

Annual Review 2023

The Open University in Scotland



Welcome

Welcome to The Open University (OU) in Scotland's Annual Review 2023, which showcases highlights of our achievements over the last year.

This Review celebrates the societal impact of our work, our public engagement, our community reach, our delivery on the skills agenda and of course our students' successes. Their stories are at the heart of the publication and make me immensely proud to be connected with The Open University.

Pivotal to our work is our ambition to open up education to all. Our mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas.

By providing such accessible and flexible learning opportunities, the OU empowers individuals to realise their full potential, whatever their circumstances, and enables employers across public, private and third sectors to develop their workforces and build skills – making a significant contribution to the country's economic growth and societal wellbeing. At the same time, research and knowledge exchange initiatives also address pressing societal challenges, driving innovation and positive change in communities across Scotland and beyond.

Thank you to everyone who has worked with The Open University in Scotland and supported our work this past year. I am proud that together we have not only opened up life-changing opportunities for individuals to fulfil their ambitions but have also contributed to shaping a more equitable and prosperous society for all. We look forward to continuing and extending our collaborations, conversations and debates over the coming year.

Paul Gray
OU Council Member for Scotland



Visit the OU in Scotland website
www.open.ac.uk/scotland



Director's introduction

With almost 20,000 students in 2023, we are one of the largest universities in Scotland and continue to have students in every region in the country from Shetland to the Scottish Borders. We teach more Scottish students than any other university in Scotland.

We recognise that people enter higher education at different stages of their lives and often must balance their studies with work, caring responsibilities, other commitments and difficult circumstances. Flexible study is core to our offer and in 2023 73% of our students were working either full-time or part-time, fitting study around their professional or personal life at a pace and level that works for them.

Increasing economic challenges and the rising cost of living, meant that 2023 was particularly testing time for many of our learners. However, we have continued to provide the most supportive personalised open learning community possible, and our student experience remains consistently rated highly. For that I am incredibly grateful to all our staff. Day in and day out they support our learners to achieve their ambitions by providing assistance and advice, as well as develop projects and partnerships to continuously improve access to education for more people.

We have followed with interest the sector developments and publication of a number of education and skills-related reports in 2023, including the National Discussion on Education, the Hayward Review, the Withers Report and the report on the Purpose and Principles of Post-school Education, Research and Skills. We were pleased to see many of the arguments we made in our submission to the inquiry reflected in the final report by James Withers, particularly the recommendation for students "undertaking part-time learning or pursuing certain approved accelerated retraining programmes to receive the same pro-rata level of funding support for living costs as those in full time education."



**We teach more
Scottish students
than any other
university in Scotland.**



We look forward to continuing our engagement with policymakers and sector stakeholders to realise our ambition of removing financial barriers and achieving parity for part-time students. One thing is certain even in challenging times – we will always pioneer life-changing learning for all.

Susan Stewart
Director of The Open University in Scotland



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2023 Highlights



Health education and training to improve outcomes

Our strategic collaboration agreement with NHS Education for Scotland will deliver innovative inclusive education and training resources, helping develop Scotland's health and social care workforce and improving outcomes for the people of Scotland.

Read more on page 22



700 graduates celebrating OU degree success

700 graduates celebrated their OU degree success at the OU in Scotland's 2023 ceremonies in Glasgow, where Active Life Club founder Raza Sadiq also received an Honorary Degree for his contribution to community and inclusion.

Read more on page 4



OU student awarded Convergence RBS Female Entrepreneurship Award

OU in Scotland student Laura Ripley won the Royal Bank of Scotland Female Entrepreneurship Award at the 2023 Convergence Awards, Scotland's renowned springboard for university founders.

Read more on page 15



New OU/BBC series showcases remarkable Scottish women

Presented by Kirsty Wark, OU/BBC three-part series The Women Who Changed Modern Scotland told the story of women who had a role in shaping the nation over the last 50 years by challenging the status quo, defying sexism, stepping up to lead in politics, in their communities and in the workplace, and changing the lives of everyone in Scotland.

Read more on page 18



Research reveals shocking level of online violence experienced by women

OU researchers published results from the UK's largest ever study into societal attitudes and experiences of online violence against women and girls. The findings revealed that in Scotland, one in six women have experienced online violence, and one in nine who have experienced online violence said it later progressed to offline violence.

