

# Briefing on Widening access to higher education

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# About The Open University in Scotland

The Open University in Scotland supports people across Scotland to develop their knowledge, acquire new skills and achieve life-changing qualifications.

In 2022/23 we were proud to help over 19,500 students study around their professional or personal life at a pace and level that worked for them. The most recently published HESA data (2022-23) shows that apart from The University of Glasgow we teach more Scottish domiciled students than any other university and by far the largest provider of flexible, part-time study (discounting adult education provision).

Flexible study is core to our offer with 73% of our students working either full-time or part-time in 2022/23.

Most of our graduates (85%) remain in the location where their study is undertaken, which means their talent and skills benefit local communities.

We offer high-quality distance learning to students, lifelong learners, communities, employees and businesses and this is evidenced in our NSS feedback and TEF Gold rating. Our students range from school age to 92. We have formal partnerships with 16 regional colleges and collaborate with local authorities, the NHS, social care, the third sector and employers across Scotland. Our innovative national schools programme, Young Applicants in Schools

Scheme, helps S6 pupils access a broader curriculum and bridge school to university level study.

We are committed to widening access to higher education building on our founding principle of being open to everyone, regardless of age, income, geography and background. The majority of our undergraduates in Scotland are eligible for a part-time fee grant to help towards their tuition fees.

In Academic Year 2022/23 of our undergraduates in Scotland:

- **28%** declared a disability
- **22%** live in remote or rural areas
- **23%** joined with qualifications below standard university entrance level
- **21%** were resident in the most deprived areas of Scotland

As part of the UK's only four nations university, we are funded to teach students resident in Scotland by the Scottish Funding Council. Over 150 staff operate from our Edinburgh offices with over 400 associate lecturers working across the country.

OU research ranks in the top third of UK universities according to the Research Excellence Framework and we are a trusted partner of many leading organisations for teaching and research including the BBC, NASA, and the United Nations. Our free platform, OpenLearn, reaches over 300,000 learners in Scotland.

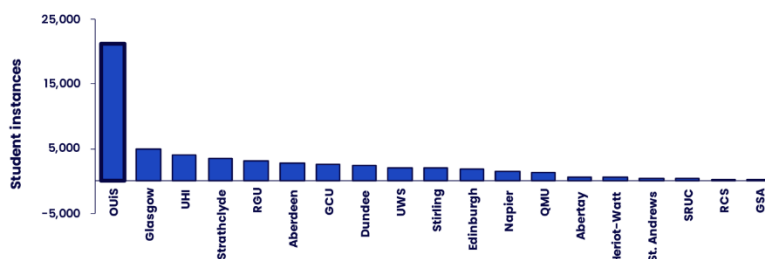
Find out more: [open.ac.uk/scotland](https://open.ac.uk/scotland)

# Widening Access

The Open University has been designated as a part-time provider since its funding was transferred from HEFCE to SHEFC in 2000 – as a result, OU students are classified as part-time even if they are studying 120 credits i.e., full-time intensity. In 2021/22, 30% of all Scottish domiciled taught university enrolments in Scotland were for part-time students with **38%** of Scottish domiciled part-time students studying with The Open University. We believe widening access should not solely focus on full-time campus-based undergraduates.

## OU leads part-time university education of Scottish domiciled students

In 2021/22, of all Scottish domiciled taught university enrolments in Scotland 30% were for part-time students and of these 38% studied with the Open University



Source: HESA Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22. This counts students in 'instances'. An instance roughly equates to a student studying for a single qualification or set of stand-alone modules (incl. microcredentials). Students sometimes have more than one instance.

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As a four-nations university, the Open University in Scotland's data on widening access forms part of the university's Access and Participation Plan for the OfS. This includes an Equality of Opportunity Risk Register based on the University's analysis of data from its student population across all four nations. The university places significant institutional focus on improving student outcomes and reducing inequality gaps. Data-informed support mechanisms and interventions are implemented throughout the student journey to support student success.

## **Metrics which include part-time students**

When we met with the Commissioner for Fair Access last year we discussed possible elements of an adult learners basket of measures. We continue to explore these ideas and to test against unintended consequences. They focus on readily accessible data sources:

- Student accessing PTFG (indication of personal income to £25k – although anecdotally varied advice given by DWP with respect to impact of PTFG on benefits)
- Prior educational qualifications
- Rural and remote, using Scottish Government definitions. This is, of course, spatial like SIMD and could therefore sweep up some non-eligible learners.

However, SIMD doesn't serve rural areas and this is available, so it could be considered as one measure.

Shona Littlejohn, our Depute Director for Student Experience and Widening Access, chairs Universities Scotland's short life working group on widening access.

## Access Modules

Access modules provide the perfect introduction to distance learning and studying with OU. Students can get a broad overview of the subjects that interest them, refresh their learning skills and build their self-confidence.

The OU offers four Access modules, starting in February, May and October. They are usually 30 weeks long, and most students study for about 8–10 hours a week. There are also fast-track options available, which can be completed in 18 weeks by increasing study time to 16–20 hours a week.

