



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE  
FOR EMPLOYMENT  
AND LEARNING**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**The Open University**

14 December 2011

## **NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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### **COMMITTEE FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING**

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**The Open University**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Sammy Douglas

Mr Chris Lyttle

Mrs Sandra Overend

**Witnesses:**

Mr John D'Arcy	)	
Ms Donna Gallagher	)	The Open University
Ms Heather Laird	)	
Ms Orla Matthews	)	

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

We now have a presentation from the Open University. I welcome the director, Mr John D'Arcy; deputy director Ms Heather Laird; Ms Donna Gallagher, health and social services staff tutor; and Ms Orla Matthews, who is a student. I invite you to make your presentation, after which members will have an opportunity to ask questions.

**Mr John D'Arcy (The Open University):**

Thank you for your warm welcome on a very cold day. It is a real pleasure for the Open University to make this presentation to you. I am delighted that, in making the presentation, we

have with us a staff tutor, Donna Gallagher, who works on our nursing programme, and, really importantly, we have Orla Matthews with us, who is a student. Orla will be graduating with the Open University in May 2012, and, at the risk of being a little bit cheeky, you will all get an invitation to that ceremony. I hope that you will be able to attend and help us to celebrate Orla's success.

We are conscious that you are up against time today, so I will give a quick overview and some background on the Open University. More importantly, Donna will talk to you about the interactions that we have with employers, how we make our courses fit for purpose for employers, and how we ensure that our students have the best employment prospects.

You are probably aware that the Open University is just over 40 years old. We started in 1969 as an initiative of the Harold Wilson Government. The key context of the Open University is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. We have a very diverse range of students; we are not the typical three-A-level student type of university. We take people from across the community, from different backgrounds and ages, but we give them the same quality of education that they would get in any other university throughout the UK. We are measured and quality-assured to exactly the same standard as any other university.

We have been a pioneering organisation ever since we were set up. You will recall that the early days of the Open University were, largely, driven by BBC 2 programmes, often shown late at night or very early in the morning. We still do television programmes in collaboration with the BBC. The most prominent one at the moment is 'Frozen Planet', but we also work with the BBC on programmes such as 'Coast' and 'Bang Goes the Theory'. However, we are tending to move more into mobile devices like iPads and iPhones and using the internet much more to deliver content where people need it at a time and place that suits them best for their studies.

We operate on a global scale, which brings a big advantage for Northern Ireland. The quality of our materials is really valued worldwide, and we can deliver that locally using a bank of over 400 lecturers across Ireland and a concentrated staff of around 55 in our Belfast office. Donna, Heather and I and all our staff tutors are based there.

We see ourselves as fitting in well to the higher and further education mix in Northern Ireland. We provide a different level of service from that of Queen's University and the University of Ulster. We are a part-time and a distance-learning university, so we are location free. We think that that is a real asset to Northern Ireland, moving forward, because many areas of Northern Ireland might not have the access that they want to a university. We think that we can, to a large degree, fill that gap. We are very much into people learning throughout their lives, and Heather will indicate the age range of our students. We see the Open University having a real role in helping people to get into work and, once in work, upping their skills and helping them to progress.

One of the biggest innovations over the past two years is in the use of technology, particularly the use of iTunes University. In our submission, we state that we have had 40 million downloads. We have just got our latest report, which shows that has increased to 42 million. That is all free to anybody in the world. There is material there from all our faculties. We have 422 e-books and 389 audio/video collections that people can download to begin an informal learning process. For many, that represents an opportunity to move into a formal taught course with the university.

Last year, we won a Times Higher Education Award for our collaboration project with UNISON. We were given an outstanding assessment by the Education and Training Inspectorate for our PGCE course. Northern Ireland is in a really strong position when it comes to research, because the three universities here are in the UK's top 50 research universities. Queen's is at 39, we are at 43 and the University of Ulster is 45, so we would like to increase our knowledge transfer here in Northern Ireland.

I e-mailed the Committee a few weeks ago, confirming that the university is maintaining its undergraduate fee at its current level, which is really great news for our students here. Last week, the university decided that our postgraduate fees will also stay at the same level, and, again, we think that that is great news for our students here.

I will hand over to Heather Laird who will give a flavour of who our students are and the position on numbers.

**Ms Heather Laird (The Open University):**

It is difficult for us to know exactly how many students we have at any one time, so I will give a snapshot of where we stand. We have almost 5,500 module reservations/registrations in the system, and about 4,500 of those students have confirmed their places on modules or are part way through modules.