Read more on page 22



Business roadshow unlocks fully-funded training for SMEs

Our inaugural Skills for Business Roadshow toured Scotland in April and May, providing us a greater understanding of business challenges and an opportunity to offer organisations support and advice on how the OU can help create a tailored training strategy to address specific skills gaps and needs.

Read more on page 13



OU internship project wins student engagement award

The OU's 'Virtual Internships for Underrepresented Students - exploring opportunities for student co-creation and partnership' project won the 2023 sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland) Student Engagement Award in the Diverse Voices category.

Read more on page 5



RCN Nursing Student of the Year

Nurse Lois Gaffney, whose OU studies enabled her to upskill while working in healthcare support at a Shetland hospital, won the prestigious Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Scotland award in June.

Read more on page 23



Partnership to improve children's lives

A new Memorandum of Understanding between the OU and Children in Scotland enables practitioners to access a wide range of courses to help them upskill and make greater impact in their communities, while they will also collaborate with OU academics to explore potential research opportunities and new ways of improving young people's lives.

Read more on page 14

Excellence in teaching and support

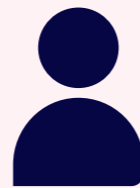
The Open University has pioneered distance learning for over half a century. All our courses are specifically designed to be taught via supported online learning and we are constantly innovating on how we deliver them to students. We offer over 200 globally recognised qualifications across a wide range of subjects, including undergraduate degrees, postgraduate degrees, certificates and diplomas, many accredited by leading professional bodies.

Over 226,500 people have studied with the OU in Scotland to date and over 84,700 qualifications have been awarded. In 2022-23 we had over 19,500 students who studied over 27,000 modules.

At our degree ceremonies in September 2023, a total of 700 graduates crossed the stage to collect their degree certificates: among them 650 undergraduates and 50 postgraduates. Half of them were the first in their families to study at higher education level.



350 OU students in Scotland are care experienced and 2,230 are carers



28% of OU students in Scotland share a disability



We have 51 students in 16 secure facilities across Scotland

Award-winning innovative education

In 2023 the quality of our teaching was formally recognised by the Office for Students' (OfS) Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) awarding the OU an overall 'Gold' rating – the highest in the TEF. In addition to this overall rating, we also received two sub-ratings of Gold for Student Outcomes and Silver for Student Experience. The TEF panel commended the OU for compelling evidence of outstanding or very high-quality features across all aspects of their assessment, and the fact that we tailor our approaches to our students, including those from underrepresented groups.



OU graduates at the degree ceremony in Glasgow, September 2023.

The TEF awards were introduced by the UK Government to encourage and recognise high-quality teaching and student outcomes in higher education and 2023 was the first time the OU submitted to the TEF. While an entry to the TEF is not a requirement for providers outside England, the OU's submission reflected our organisation's four nations remit, including the OU in Scotland; we are delighted with this outcome and the significant impact on the recognition of our quality that it will have in Scotland.

Another outstanding success was the OU's OpenSTEM Lab's receipt of the Queen's Anniversary Prize, which recognises outstanding, innovative work by UK colleges and universities that deliver real benefit to the wider world through education and training. The Prizes are the highest national honour awarded in UK further and higher education. The world-leading, multi-award-winning OpenSTEM Labs are physically based in Milton Keynes but are changing the way scientists and engineers of the future are educated by making authentic laboratory experiences possible online also for our students in Scotland, or anywhere else.

The OU's 'Virtual Internships for Underrepresented Students – exploring opportunities for student co-creation and partnership' project won the sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland) 2023 Student Engagement Award in the 'Diverse Voices' category. For the past two years, this pioneering scheme has been offering unique opportunities for flexible, paid internships for OU students, particularly focused on those with protected characteristics, ensuring equal access to valuable work experience and addressing the graduate outcome gaps that often affect underrepresented students.

Outstanding student support

Our research shows that access to learning has significant human impact, helping people improve their job satisfaction, self-esteem and general quality of life. Most OU alumni (94%) say that studying with us has improved at least one aspect of their personal development and 86% say study has led to an improvement in their personal wellbeing.

We want our students to be successful in completing their studies and therefore embed support into our curriculum design and delivery at every stage of the student's learning journey. Our student support team in Scotland offers personalised advice and dedicated support, tailored to the needs of our students – from care-experienced learners, carers, students with disabilities, those with mental health difficulties, people facing financial difficulties, and students in secure environments.

