

The Open University



Response to the Department for Employment and Learning's Consultation on a Strategy for 'improving the job prospects and working careers of people with disabilities in Northern Ireland'

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Introduction

The Open University welcomes this consultation on a strategy for 'improving the job prospects and working careers of people with disabilities in Northern Ireland.'

Theme One - Supporting people to secure paid employment

1. Do you agree with the specific target group for this strategy; people who have significant disability-related barriers, but who are capable of progressing towards and moving into paid employment?

The Open University (OU) agrees with the target group. We have a track record of enabling individuals to overcome barriers in order to access higher education, which in turn increases employability prospects. We are committed to a social justice mission to create opportunities for those who may face barriers in participating in higher education. We do this by identifying and tackling barriers which can prevent students from studying with us.

The OU has the largest disabled student community of any UK university, and in Northern Ireland, 15% of our students declare a disability. We strongly believe that disability should not be a barrier to undertaking higher education, and in turn, gaining employment. The OU provides a range of services for students with disabilities, to enable them to fully participate in higher education. This includes accessible study materials, assistive technologies, tutorial and examination arrangements.

Our practice and approach may be useful to this strategy when considering how to tackle the barriers that disabled people face, despite their capabilities, to progressing towards and moving into paid employment. Our expertise could be transferable in this sense.

2. Do you agree with the sources identified to specifically target people with disabilities for employment support; schools, FE colleges, training programmes, universities, community and voluntary projects and the Jobs and Benefits offices/Job Centres?

Yes. The Open University currently works to provide higher education to anyone with a desire to learn and that will enable individuals to pursue employment. We believe that universities have a key role to play alongside the other sources identified, to provide an integrated approach to delivering the strategy.

It is worth noting that the studying with the OU has a positive effect on students' career and employment prospects. That combined with the support we offer disabled students, makes the OU a significant source to provide pre-employment higher education. For example, 67% of OU students in Northern Ireland say that studying with The Open University improves their job prospects and 76% of OU students in Northern Ireland say studying with the University directly increases their ability to do their jobs. Studying with the OU also increases students' earning potential – for example the average increase in earning potential seen by students in Northern Ireland over their working lives who have completed an OU undergraduate degree, and who had non-traditional entry requirements¹ prior to studying is £85,000 for males and £54,000 for females.

3. Do you agree with the proposed role of the Supported Employment Officers and the implementation of the Supported Employment Model in helping to achieve employment outcomes within this strategy?

The OU agrees with this, particularly in light of the objective of the Supported Employment Model to assist people with significant disabilities to progress towards, secure, maintain and progress in paid employment in the labour market as part of a fully inclusive and integrated workforce in Northern Ireland.

Although there will be a specific focus on young people, The Open University supports an all-age approach towards enabling those with disability-related barriers into work and the specific services proposed for adults. The Open University welcomes the Department's plans to include adults in target groups in the Economic Activity Strategy and the Supported Employment Officers' involvement in the delivery, provision and profile of disabled clients taking part.

4. Do you agree that the Department and the disability sector should set annual targets for the number of disabled people who secure employment as a direct result of this strategy?

The OU welcomes measures that will maximize the number of people who secure employment as a result of this strategy but would expect the Department to review these on a regular basis.

¹ Five or more GCSEs at grades A*-C (or equivalent) but less than two A-levels.

Theme 2: Retention and Career Progression

5. Do you agree with the proposal to promote and advertise the disability employment retention services and programmes that are currently available to employers and disabled employees?

Yes.

6. What other measures would assist disabled people to stay in employment?

As a provider of part-time higher education, we suggest that upskilling, reskilling and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) opportunities are available. These must be flexible and assistive to ensure there are no barriers to individuals seeking these opportunities.

The flexible, part-time distance learning offered by The Open University plays an important role in increasing access to and participation in higher education, and in enabling social mobility. In particular, it enables those who have missed out initially to fulfil their potential and achieve a university-level qualification, which can lead to greater opportunities to gain employment, and progress to higher-paid levels.