The age profile is interesting. When I started working for the university, most of its students were older than me. However, I am afraid that that has gone the other way, and not totally due to the length of time that I have been there. Of our students, 18.7% are under 26. The bulk of the students — about 37.5% — are between 26 and 35. Almost 27% are between 36 and 45, and about 12% are aged 46 to 55. Only 4.5% are over 55. That gives you an idea of the balance and shows that the percentage of younger students is increasing. About 9.5% of our students in Northern Ireland are managing a disability or an additional requirement, and the nature of Open University study lends itself very well to that.

When it comes to module choices, health and social care is one of the most popular. We have more registrations on our introduction to health and social care at the moment than on any other module. That 60-point module allows people to achieve a certificate in health and social care — a bite-sized qualification, if you like.

The other very popular module at the moment is My Digital Life, which is an online technology course that leads to a certificate in computing and information technology. Social sciences is another popular area. In addition, we have psychology, which is up there with the social sciences, health and social care, and our introductory business module. Those are the key areas.

In supporting students, one our big aims is making sure that they get the right information, advice and guidance at the outset and get onto the right module. Obviously, if they start at the right place, their chances of success are better. We make key interventions as they work their way through, particularly during their initial modules, and progress to the different levels. That is a very quick overview of where we are.

**Mr D'Arcy:**

Thank you, Heather. Donna, do you want to say a few words about how we engage with employers?

**Ms Donna Gallagher (The Open University):**

Good afternoon, everybody. I am a senior lecturer, and I manage the pre-registration nursing programme. My background is in nursing. We currently have 160 students across the four years of the programme.

The pre-registration nursing programme is delivered across four years as opposed to three, so it is part-time. That allows our students to continue working a third of the working week as a healthcare assistant because they are all sourced from healthcare assistant nursing auxiliary backgrounds, across the five health and social care trusts. We have students across the whole of Northern Ireland employed by the trusts as healthcare assistants. For the other two thirds of the week, they are on academic or practice study on the pre-registration nursing programme.

At the end of the four-year journey, they qualify and register with the Nursing and Midwifery Council in adult nursing or mental health nursing: we offer the two branches. The programme started in Northern Ireland in 2004 and has continued with success with our five partners in the trusts. We have almost 50 students already working in our services across the trusts as registered nurses. The programme is offered across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the States of Jersey, so our students have learning opportunities and access to that wider student body online in some of the ways that John alluded to.

The students' managers need to be able to support them for 20 hours a week on the pre-registration programme. So our students can be working part time and employed within the trust right up to full time, and can access that opportunity over the four years. Our programme meets the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) standards, as does every other pre-registration nursing programme offered by other universities. We work closely in partnership with our five trusts but also very much with the University of Ulster and Queen's University, Belfast. The three higher education institutions have already written a joint mentorship programme, which we offer yearly in partnership across the five trusts to support the staff nurses who support our

students when on practice learning.

Our partnership is extremely active. Although I am based at the Open University in Belfast, I am often out in service. I am there physically maybe two days a week, and three days I am out across the five trusts. I have often said to my husband that my next job will be a taxi driver because I know every back route to every hospital and every community facility across Northern Ireland. We could not offer the programme without the active partnership of our five trusts. This has to be done in full partnership, and I have to say that that partnership is fantastic.

As I am sure you are aware, our students learn as with any university. For any student who engages in a nursing profession professional programme, 50% of the learning is theoretical and 50% is in practice. So 50% of the assessment for our programme is also in practice, which is why the three higher education institutions joined forces to write the mentorship programme because those mentors have to assess our students for us for the 50% of the time out in practice.

We have about 160 students actively on the programme. We have an attrition rate of less than 4·5% across the four years, which is about one third of the general attrition rate of most other higher education institutions that offer pre-registration nurse education. Those places are funded by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland. We actively and regularly engage with the Department each year, and the Department continually funds 18 places a year in the programme, in both mental health and adult nursing.

In 2007, we bid for regeneration moneys along with the Chief Nursing Officer and the Department. That allowed us to put 70 students onto the programme at that time. Orla is one of that group. We got regeneration monies that allowed us to support more students in the greater Belfast area, as well as across the whole of Northern Ireland. Those 70 students will all now be graduating. They are awaiting their final results and will graduate in May. However, we will be actively looking for staff nurse posts in January and February with our five partner trusts.

**Mr D'Arcy:**

Thank you, Donna. Chairman, we would like to conclude our presentation with some insights from Orla, who is one of our successful students and has managed that very delicate balance of

work and learning at the same time.