Active engagement with our students continues to be a key priority for us. In 2023 we further developed our Student Voice Plan, including different kinds of consultations with students, our Big Blether event and the Student Voice Festival. We have also developed a Student Engagement Champions Network for our staff, due to launch in 2024.

The way we support our students is innovative and proactive: Over the last year, outbound calling campaigns to offer support proactively to students have been rolled out into team-wide activity with all Senior Advisers trained. In these effective campaigns staff have been focused particularly on calls in relation to missed tutor-marked assignment (TMA) submissions and credit transfers.

A culture that enables our students, and our staff, to flourish is central to all we do. We believe that everyone has a responsibility for actively supporting mental health and wellbeing, whether their own or that of others. Our achievements in student mental health support were acknowledged and certified last year by the National Union of Students via our Student Mental Health Agreement (2021-23).

Student stories

Finding your own way

Knowing that a campus university wasn't for them, Emma was struggling to find their way, until late one night they came across The Open University website. Within a week, Emma received a call from the OU to talk everything through and make sure that distance learning was for them.

When Emma started their degree, they were astounded by the variety of support they could access: "You don't have to search for support, the OU is proactive and makes sure you get everything you need."

Emma's tutors were also informed how they could best offer support. Emma received audio textbooks, advice about studying with dyslexia and access to an online group for dyslexic students.

Emma is also a member of the Scottish Youth Parliament and has started a non-profit organisation tackling underrepresentation in the media.

"Being able to organise my own study time means that I have capacity to do the things I care about."



I feel like the OU breaks down barriers and creates a space where you can be yourself. It's not just about the education. The OU takes into account that you're an individual and you have a life.

Emma Prach
OU student



A dream come true

Farah was forced to marry by her family and was unable to pursue her lifelong ambition of studying for a career in law. After having endured physical, mental and sexual violence, Farah left her abusive marriage.

She was able to use a credit transfer to join her studies at the OU halfway through her Honours degree and to access Part-Time Fee Grant funding. Managing multiple health conditions and disabilities, Farah found that flexible online studying was the best way to achieve her educational goals. Disabilities Services provided her with an ergonomic chair and computer-adapted programmes for grammar, speech to text, and recording lectures. Farah also received mentoring support to help her manage complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

When she became very unwell and ended up in hospital, Farah's mentor acted as a go-between with lecturers and helped her to pace tasks based on her health needs. She was also given the opportunity to postpone some assignments.

Farah is now continuing her studies with the OU as a postgraduate student in Law, planning to carry out in-depth research to improve legal help for victims of domestic and honour-based abuse.



The OU made my passion and dream of becoming a legal research student real, empowering me to further enhance my academic skills and continue my legal research. To complete my degree is an absolute dream come true.



Widening Access

Defined by our mission, at The Open University of Scotland we are open to everyone, with most of our courses not requiring prior educational qualifications for entry.

In 2022–23, our students' age ranged from school age to 92 years old. 75% of our new undergraduates earned less than £25,000 and were therefore eligible for the Part-Time Fee Grant. 22% lived in remote and rural parts of Scotland. 23% of new undergraduates in 2022–23 joined without standard university entrance qualifications and 17% had a college HNC/D.

A key focus of our work is ensuring that people from Scotland's most disadvantaged groups and communities can all access higher education to help improve their work and life opportunities. In 2022–23, 43% of new OU undergraduates were based in Scotland's most deprived areas, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) which looks at the extent to which an area is deprived.



23% of new undergraduates join without standard university entrance qualifications



In Scotland we recruit more students from the most deprived areas than the least deprived areas



515 Access modules studied in Scotland

Engaging with schools and colleges

Our Young Applicants in Schools Scheme (YASS) allows students in the final year of secondary school to experience higher education level study in school alongside their other subjects. The programme is designed to bridge the gap between school and university, college or employment and helps motivated students stand out from the crowd.

In 2023, we were delighted to see an increase in the number of schools participating and had schools from all 32 local authority areas in Scotland participate in YASS; 975 students registered from 160 schools. The scheme has been of particular value to pupils in rural and remote areas of Scotland. Over 40% of our YASS students are from the two most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD40).

Our open access policy means that we welcome all learners regardless of prior qualifications, who do not follow a single linear learner journey from leaving school and moving straight away into full-time university. Many students instead choose to go to college first or pursue higher education at a later stage, perhaps due to work or family commitments, or financial reasons.

