

The Open University

Submission to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee Inquiry into the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net-zero Scotland

Introduction

We are grateful for the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee for its inquiry into the role of local government and its cross-sectoral partners in financing and delivering a net-zero Scotland.

1. The extent to which the Open University is in dialogue with the local government sector about the skillset they will need as an employer, as a contractor for services, and as a partner with public, private, and voluntary bodies to realise major net zero goals

The Open University is not currently in direct dialogue with the local government sector about the skillset they will need to realise major net zero goals. We will expand on the primary reasons why in the next two questions.

Sustainability is identified as a priority in our five-year strategic plan 2022-27 'Learn and Live' current strategy and we are engaging with a range of agencies – public, private and voluntary in pursuit of our journey to net zero. [Read the Open University's strategy for 2022-2027](#). The University has cut CO₂ emissions by 54% since 2005 across all our sites, exceeding the original target by 20%. As of 1st June 2020, all of the University's electricity comes from sustainable sources i.e., solar, wind and hydro.

The University's Go Green programme aims to achieve environmental and financial savings across the University by empowering staff to act on energy, waste, water and travel. Go Green is intended to be an integral part of staff behaviours in the future to enable the University to manage its energy needs and energy costs.

From public engagement (carbon literacy etc), to helping organisations understand the notion of a circular economy and providing green related skills – both in environmental management and more technical skills, we are already providing a valuable contribution across Scotland. These are sort of the real-life solutions we can bring when talking to local government and other potential partners.

2. How you benchmark the skills and expertise the workforce will need to make “net zero by 2045” a reality against the courses being provided in the higher education sector. Put simply, are enough people getting the right sort of qualifications in Scotland to make the goal of net zero by 2045 an achievable one?

We believe that at a high-level reading of strategies and plans it would be easy to think that Scotland is ready to meet the challenges of being Net Zero by 2045. We don't believe however that people are getting the right sort of qualifications to make the goal of net zero by 2045. Work is required to be able to benchmark the skills and expertise the workforce will need. As part of that process, we are currently reviewing our own curriculum across the United Nations' seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.

In giving that answer we're not seeking to be deliberately controversial or negative, just honest. We recognise that The Open University can be as guilty as anyone else in talking in the abstract 'about the huge shift in the skills needed in the workforce in the coming years to achieve net zero, as people of all ages move from carbon intensive industries to jobs focused on net zero and sustainability'. What is missing, we believe, are the details of exactly what jobs are required and the skills that will be needed to benchmark them against course curricula.

The Open University currently offers significant Environmental Management and Sustainability related curriculum at both undergraduate ([read about undergraduate courses](#)) and postgraduate level, and as free open educational resources on OpenLearn. [Find out about environment courses on OpenLearn](#). Careers relating to environment and climate change are promoted to OU graduates on our [careers website](#). Building sustainability into the curriculum is important, so that no matter the subject, students gain an understanding of sustainability and its related issues (as national research shows there is high demand).

Our unique partnership with the BBC gives us a formidable reach to the public beyond what could reasonably be expected of a university. We believe that sustainability is part of everyone's role and as such co-produced a BBC Bitesize series of ten short videos to use as part of 'Careers Week' to challenge preconceptions around 'green' careers and demonstrate how becoming more sustainable applies across all roles and sectors. [Watch the videos](#). The videos include careers as diverse as engineering, gaming, horticulture and teaching. We ask 'what if' questions to encourage us all to reimagine our jobs for sustainability.

As part of our [OU Student Voice Week](#) in November 2021 we held a Green Entrepreneur Showcase with a series of short films showcases OU students who are using their studies to make a difference to people and the planet. [Find out about our Green Entrepreneur Showcase](#).

3. If not, please outline particular areas where you have concerns that demand and/ or provision is currently deficient. What can be done to address these?

It is our belief that the landscape isn't clear on what the demand and current provision is or what the future provision needs to be. Like other skills providers, the OU needs to know what roles and sectors people need to transition into to be able to offer up-skilling/re-skilling opportunities. While there are lots of activity happening amongst organisations across the country there needs to be a more strategic and joined-up approach to realise the Scottish Government's ambitions. There needs to be greater leadership around providing a strategic overview, and an easier way to help organisations achieve their strategic goals in this area.

