

Open University submission of 18 August 2023

PE2009/E: Ensure fair access to Scottish universities for all residents in Scotland and the UK

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. With over 21,000 students, we are the fourth largest university in Scotland and the largest provider of flexible, part-time study. We teach more Scottish students than anyone else in the sector.

We offer high-quality distance learning to students, lifelong learners, communities, employees and businesses. 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. More than 20% of our undergraduates in Scotland join with qualifications below standard university entrance level, almost 19% are resident in the most deprived areas of Scotland, 26% declare a disability and 23% live in remote or rural areas. The majority of our students in Scotland are eligible for a part-time fee grant to help towards their tuition fees.

Flexible study is core to our offer with 74% of our students working either full-time or part-time fitting study around their professional or personal life at a pace and level that works for them. Most of our graduates (85%)

remain in the location where their study is undertaken, which means their talent and skills benefit local communities.

Our free platform, OpenLearn, reaches over 300,000 learners in Scotland.

Student Financial Support

The system is currently not designed to enable different kinds of learner journey. We believe there should be a move away from the current default position of viewing higher education as the transition of 17-and-18-year-olds from school into full-time university and adopt a wider view of the diversity of learners and their needs in Scotland. The reality is that many students do not follow a single linear journey. Immediately after school is not always the right time in a person's life to choose to pursue higher education. Many students will go on to college first or choose to come back to education later in life.

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. 22,000 students studied with The Open University across Scotland in academic year 2020-21 and of the 8,094 new undergraduate entrants, 21% were registered for 120 credits. This proportion has grown considerably over the past five years, from 12% in 2016/17. 27% of all higher education enrolments in Scotland are part-time students with 69% of part-time students studying with The Open University.

These students, despite studying at full-time intensity, **have no access to free tuition fees, student loans, bursaries and do not qualify for exemption from council tax.** They can access the Part-time Fee Grant from the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) to help towards their

tuition fees but only if they have an income of less £25,000 per annum. Neither the grant nor the income threshold has not changed since its introduction in 2013 despite inflation.

In addition, if you are care experienced and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students. If you are a lone parent and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not for** part-time students. If you have dependents and are a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students. If you are estranged from your family and a full-time student, then financial support is available **but not** for part-time students.

In 2017, the Independent Review into Student Support recommended action to implement equitable support measures for part-time students and those currently receiving Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)¹.¹ That recommendation has not been implemented yet. **This means that part-time students still do not have access to the same range of financial support compared to full-time students.** This is not the case in other UK nations where for instance part-time students have access to maintenance grants in Wales and to part-time loans in Northern Ireland.

Part Time Fee Grant

The Part-time Fee Grant from SAAS is available to students who have an income less than £25,000 gross per annum. 71% of Open University in Scotland undergraduate students are in receipt of the Part-time Fee Grant but neither the level of grant or the threshold has changed for a decade and the gap between the grant and the OU fee was over £290 in

¹ Scottish Government. (2017) A New Social Contract for Students; Fairness, Parity and Clarity. Independent Report for Scotland. Edinburgh: Government Publications

2021/22. To ensure that our students are not disadvantaged in comparison to their full-time counterparts, who receive free tuition, The Open University absorbs the cost of the difference between the grant and the fee at a total cost of £3 million in 2021/22.

Our autumn 2022 intake saw a significant growth in 18–20year-olds choosing to study with the Open University and work at the same time as an alternative to the traditional four-year degree campus university model. This age group increased in size by 14% in headcount terms, while full-time equivalent (FTE) numbers increased by 22%.