While we have worked with colleges for many years, in 2023 the OU in Scotland signed a collaboration agreement with the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) which will allow learners who achieve a SQA Higher National Certificate or Diploma (HNC/HND) to progress, or 'articulate', onto year two or year three of a related BA/BSc Open Degree with Honours at The Open University. This agreement highlights and promotes the unique opportunity presented by the Open Degree for those wishing to transfer credit from a wide range of SQA HN qualifications, setting the OU apart from other universities in Scotland, by showing the flexibility of our offer.

Recognising the value of SQA HNC and HND qualifications which are designed to meet the needs of industry, the agreement has been designed to widen access to higher education in a manner that suits learners' needs, improves attainment, and ultimately gives our learners the skills they need to thrive in the modern workplace.



Our annual Mock COP engages pupils in the Highland in the climate change debate

Unlocking potential

We continue to offer Access modules providing a perfect introduction to higher education and studying with OU. Students can get a broad overview of the subjects that interest them, refresh their learning skills and often importantly build their self-confidence while studying about nine hours per week. When studying an Access module our students will have one-to-one tutorials tailored to the students' individual needs, access to a student support team staffed by specialist advisers, the opportunity to share ideas with other students through our online forums. We know that students who start with an Access module are more likely to be successful when they advance to OU Level 1 study. In the academic year 2022-23, 515 Access modules were successfully completed by students in Scotland.

After having carried out independent research into the barriers and challenges accessing informal and formal education for those living in particularly disadvantaged areas in Scotland in 2022, over the past year we used the key findings to co-create and test interventions in collaboration with the South Lanarkshire Community Planning Partnership: A network of OpenLearn Champions was created in the area. We also promoted and ran a series of OpenLearn Taster and Access Sessions in Springhall and Rutherglen. The OpenLearn Champions are a wide group of people from third sector organisations, colleges and libraries and we equipped them with the knowledge and skills to bring the OU's free online open educational resources to people in their communities.

We estimate that as part of this pilot project there were around 265 enrolments on OpenLearn courses and over 100 course completions with the most popular subjects being mental health, children's wellbeing and employability. Subsequently, registrations in South Lanarkshire for our Access courses have also increased at a greater rate than the rest of Scotland (43% compared to 20%).

One of the key benefits of the project has been the strength of the relationship with local intermediaries, allowing us to capture the longer-term benefits of taking that first step into informal learning. We aim to take the findings from this project further forward in 2024 and hope to also roll them out when working in partnership with other local authorities.

Student stories

The possibilities are endless

"One participant in South Lanarkshire signed up and registered for OpenLearn courses in Learning and Dealing with Autism. He had been unemployed for a few years due to medical grounds and had worked in construction from the age of 17. He felt he had nothing else to offer an employer now at over 50. He discovered as a result of his OpenLearn course and participating in the Movement to Work programme here in Cambuslang Job Centre Plus, that this was not the case.

He is now in fulltime employment within the care sector and helps at his granddaughter's nursery for children with special needs too. It has all been a very worthwhile life-changing event for him and his family."

Employment Advisor
Department of Work and Pensions



Participants' feedback



These short courses will help my CV look like I've done something since leaving school. An employer might even look at me.



The possibilities are endless. I'm so pleased I came along.



It's never too late to learn...given me hope and confidence.



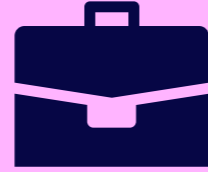
I left with hope for the future.



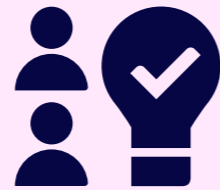
Developing the workforce

As the UK's largest university, The Open University is recognised globally as a leader in providing online distance learning opportunities to individuals, however many people are not aware that our flexible, skills-based training extends to businesses and employers.

While recent financial and economic pressures mean training budgets are often squeezed at the expense of skills development, we are helping employers across Scotland to develop affordable training to support their businesses. Our training options focus on areas reflecting Scotland's skills priorities including digital, sustainability and social care. At the same time, three quarters of OU learners 'earn while they learn' with employers telling us that the flexible OU online delivery model, providing learning at a time that suits the business and employee, is an approach that really works for them.



Working with over 250 employers across Scotland



950 students are sponsored by their employers to study with us



85% of alumni say OU studies improved their job skills

Our role in the Scottish skills landscape

According to the 2023 Business Barometer report, published by the OU and the British Chambers of Commerce, more than two thirds (71%) of Scottish organisations were experiencing skills shortages - one of the top challenges facing employers.