The four access modules are:

1. Arts and languages (Arts and languages fast track available)
2. Business and law
3. Psychology, social science and wellbeing (fast track available)
4. Science, technology and maths (fast track available)

The four modules have skills development built into them through focusing on refreshing study skills and techniques and using computers and technology for learning. Student also experience peer support, peer learning and working collaboratively.

Students who start with an Access module **are more likely to be successful** when they advance to OU Stage 1 study. In the academic year 2022–23 **515 Access Modules** were studied in Scotland.

## **College Articulation**

Collaboration with colleges is an important element of widening access to HE in Scotland and increasing students' employability. The Open University is proud to have formal articulation partnerships with all colleges in Scotland other than those within the University of Highlands & Islands network.

In addition to a range of degree programmes in specific subjects, the University's unique Open Degree is also available to all HN students, regardless of the HN qualification they have studied at college. This allows the student to gain credit for previous study, whilst building a degree programme more tailored to their own pathway development needs, or the needs of their employer.

We currently operate two Collaborative Teaching Provision partnerships with Fife College & City of Glasgow College. These arrangements permit students in both Local Authority areas to progress from HND studies at both colleges to degree level study seamlessly.

Students benefit for continuity of teaching staff from SCQF level 5 up until degree level study. Due to mapped pathways, all students who apply to join either programme are guaranteed a place at Level 3 Studies and can complete the final 120 credits toward an OU degree. Student ages vary from 17-52.

We see a module pass rate of between 65-70% in excess of the national rate of 58% across our on-campus offering at Fife College and City of Glasgow College. In Fife College particularly this enables many in rural as well as SIMD 20/40 areas to stay in the local area to complete degree level study.

## Young Applicants in Schools Scheme

We are proud to see our [Young Applicants in Schools Scheme](#) (YASS) recognised for its contribution to the Scottish Funding Council Widening Access Report. We include targets for SIMD 20 participants within YASS. Over 40% of our YASS students are from the two most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD40).

YASS has continued to meet a clear academic need for pupils in their final year. In 2022/23 we had 956 students registered from 160 schools across 31 local authorities. YASS not only prepares pupils for independent learning but also provides a curriculum broader than they have access to in schools.

YASS currently offers 22 OU courses, in multiple subject area, including those that are not offered at schools (e.g. law, statistics, accounting), and language at beginner and Intermediate level (Spanish, French, German), that may be entirely new to students, depending on what the school is available to offer. It has been of particular value to pupils in rural and remote areas of Scotland.

We also offer a very flexible course, YXM130 which allows students to effectively create own course, in their chosen subject, using the hundreds of courses on Open Learn to make their own course, and tailor it to their study interests, consolidating and reflecting on the learning they do on OpenLearn. We provide a number of suggested subject pathways for students e.g. Sport and Exercise, or Health and Social care, both again unlikely to be available to the students at school level.



# Community Learning and Development

At the OU in Scotland we have experience of the transformational potential of learning. We know that community learning and development can be an accessible pathway to upskilling, reskilling, confidence building and learning journeys that enhance the lives of individuals and communities. Our concern is that accessibility and availability will decrease in the current funding environment. Our hope is that creative and innovative approaches are explored to ensure accessibility and availability is maximised.

We provide learning that is accessible and available to every individual in Scotland through a digital offer, largely open entry and part-time fee grant to support those on low incomes. We would like to see community learning and development similarly open to all. We also wish to increasingly see CLD learners aware of the many pathways available to them to continue their learning journeys.

The OU in Scotland supports an Open Learn Champions Programme which supports those working these client groups, including CLD practitioners and those supporting employability. Open Learn Champions have access to a training module, resources, networking events and CPD sessions.

In 2022 we undertook independent research into the barriers and challenges accessing informal and formal education for those living in disadvantaged areas in Scotland. We used the findings to co-create interventions, which we tested in collaboration with the South Lanarkshire Community Planning Partnership. A network of OpenLearn Champions was created, and we promoted

and ran a series of OpenLearn Taster and Access Sessions in Springhall and Rutherglen, South Lanarkshire. Around 265 people enrolments on OpenLearn courses with the most popular subject areas being were mental health, children's wellbeing and employability. Although the numbers are small, access registrations for the area have increased at a greater rate than the rest of Scotland (+43% vs +20%).

Our Open Pathways resource is designed for learners to plan their pathways into accredited learning from informal and online learning, including a specific pathway for those undertaking the Adult Achievement Award (SCQF6). We also have a module called Making Your Learning Count (SCQF7) which allows learners to convert 150 hours of informal, online and community-based learning into credit through reflection and group activities while developing skills for formal study.

## **Partnerships with Local Authorities**

Our partnership with SOLACE, established towards the end of 2023, has now evolved into a collaboration with 9 Local Authorities across Scotland. An approach has been designed to support and enhance local efforts to increase participation and improve access to educational learning and support, implement focussed community-based interventions in SIMD areas and work with schools to support pupils currently disengaged from the education system.

This approach has also enabled us to work with local authority partners to develop and curate practical, long term and sustainable solutions to the recruitment and retention challenges being faced across key local authority

services. We have also placed a strong emphasis on providing learning pathway opportunities for their own internal workforce to grow and develop.