Utilising the [Upskilling Fund](#) and the [National Training Transition Fund](#) we have developed a micro credential ([find out more about the Climate Change: Transforming your Organisation for Sustainability](#)) to help meet the Scottish Government's ambition to support the move to net zero and to renewable energy. Hosted on the FutureLearn platform this 10-week micro credential equips participants with the knowledge, skills and courage to transform their organisation's response to the climate and ecological crisis, whatever their level, role or sector.

4. What role you see R&D in the higher education sector in helping local government achieve net zero goals. If there are barriers to effective joint working in these areas, please outline these. And to what extent are there bodies or networks that are helping to dialogue facilitate partnership working in these areas? (eg enterprise agencies, city region deals, the Scottish National Investment Bank, etc)

We think that higher education, both the college and university sectors, have a critical role to play as part of a wider collective of organisations; each bringing their own expertise and skills to achieve common goals.

The first barrier to helping local government achieve net zero goals is funding. A key role of the OU in supporting local government achieve their Net Zero ambitions is to help them develop and upskill their workforces and residents for green careers and a net-zero future. There can be significant costs and lead in time in developing curriculum, therefore additional investment is going to be required to ensure that the activities that need to happen, once identified, occur.

The second barrier to effective joint working is in the key agencies protecting organisational interests. Our national agencies need to be able to work together at a national and regional level as highlighted by Audit Scotland in relation to the skills agenda. We will only achieve our net zero goals if key agencies work together in partnership alongside education and skills providers and the business sector.

We believe that higher education has a positive role to play within a collaborative approach be it through the city region deals or in our own case through the South of Scotland Education and Skills Strategic Coordination Group. The roles and remits of the newly created Pathfinder Programmes arising from the Scottish Funding Council's report on 'Coherence and Sustainability: Review of Tertiary Education and Research' add another layer of complexity to be negotiated.

ABOUT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

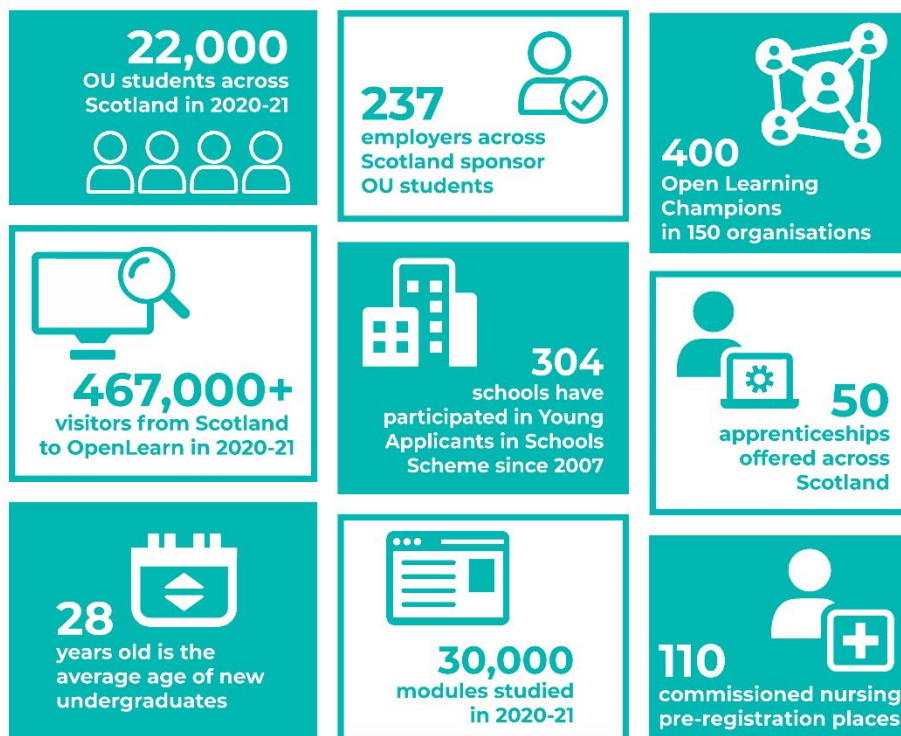
The Open University (OU) in Scotland is the country's leading provider of part-time higher and flexible education – with 73% of our students combining work and study (2020/21). Social justice is at our core and we are committed to ensuring high quality education is accessible to all, regardless of age, income, qualifications or geography.

Our [open admissions policy](#) means no formal entry requirements are needed for most undergraduate qualifications or modules, and many of our new undergraduates join us without standard university entrance level qualifications.