In 2023, the OU in Scotland also commissioned Censuwide to conduct further bespoke research into the needs of Scottish small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in particular.

The findings indicated that for businesses with 10-49 employees a staggering 83% face skills shortages that are impacting their business growth and profitability. People management (25%), finance (24%), digital technologies (22%) and project management (20%) were the top areas in which respondents were experiencing skills

shortages, while environmental concerns and their impact on business growth are also front and centre for Scotland's SMEs.

The survey also highlighted a lack of awareness among SMEs of the access they have to Scottish Government-funded employee training support. Less than a third of businesses had heard of the Scottish Funding Council Upskilling Fund, the Flexible Workforce Development Fund (FWDF) which was available at the time but was subsequently closed at the Scottish Budget announcement at the end of 2023, and the Part-Time Fee Grant.

Recognising that managing skills gaps and talent retention is particularly challenging for rural and semi-rural based SMEs, in 2023 we ran the first-ever OU in Scotland Skills for Business Roadshow in various locations across the nation, aimed at raising awareness of the vast range of relevant flexible, short online courses that SMEs can access at little or no cost to themselves or their employees. Working alongside industry partners, the roadshow was co-hosted by a number of Scottish Chambers and presented an incredible opportunity to engage with business owners on a one-to-one level, gaining a greater understanding of their needs and challenges. We provided direct and detailed support and advice on how the OU can help create a tailored training strategy that will address the specific skills gaps and needs within businesses. The roadshow events were attended by over 120 delegates in the seven mainly rural locations and have opened up the opportunity for future conversations with over 1500 Scottish businesses.



Studying an OU Microcredential helped Callum Mullen upskill himself in a new role at software development firm Tank Studios

Scotland's tourism industry

Most acutely impacted in recent years, Scottish tourism and hospitality has been one of the hardest hit sectors: lengthy lockdowns coupled with a shortage of labour and skilled migrant workers due to stricter post-Brexit immigration rules, recent rising energy prices and the cost-of-living crisis have resulted in serious challenges in staff recruitment and retention in the sector.

As part of Scottish Tourism Month in February 2023, the OU in Scotland launched a new scholarship partnership with Hospitality Industry Trust (HIT) Scotland to develop tourism and hospitality talent. Ten scholars from across the country began studying for a fully-funded Microcredential course with the OU in Scotland. Supported by the Scottish Funding Council's Upskilling Fund they had the opportunity to gain new specialist knowledge and skills in areas such as agile leadership, climate change and sustainability, people management, and accounting.

Voluntary and Third Sector

Throughout 2023 we have continued to develop learning partnerships with voluntary and third sector organisations across the length and breadth of Scotland. We signed Memoranda of Understanding with the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) and Children in Scotland, both forming the foundation of exciting learning partnerships aimed at upskilling the workforce.

To support the NTS's programme promoting learning in the workplace, the OU provision was mapped against the Trust's job families, providing a tailored selection of courses to support staff in their careers. Children in Scotland is a membership organisation, and practitioners working with children and young people will have access to a wide range of OU courses in key skills areas to help them upskill and make a greater impact in their communities. Practitioners and OU academics will also pursue potential research opportunities and collaborate to explore new ways of improving the lives of children and young people.

Student stories

Attracting and developing high calibre staff

Mental health charity Health in Mind has been able to continue providing all staff with valuable learning opportunities through the OU at a time of immense pressure on the third sector.

As an OU graduate herself, Alliance Manager Flora Henderson was confident that the flexibility, quality of written materials and interactive online learning environment provided by the OU in Scotland would meet a range of individual needs across the charity.

"The cost-of-living crisis, as well as ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in a tremendous increase in demand for support. At the same time, staff are affected by workload and a continued impact on staff absence levels".

First partnering with the OU in Scotland in 2021, the charity's training plans have evolved over the last couple of years to take a more focused approach aligned with the organisation's overall strategy and objectives.

Alongside supporting team members to progress to promoted posts, the courses also draw in new staff: "Access to OU courses is a valuable part of our offer



and how important it is that educational qualifications are relevant, benchmarked and delivered in a format that suits our workforce."

Feedback from prospective employees indicates that access to training is a key part of attracting high calibre staff.