**Ms Orla Matthews (The Open University):**

Good afternoon. The opportunity that the Open University gave me has been an excellent journey of learning. I left school with qualifications; some of my fellow students did not. I did not know what I wanted to do. I fell into a job and I chose to have a family. I had an experience as a patient in hospital and decided that I would really love to do nursing, so I decided to change my career. I got a job as a nursing auxiliary in the Mater Hospital, which is part of the Belfast Trust. Managing family commitments is a lot more difficult when you are thinking about progressing in your career or education, and the Open University course allows for that. It allows for third-level education to be accessible to everyone; not just school leavers but people of all ages.

Support for the pre-registered nursing course comes from the trust, the hospital and the ward manager. Someone had completed the pre-registered course through the Open University on the ward that that I worked on. That person had worked as a nursing auxiliary and, having qualified, is working as a staff nurse on the ward. So, the ward was very eager to take another student on board and to give me that support, which I also get from the trust.

It is distance learning, but the nursing course and the approach to learning is specific. It was a difficult course; it would be silly of me to say it was not. It was hard at times, because it is a third-level course, but the Open University also allows for flexibility so that you can work around your family commitments. I was able to continue working 30 hours a week in my trust and learn at the same time, which allowed me to keep any family commitments. It took a lot of stress out of trying to maintain the work, life and education balance, because everything was going on at the same time.

As it is a distance learning course, there is a lot of online material and an online forum. As Donna pointed out, because the course is in Scotland, England and Jersey, we have online activities through which we engage directly with students from across the water, which enhances learning.

You are constantly in a practical setting: the base ward as an employee and also as a student. You come into the course with a sound foundation of skill sets that you bring along with you throughout your journey. Nurses who have qualified through the course are very well rounded and capable staff nurses, which is why they were eager to keep the nursing student they had on our ward as a staff nurse. Hopefully, in February, I shall also be working on my base ward in my blue uniform.

I cannot emphasise enough the opportunity that the Open University nursing course gives me. I wanted to progress in my career when I was a nursing auxiliary, but I was not sure how to do it. I would have had to go back to college initially because access to other universities would have had certain criteria that I would have had to meet. I would have had to leave my employment, and there would have been a lot of financial stress through that. When you are on the ward, you know there are people there who are capable and have the ability and, through investment, will produce excellent staff nurses. I think that the trust supports the Open University course so much because it is a real investment with an endgame where staff nurses come back to work in the trust. It is brilliant to know that I will be graduating in May, thanks to the Open University and the support of my trust.

**Mr D'Arcy:**

Thank you, Orla. Thank you, Chairman, for the amount of time that you have given us today. I will just pick up on one point that Donna made, which is the fact that the three universities collaborate very closely on this sort of provision. That is a really good model for how we progress more widely in higher education over the coming years.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

Thank you for your presentation. I commend Orla for giving us an insight into how the Open University has helped her. It is testimony to the Open University. What qualifications do you need to get on to Open University courses? What is the fallout rate? Are the courses all done online? Do you have study online? Maybe there is hope for me yet, but I could not go online. I would have to use a hard copy. Is that available?

**Mr D'Arcy:**

Those are three very good questions. I will hand over to Heather to respond because she has the detail of the numbers that you are seeking.

**Ms Laird:**

We do not have any specific entry requirements. We have a conversation with applicants, and inquirers will go online and find out a little bit about us or they will pick up a brochure or go to an event. We engage in dialogue with them to see where they are coming from. They will start with our openings modules or with level 1, and those modules will give them the skills that they need to carry on. As John said, we are very open in respect of entry requirements. It is a case of working with people. We will have people coming in with no qualifications whatsoever, but they will have a commitment and an interest in learning. We also have people coming in who have a degree but want a change of career or want to progress and move on to a postgraduate course, so there is a very wide variety of intake.

We now require people to give us their highest level of education at the start, and that is linked to funding issues. It was not a question that they had to answer previously, but it now is. So, we are beginning to build up a better picture of where they are coming from and what percentage of people have no qualifications.

The fallout rate varies from module to module, but our retention figures have improved greatly. The fallout rate on some courses could be as high as 25%, but, on others, we could lose 1% to 2%. The nursing programme is a good example, and that is linked to the support that is provided. We find that, if students have peer support as well as university support, the drop-out rate is very much reduced.