In this case, part-time higher education is often the only option available to individuals with disabilities, who face barriers in entering full-time, campus-based higher education. The maintenance of Disabled Students' Allowance is therefore vital in any part-time higher education opportunities (that will enhance employment prospects, or provide re0skilling or upskilling opportunities) for disabled people.

The Open University also offers a number of free online courses which provide a taster for individuals considering higher education, or which may offer tailored learning of specific subjects that can be directly applied in the workplace. The OU's OpenLearn site is the UK's largest source of free university materials, and has had over 31 million unique visitors since 2006. Individuals can also access OU materials on iTunes U, and our YouTube channel. In 2012, the OU launched FutureLearn – a partnership with over 55 UK and international universities and institutions – to provide a number of massive open online courses (MOOCs). This has opened up access to learner for a wider range of students than ever before.

7. Do you agree that people with disabilities face additional barriers to progression and career development as a result of their disability? If so, why do you believe this is the case?

While there have been significant shifts in the discourse around disability over the last twenty years, some perceptions and misunderstanding of specific disabilities still remain. People with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, for example, face challenges in social interaction and communication, directly impacting on their response to instruction and collaboration. For

people with other types of disabilities, additional effort may be required by them in order to adapt to what may be considered a 'normal' working environment. The willingness of employers to make reasonable adjustments that enable people with disabilities to be fully productive in the workplace is essential.

8. What supports or assistance do you think would help disabled employees to access greater opportunities for progression, including promotion, throughout their careers?

The OU agrees that tailored training and continuous development would aid opportunities for progression, including promotion. We work with Specialisterne NI, an IT recruiter for people with ASD, to facilitate access to Higher Education for learners on the Autistic Spectrum, ensure appropriate reasonable adjustments and to encourage students to reach their full potential in approaching a career. Specialisterne's model includes tailored training with employers and has been effective in promoting a shift in mindset towards employees. Through improved knowledge of the issue, managers develop greater confidence and understanding in their interaction with the employee. The Open University facilitates the connection between its students who have declared ASD with Specialisterne, offering appropriate support from degree to career.

Theme 3: Employers

9. Do you agree with the development of a specific recruitment model to assist employers to employ more people with disabilities? What practical supports do you think employers need?

N/A. We feel this question is best answered by employers with direct experience.

10. Do you think that a major employer event would help promote employment opportunities for people with disabilities?

Yes.

11. Do you agree that the Department should introduce a disability employment one-stop-shop service for employers?

Yes, if useful for employers and individuals seeking employment.

12. Do you agree with the proposal to have a network of high profile disability advocates to help influence the attitudes and actions of employers?

Yes, but this approach must be integrated and consultative to include the source groups identified under Theme 1. This will ensure that the services provided by source groups are adequately reflected and portrayed in any advocacy and influencing activities.

Theme 4: Research and Development

13. Do you agree with the proposal to carry out targeted research and evaluation projects on 'employment' provision and issues for people with disabilities?

Yes. The OU believes that a robust evidence-base is required for any strategy to be successful.

14. What specific areas of research do you think that the Strategy needs to prioritise?

Theme 5: Strategic Partnership and Engagement

15. What methods of consultation and communication do you think would work best to ensure that people with significant disabilities and their support workers can continue to have their opinions listened to?

We believe this question is best answered by those individuals involved.

16. How can the Department ensure that there is meaningful representation for people with disabilities on the Disability Employment Stakeholder Forum?

The Department should research and liaise fully with disability advocates and those organisations and institutions who provides services to disabled people to understand how best to represent people with disabilities.

17. Please outline any other comments or proposals that you have for the Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities?

The Open University is willing to work with the Department and related stakeholders on any aspect of this strategy, and provide advice and guidance on the support it provides to students with disabilities in Northern Ireland.