Flora Henderson
Alliance Manager

Entrepreneurial spirit

In October 2023, OU student Laura Ripley from Aberdeenshire won the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) Female Entrepreneurship Award. Her unique business Northern Frights is a horror and fantasy events company using props, special effects and skilled actors to create immersive and thriving events in the North of Scotland.

Laura had dropped out of school when she was 15 and says: "I've been able to study subjects related to my business through the Open Degree such as Design, Business and Creative Writing."



I ended up in a career that I hated until my early 30s, so the opportunity to study with The Open University gave me the chance to study at home whilst still working.

Laura Ripley
Northern Frights



In their assessment the judges all agreed that Laura's resilience and determination to cut through a largely male dominated niche sector with an ambitious scalable business model showed real entrepreneurial spirit. She had overcome the many challenges that a female founder faces in an underrepresented sector and used this experience to fuel future ambitions while championing and promoting diversity and inclusion: "A real role model for their sector for the future and this embodies the spirit behind this award."

Learning for all

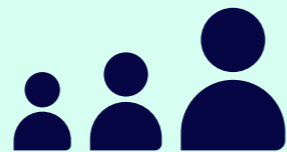
The Open University in Scotland is open to everyone, regardless of age, income, geography and background, and through our supported distance learning mode we deliver education to a wide range of people, at every stage of their lives.

We offer a lot of learning opportunities outside of the formal education routes that we provide through degree programmes and short courses. Accessing free non-formal learning can even lead learners to further study; either way, we believe learning will inspire people, open minds and improve lives.

In 2023, we offered a wide range of learning opportunities, including online tools, outreach events and community activities to engage the public and share the benefits of our education and research widely.



22% of OU students live in remote or rural areas



Our students range from school age to 92 years old



165,200 OpenLearn visitors from Scotland

Inspiring broadcasts

Since the early 1970s, our partnership with the BBC has provided education as a unique public service offer, reaching millions of people. In 2023, the second series of OU/BBC co-production 'Scotland's Sacred Islands' featured adventurer Ben Fogle travelling across some of Scotland's most beautiful islands to explore how faith and belief took root and how that still thrives in island communities today. It was supported by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, with particular relevance to courses in Religion, Philosophy and Ethics, Arts and Humanities and in Social Sciences. The OU/BBC platform 'Connect' offered additional exclusive interviews with Ben Fogle discussing spirituality and mindfulness, as well as articles from academics on the rediscovery of pilgrimage and the perceived Christian decline in Scotland.

Three-part co-production 'The Women Who Changed Modern Scotland', presented by Kirsty Wark, highlighted the women who, throughout the decades, have challenged the status quo, defied sexism to seize new opportunities and, in more recent years, have stepped up to lead in politics, in their communities and in the workplace.

Well-known names, such as former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and actress and OU honorary graduate Elaine C Smith, were featured alongside an extraordinary range of women who may not be household names but whose passion and commitment have changed the lives of everyone in Scotland.

The inspiring programme that was also accompanied by additional resources on the OU/BBC Connect platform was immensely well received and successful amongst audiences and offered us an opportunity for engagement with key stakeholder at a panel discussion event that we hosted in Edinburgh.



Journalist Gabriella Bennett at our panel discussion for OU/BBC production 'The Women Who Changed Modern Scotland'

Free learning

OpenLearn is the home of free learning from The Open University, offering around 900 courses, more than 8,000 articles, interactive activities, podcasts and videos available to all. The site attracts millions of visitors each year, including 165,200 visitors from Scotland in 2022–23, giving learners the opportunity to explore a range of subjects, and build skills and confidence.

The past year saw the launch of the OU in Scotland's Jury Hub initiative, in collaboration with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. This is a new online platform as part of OpenLearn, featuring a variety of world experts discussing issues such as cognitive bias, the controversial not proven verdict, rape myths, legal concepts and methodological issues relating to the field. The initiative aims to educate prospective jurors as well as to make important and complex ideas accessible to a lay audience, with direct relevance to members of the public who have been selected for jury service.

Captivating events

In 2023, we continued to engage with diverse audiences in Scotland by taking events out to communities and engaging our academics, stakeholders and students in the sharing of knowledge and learning with members of the public in a direct and inclusive way.

Over the year we sponsored and co-hosted a broad range of events, including the Edinburgh International Book Festival, Bloody Scotland, Maths Week Scotland to name a few. At Glasgow Science Festival tickets were partly offered out to local housing associations to provide first-rate educational opportunities to underserved communities. The in-person activities were also supplemented by the 'Science on the Sofa' online programme to open access to broader audiences.