Working with our partners, from employers and trade unions, to schools, colleges and voluntary sector groups, we are at the forefront of using innovative distance education to deliver supported open learning to a wide range of people, at every stage of their lives and regardless of their background. Students can choose to study for a degree, diploma or certificate, or take a stand-alone module, short course or microcredential.

Over 7,500 young people across Scotland have participated in the OU's innovative [Young Applicants in Schools Scheme](#). Scotland's national bridging programme offers accredited courses to S6 pupils that introduces them to university level study alongside their normal classroom study. Schools in all 32 Scottish education areas take part.

OUR LEARNERS



Sustainability

Within our refresh five year Strategic Plan 2022-27 ([Read the 'Learn and Live' strategic plan](#)). The Open University (OU) has reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining its approach to research and education with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Our commitment to environmental and social sustainability will continue to run through our education, research, enterprise, curriculum and public engagement work. Our global presence and profile give us a unique opportunity to drive thought leadership and lead mass public engagement with achieving sustainability.

We define sustainability as meeting our needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. We acknowledge the impact of greenhouse gas emissions from our own operations, including the goods and services we procure, travel and our real estate. As such, we have committed to achieving zero net greenhouse gas emissions from our energy use by 2030 and from all other indirect emissions no later than 2050, through a programme of investment and measures to reduce and mitigate the adverse environmental impact of our activities.

We will continue to embrace policy and practice across the four nations, including the Climate Change Act 2008, the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 and Ireland's example of deliberative democracy with the Citizens' Assembly.

Over the next five years we will:

- build a dedicated team that supports, focuses and delivers our commitments to sustainability, whilst continuing our approach that sustainability is everyone's responsibility. The sustainability team will oversee pan-OU annual reporting in line with the university and college sector Sustainable Development Goals Accord and UN Global Compact.
- provide training and development to upskill and reskill colleagues on sustainability, including identifying social and wellbeing aspects of sustainability and contributing to system change.
- continue to advance learning, skills development and action in support of sustainability by developing and promoting curriculum, including open courses and microcredentials, for individuals, employers and communities.

COP26

We were one of the successful applicants to the Cabinet Office to host an event in the official COP26 Green Zone. On Sunday 7th November, the Open University (OU) hosted a 90-minute collaborative event with Glasgow Life bringing art, Indigenous artists, climate science and Citizen Science together. The event was held face to face with an accompanying livestream for those who wanted to watch at home. [Watch the livestream](#).

In support of activities around COP26, a new COP26 Hub on OpenLearn launched in September 2021. The Hub features existing free courses as well as a series of articles written by people from across the OU community. It also features a specially commissioned animation that introduces the COP26 Hub. [Watch the animation](#).

We also launched three Sustainability Microcredentials, with the latest focussing on supporting how businesses implement the UN sustainability goals. [Read the Microcredentials](#). These 10 week, 100 hours microcredentials cover:

- Polar Regions – to understand the science and data of climate change;
- Cuban Innovation - learning from low cost, resourceful innovations;
- Transforming Organisations for Sustainability - applying five ways of working to radically and rapidly transform any organisation for sustainability and the wellbeing of future generations.

[Read more about the Nature and Environment Microcredentials](#).



Education

At the Open University (OU), we are committed to ensuring that by 2030 all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote social and environmental justice including sustainable development, sustainable lifestyles, and transition of key areas of the economy. Around 4,000 of our current students are studying modules with an environment-specific focus.

Climate education has three strands: teaching adults, teaching children, and equipping teachers to teach students. The OU already provides extensive high-quality resources on climate change and sustainability. For instance:

- Free, high-quality, informal learning resources on climate change are found on our [OpenLearn platform - Nature and Environment](#). This contains 1,300 resources split into 82 courses, 43 interactives, 148 podcasts, 285 videos, and many academic articles and broadcast content. Material like this, alongside our microcredentials programme, can quickly help a wide range of people gain the skills and knowledge needed to implement net zero and sustainability.
- For upskilling and reskilling, we have three climate change microcredentials as previously outlined. The cohort and networks from fellow learners are invaluable in implementing learning.

- We can also design courses in partnership with and tailored to specific industries, sectors or organisations and make these available on our Future Learn platform.

The OU's partnership with the BBC produces programmes like 'A Perfect Planet', 'The Green Planet' and 'Blue Planet 2' which build public awareness amongst adults and children alike. These have substantial reach across the public with 'The Green Planet' series reaching over 27 million views with the accompanying poster receiving 140,000 distributions requests.