**Ms Gallagher:**

For a professional programme such as pre-registration nursing education, and for students coming into a four-year programme, NMC entry criteria applies. The Open University will keep that entry criteria as low as possible, but all students must come into an NMC-approved programme for nursing education with key skills in numeracy and literacy. We work with our partners in the trust through the education that they provide. Those students would normally work in service as

nursing auxiliaries with NVQ level 2, NVQ level 3 or BTEC diplomas, and we will now work with the trust partners and offer qualifications and credit framework (QCF) level 4 diplomas. Therefore, that is the type of preparation that is required. However, if nursing auxiliaries do not have GCSE maths or key skills in maths or numeracy, we will offer that module beforehand to widen the access so that they can come on and do their nursing education. However, the pre-registration nursing programme, because it is professional, must meet NMC entry criteria, but those criteria are kept as low as possible.

**Ms Laird:**

The other thing you mentioned was online access. That is one way that we provide support, but it is very much blended learning. We still post things out to people. People still need a postbox and still need to be friends with their postman. We get a lot of hard copy. Depending on where students are, they might find it easier to have telephone tuition. So we have telephone conference calls, there is the online forum and various online resources, but there is still face-to-face learning. People still go along to a building, a classroom and a tutor, and that is something that a lot our students, particularly those coming from a widening access background, appreciate.

**Ms Gallagher:**

From the perspective of the pre-registration programme, we have students dispersed across the five trusts of Northern Ireland. We have, for example, two or three students away up in the north, over the Glenshane Pass, which was not so easy to cross today. We try to localise. We have tutorial groups as small as five, our trust partners allow us to have our tutorials in the hospitals, and we use those facilities to offer our classroom delivery. We keep it as local as we can. Roughly every six weeks, the students will get together for a lecture-style delivery. They have materials to read both in hard copy and online as well as the online activities. Then, they also have practice assessments.

**Ms Matthews:**

The universities are leaning towards a more electronic approach to learning. It is something that the Open University has already established. It has an online library, which was a fantastic source throughout my studies because everything was condensed there. There was physicality and a brilliant support network of tutorials as well as distance learning. It meant that the learning

was very flexible in approach.

**Mr Douglas:**

I thank John and Orla for the presentation. I am a former student of the Open University, and I found it very difficult to get the balance right so I appreciate some of the stuff that Orla went through. I was managing four young children at the time.

One of the things about the programme that I was on was the quality of the materials. That was prior to the days of the internet.

I googled the Open University last night and I saw a photograph of the Taoiseach with John. He grabbed your badge, is that what happened?

**Mr D'Arcy:**

This is the very the badge.

**Mr Douglas:**

Is that the famous badge? Well done.

My constituency is East Belfast, the same as Chris's. It contains some of the most disadvantaged areas. There is a major problem with educational underachievement and getting people into higher education. Can you explain whether you have outreach to such working-class communities? Going back many years, the Labour Party in particular would have been very supportive of the Open University, and hopefully still is.

My second question is linked to that. You mentioned your relationship with Queen's University. Can you tell us a bit about that, John?

**Mr D'Arcy:**

We have always prided ourselves, Sammy, on having a lot of outreach across all the communities. Donna mentioned the openings courses. Open by name, open by nature; it is really

good way for people to engage with learning. We have worked with a range of communities right across the city. For example, we work with Ballybeen Women's Centre, Falls Women's Centre, the Salvation Army and Sainsbury's at Forestside, where some of the till operators are engaged in learning like that.

A really interesting link is with St Gemma's High School in north Belfast, where some young pupils, who maybe have not had great success with GCSEs, want to continue down a pathway where they may eventually become a nurse, teacher or classroom assistant. The openings programmes serve as a sort of bridging programme between GCSE and A level. So we are very active in that regard and we have been fortunate, in the past couple of years, to have received some charitable funding from philanthropists. A lot of the programmes that we are working on at the moment are free to the user. I have spoken to our community partnership manager to see whether we can establish some meetings with colleagues across the city. We want to have a conversation with communities to try to target them appropriately.

Going back to what Heather said, the key thing that we have to do is advise people on the sort of course that they are likely to start on. The last thing that you want to do is raise expectations and have people not progressing as they could. We would be very happy to contact colleagues about that.