Summer Solstice Week was a week-long programme of events at the spectacular Crawick Multiverse in Dumfries and Galloway, with a focus on recognising the artistic, scientific and cultural significance of the summer solstice. It saw hundreds of visitors, locals, school groups and community organisations visiting Crawick Multiverse for the celebrations. Subsequently, newly developed relationships with local partners have led us to hosting the European Lunar Symposium in the region in 2024.

Student stories

Something for everyone

Retired coach-driver David Torr from the Scottish Borders motored his way to a Bachelor of Science Honours degree with The Open University (OU), after trying out a free online study course and becoming hooked. "I fell into studying by accident, I was a member of the East Berwickshire U3A (University of the Third Age) following my interest in astronomy. At that point my journey was purely for personal goals, I left school with 1 GCE at O Level. I was directed towards an OpenLearn course by the U3A. At the end of it, having enjoyed the subject, I decided to try and move further."

David opted for a flexible qualification pathway, saying: "The Open Degree was taken after I realised I did not have the aptitude to follow the maths of the course that I initially would have liked to follow, which was astronomy. When I came to that decision, I still wanted to follow a science-based degree and was pointed towards the Open Degree by an advisor in the OU in Scotland office, who explained that I could choose subjects that appealed to me." Modules David picked included Planetary Science and Environment: Responding to Change.

And David has not drawn a line under his studies yet: "I am intending to go back to take some more free courses."



If you are thinking of OpenLearn and not sure, just give it a try. There is something for everyone and at different levels.

David Torr
OU Graduate



Societal change

We promote social justice by providing educational opportunity – with this mission we strive to improve the circumstances and the lives of our learners and their wider community. We are a place of open enquiry and debate, and we share our research and knowledge that can ultimately change our society.

Through the OU's Open Societal Challenges programme, that celebrated its first anniversary in 2023, we take a challenge-led approach to research to address the world's most critical issues in sustainability, tackling inequalities and living well.

We also actively engage directly with key stakeholders and policymakers to dismantle any barriers to the opportunities that our students and potential students face, whether discrimination, wrong turns, disability or hardship. We make the case to government and employers for policies and funding that help achieve our mission. As such, we contribute to the development of national strategies and public policy to ensure they take account of our students and part-time higher education in general.



The OU in Scotland boosted the economy by £217.4m



The total impact from expenditure and employment in Scotland is £55m



85% of OU graduates remain in the location where they studied

Informing policy

Over the past year, we presented to senior Scottish Government civil servants in relation to the potential lifetime skills offer to be introduced as part of the National Strategy for Economic Transformation; and we notably fed into the Scottish Government's Strategic Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape led by James Withers where we covered funding and models of lifelong learning, the OU's role in skills delivery, the need for parity for part-time learners and the need for a robust system of funding that supports learners throughout their lives.

In June 2023 we gave evidence on behalf of Universities Scotland and the sector to the Social Justice and Social Security Committee on 'Child Poverty and Parental Employment', highlighting the need for flexible education and skill development opportunities.



The OU in Scotland is also part of a specialist knowledge group brought together by the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS) to update their Memorandum on Entry Requirements to Programmes of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Scotland. Over the past year we have been working to support the GTCS's ambition to support widening student access into ITE and increase diversity in the teaching profession through the addition of a broader range of minimum requirements in Literacy and Numeracy.

We also use our insights from academic research to inform and advise politicians and civil servants. In 2023, we provided a number of research briefings and reports to Ministers, civil servants and parliamentary committees, for example on the 'Integration of migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland', on the 'Not Proven' verdict in Scotland and on 'COP26 – One year on', to name a few.



The OU is in an enviable position, even amongst Higher Education institutions. It has a very high profile at the Parliament and is almost universally supported.

Feedback from MSP via annual survey



The success of our parliamentary engagement has been evidenced in the results of an annual survey of MSPs. In 2023, we received some of our highest ever ratings: 93% of participating MSPs said they were favourable of the OU, a 9% increase from 2022, and 74% said they were satisfied with our engagement with them, a 13% increase.

Research and innovation

With 82% of the OU's research impact assessed to be 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent' by the last Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2021, our discoveries have real-life relevance. In September 2023, OU researcher Professor Olga Jurasz published her findings from the UK's largest ever study into societal attitudes and experiences of online violence against women and girls across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They revealed that in Scotland one in six women have experienced online violence, with this figure increasing amongst those aged 16-24 (27%) and LGBT+ women (45%). The research also showed that women and girls in Scotland were the most likely to have witnessed online violence, in comparison to those in the other UK nations. The research was met with great interest from parliamentarians, and we are planning to host an engagement event in 2024.

Our world-class research results in innovation in the real world - in Scotland and globally. Work by OU researchers who established a capability for the analyses of distilled spirits, using comprehensive gas chromatography-mass spectrometry, has been of great interest to the Scotch Whisky sector - a major contributor to the UK economy and employing thousands of people in distilleries in the more rural areas of Scotland. Developing new tools that can help solve the challenges of the sector, e.g. to detect adulterated whiskies or assess the impact of changes in manufacturing processes, the dissemination of this commercially focussed research has resulted in several new opportunities to collaborate with leading Scottish partners and the Scottish Government.

Tackling healthcare challenges

Building on our existing partnership with NHS Scotland and innovative work such as the OU Future Nurse programme - a funded scheme offering routes for those already working in healthcare support worker roles to become registered nurses - in 2023 we signed a strategic collaboration agreement with NHS Education for Scotland.

With the agreement we have formalised our joint ambition of supporting the current and future workforce, opening up numerous impactful opportunities in the health and social care sector and ultimately improving outcomes for the people of Scotland. It will focus on exploring opportunities for nursing studies in schools, employment and education opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers, employment access routes in nursing using the OU Certificate of Higher Education in Healthcare Practice, supporting pathways from Higher National Qualifications and upskilling social care staff in learning languages for wellbeing in care settings.

Student stories

Lifelong learning in nursing

In June 2023, Lois Gaffney, a nurse whose Open University studies enabled her to upskill while working in healthcare support won the prestigious Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Scotland Nursing Student of the Year Award. Lois had left school at 16 and started working as a nursing auxiliary. "Having been a healthcare support worker for 13 years, I finally made the decision to undergo training to become a registered nurse."

Living on Shetland, Lois explored the option of studying on the mainland, but as she explained:



After becoming a mother, I knew that the OU was the best option for me. I could remain in Shetland, continue to be a healthcare support worker with all my colleagues and continue to have time with my daughter and partner too.

Lois Gaffney
OU Nursing Graduate



The RCN Scotland award shortlisting included recognition of Lois' nomination for the Council of Deans Student Leadership Programme; bringing learning gained from a neurology placement in Glasgow back to her hospital; and supporting colleagues on a nurse workforce wellbeing group.

But learning isn't over yet for Lois: "I recently completed the Advanced Life Support course and really enjoyed that. Lifelong learning is a huge part of nursing. I am excited to see what lies ahead for any future projects."

Setting an example

Studying with The Open University has enabled Zimbabwean refugee Vitalis Mumbure to gain a new career in social work, helping to improve the lives of others.

The father-of-four who lives in Paisley decided when he gained UK citizenship in 2021 that he wanted a professional qualification that would set a good example to his children and other refugees: "I wanted to change people's lives by contributing positively to them, and I saw social work as a way of giving back to the community. I am a refugee and I wanted to be a better citizen in my new home."

Now a newly qualified social worker in Glasgow City Council's Older People with Physical Disabilities team, Vitalis works to empower and enhance the lives of care services users and their families, through identifying and providing practical and emotional support.



I am someone who has always been passionate about social justice issues and is committed to working towards ending inequalities, human rights abuses and discrimination. This has led me to choosing a career that enables me to make a difference and work on the ground, both with those affected and those who have the power to change policy.

Vitalis Mumbure
OU Social Work Graduate



73%

of our students are in full-time or part-time work

28

is the average age of new undergraduates

92%

of graduates in Scotland say OU study supports their career goals

OU Employability of Qualifiers Survey, 2023

75%

of new undergraduates earn less than £25,000

745

students have transferred credit from their HNC or HND to OU studies

£217.4m

economic benefit from OU in Scotland activity

London Economics, 2018-19

19,500+

OU students in Scotland

17%

of new undergraduates have a college HNC/D

90%

of graduates in Scotland say OU study supports their personal goals

OU Employability of Qualifiers Survey, 2023



Visit the OU in Scotland website
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Student data in this report relates to our last full academic year 2022-23
Other data sources: OU Employability of Qualifiers Survey 2022 and National Student Survey 2023.

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