The wider relationships with the other two universities are positive. We have been part of the steering group for the higher education review that Sir Graeme Davies is taking forward. Northern Ireland is in a unique position, probably within the UK, and within Ireland. It has three very different universities that are performing really well, from the research element at Queen's, the regionality of the University of Ulster, and the part-time distance niche that we have, and we also have the six larger regional colleges, which gives Northern Ireland a real opportunity to look at sensible strategic collaboration. We operate right across the UK, and our colleagues in Scotland and Wales are quite envious that we have such a networked group of higher education providers. So we are very keen to work with our partners in serving the people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Lyttle:**

Thank you for your presentation. It is great to hear from you. Having listened to the delivery of your presentation, it is easy to see why the university is so proud of you, Orla. Congratulations on your achievement.

The submission states that the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) put the Open University as the only higher education institution that is “outstanding”. Can you give us an idea as to why that is?

**Mr D'Arcy:**

Again, that mirrors exactly what Orla and Donna were talking about. The type of student that we get for our PGCE course is someone who is in work elsewhere. It is not necessarily someone who has just left school with A levels. They are bringing to the teaching profession a wider range of expertise and experience. We have had really strong feedback from the ETI on that. The informal feedback that we have had from the schools that then employ those people is that they really hit the ground running. Sometimes, schools are criticised for not focusing on the needs of business. A lot of our graduates come in with all those skills of communication and time management and all those intangibles that business organisations talk about.

We have only about 20 students each year, so we are the smallest player. However, we are a bit of a niche player. So we offer an opportunity for those who are in employment. Some of our students may be in the IT industry and suddenly feel that they want to make a contribution through teaching. If we can capture that worldwide experience and bring it into the classroom, it is a real asset to the education sector. It has been a very successful course and, as we move towards a wider review of teacher education over the coming year, we hope that our model is well recognised.

**Mr Lyttle:**

It is clear that flexibility and adaptability is the key strength of the Open University, and it is helpful to get feedback on that issue, given the upcoming teacher-training review. It is great to hear from you today. Thank you.

**Mrs Overend:**

Thank you for giving us so much information. How do you promote your courses? How do you get the word out? Do you get into careers advice suites?

**Mr D'Arcy:**

We have a really good relationship with the Careers Service, and it makes schools and jobcentres aware of us. We probably suffer from being one of the best kept secrets in Northern Ireland. We have a bigger role to play. We will be starting a new promotional campaign throughout the UK just after Christmas, when we will be talking about the benefits of Open University-style learning. However, we do a lot of open-near-you events where we go into libraries and shopping centres and let people touch and feel our materials. We are very active in that.

We also work with schools, trade unions and various community partnerships. It is a multi-stranded approach. We have open days at our office in Victoria Street, and Heather nearly kills me because we would have maybe 90 people turning. It shows that there is a real demand for learning and for flexible learning. We are lucky that we have such a talented team of staff tutors such as Donna on hand. They can really talk to people about the job opportunities or the wider academic opportunities from the learning course that they are thinking of.

We are like other universities. We engage with the Careers Service, we take out advertisements and we also work with employers. We have had some very useful meetings of late with the computing sector as regards our foundation degree. In addition, we work with the further education colleges very closely. This year, we are developing a foundation degree with Belfast Metropolitan College for the financial services sector. Unfortunately, we did not get the take-up for which we had hoped this year, but we are keen to run it again next year. It is a real mixture of things, Sandra.

**Mrs Overend:**

I was also wondering whether you linked in with businesses. Are you looking to increase your science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subject areas and that sort of thing as well?

**Mr D'Arcy:**

Absolutely. An interesting programme is being piloted in England. It is a different sort of two-plus-two model. It is for people who do not have science qualifications at A level, and we take them through a fast-track approach for the first two years, and then, with partner universities in England and Wales, they migrate to a science honours degree. We would like to take forward that conversation with Queen's University and the University of Ulster once we have a better sense of how successful it has been in England and Wales. There are 13 universities in England and Wales that are partnering with the Open University on that sort of programme.

STEM is a core area for us. The My Digital Life module that we launched last year has been phenomenally successful. We had to close the door because a lot of the materials that come with that are physical bits of processors, and we had only a certain amount of them. Only x number of students could take part.

We are getting really good feedback from those sorts of things. Obviously, we would like to expand them. It has been really good to have this opportunity to talk to you. I am very keen for us to engage with colleagues on the Employment and Learning Committee and others. If you are looking at upskilling in the health sector, we have a good-news story to take to the Health Committee. We also have a good-news story to take to the Committee for Education. We are really grateful for your time today given your very pressing timetable.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

Thank you for coming and giving us your presentation and for taking the questions. It is a good-news story. People who do not want to go to a building or university as such will benefit; they will be able to get themselves upskilled and knowledgeable so that they can move forward in life. You are to be commended for that. Thank you for your presentation.