



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

The Open University

14 January 2015

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Employment and Learning

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr William Irwin
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan

Witnesses:

Mr Michael Bower	The Open University
Mr John D'Arcy	The Open University

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): I welcome John D'Arcy and Michael Bower.

Mr John D'Arcy (The Open University): Good morning, Chairman and members.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Good morning, John and Michael. Before we start, John, on behalf of the Committee, I thank the Open University (OU) for hosting us this morning. It is an honour for us to be here. Thank you very much for the hospitality. Unfortunately, due to the weather, not as many members are here as had hoped to be. Some of the members who have apologised want to make it clear that it is nothing to do with you.

Mr D'Arcy: That is good to hear, Chairman. Thank you for making the time to come to visit the Open University here in Belfast. It is almost five years since we moved into this fine building. It was a major investment from the university at that time. It is unique in the network of the Open University in that we are truly in the city centre. It is a great opportunity for students to come in, meet tutors and get advice about courses they may want to do or advice on courses that they are on. So, you are very welcome here. Later today, you will have an opportunity to meet some of our students down in the library. Rather than just listening to Michael and me talk about the Open University, that will give you an opportunity to hear at first hand the benefits that this style of study brings to them.

I have a few slides. Apologies to Anna and Sydney, as you may have to turn round a little bit. I have tried to minimise these. Hopefully, it is not death by PowerPoint. It might help to put in context some of the new developments that we are taking forward as a university here in Northern Ireland.

As a headline statement to kick off with, we are bringing world-class flexible higher education (HE) to citizens right across Northern Ireland, regardless of where they live. We have been doing that since the university got its royal charter in 1969. We are a unique university not just within the UK but across the globe in that we are truly open to people, places, methods and ideas. A unique thing that

Harold Wilson established when the Labour Government set up the university was that we would be open access, so people did not necessarily have to have traditional university entry qualifications to undertake higher education study. That puts real challenges on us as a university because, like Queen's, like Ulster, like Oxford, like Cambridge, we are covered by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) and all the quality assurance standards that any other university complies with. We put a lot of investment and time into making sure that we advise students appropriately on the right type of study for them and also making sure that they have the right sorts of study skills to maximise their investment of time and money on a particular course. There will be an opportunity get some sense of that when we visit our student services department on the first floor later.

Being a distance learning institution, obviously places are something that we are very open to. We see ourselves as having distance but not being distant from our students. Over the number of years that we have been in operation, that has changed from delivering large boxes of materials to people via Royal Mail or, back in the day, the GPO, to more and more students receiving their materials electronically. I will be able to update you on some of our latest developments on that later in the presentation.

We are keen to open our minds to different methods of teaching people. Again, that has changed over time. With regard to the late night BBC Two television programmes, the last time our vice chancellor was here at an event that you were at, he talked about the Open University educating many drunken physicists. They were not drunk when they qualified, but many of them were watching Open University studies late at night returning from adventurous weekends. That interaction with the BBC continues, but we are now producing 25 high-quality, feature-length programmes per year, such as 'Frozen Planet' and 'Wild Weather' — pertinent to today — a few weeks ago with Richard Hammond. Those are still the same high-quality programmes. Many of them are science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) related and are trying to get people to lean into taking up study at a higher level. We have a very strong research team in the university, and we will focus on that a little bit towards the end.

One of our great satisfactions is that, over the past 10 years, we have been ranked the number one university in Northern Ireland for student satisfaction. That is from a national student survey. Again, a credit to the staff that we have here in Northern Ireland is that, being a distance university, we have that degree of interaction and support with our students, many of whom could be in Enniskillen, Derry/Londonderry, Ballymena, Bangor or wherever, but they are getting a very high level of personalised support, and that is reflected in those statistics.

Since 1971, we have awarded over 19,000 higher-level higher education qualifications, and we have a very wide range of subjects that students can take right across our seven faculties. As you can see, we have 374 undergraduate modules and 151 postgraduate modules.

Our most recent statistics show why we are different here in Northern Ireland, complementing the excellence that you will find in Queen's University and Ulster University. Our former vice chancellor, Martin Bean, has often said to the Minister and DEL officials that, in many ways, Northern Ireland has it cracked, in that we have a very compact, excellent higher education system. We have three very different universities doing very different things at a high level. So, we will differ from other universities. When you look at the median age of our students, you see that it is 30 years of age. Many of those people are the sorts of people who you will find in the Northern Ireland Executive's economic strategy and skills for success strategies. There are people who are in work. Some 73% of our current students are in employment. So, they are looking to upskill, to improve their prospects, their life chances and their careers and to improve the productivity of the organisations that they work for. Some 5% of our undergraduates are directly supported by their employers. Again, that is a reasonably high statistic for a part-time university. It is good that industry and employers locally are seeing the value of higher level study in the part-time sector.

An increasing figure for us is the number of our students who have a disability. Last year, 13% of our students registered as having a disability and, this year, it is 15%. Again, when you look at the way that we teach higher education, I suppose that that is pretty obvious. People do not necessarily have to travel long distances and can study at a time that suits them. We are very proud of that statistic, and feel that we can add value to what the Department is trying to do, particularly through the economic inactivity work that it is about to begin. We also feel that that is a very strong statistic for Northern Ireland.

Almost half of our students do not have the equivalent of one A level when they start. I referred to that earlier when I spoke about open access. That puts an onus on us to ensure that we provide good

guidance and advice to students at an early stage. However, we also work with other educational partners like the further education colleges if, for example, we feel that a student may need to undertake an essential skills course before embarking on a higher level course of study with us. Again, the compactness of Northern Ireland, with its three universities and six colleges, makes those referrals much more straightforward for us.

This is almost the Michael Caine moment: not a lot of people know that 36% of our module registrations are in hard STEM subjects. I think that there is a feeling somewhere that we tend to be more of a social science and arts-based university. However, if you look at that statistic and put it in line with the percentage of students who are currently in work, you see that it is a real asset for Northern Ireland as we prepare for the devolution of corporation tax, and it shows that we can prepare an existing workforce to be skills ready for new investments that may be coming down the road. When we say "hard STEM", we mean the hard sciences. If we throw in my particular discipline of psychology, that figure will increase to one that is much higher, but some of my science colleagues tell me that I am a bit of a soft scientist rather than a hard STEM person.

The final bullet point on the page is important. Widening access and participation has always been a high-priority issue for Northern Ireland, and that has been delivered by all three universities. However, I think that our statistic speaks volumes about the power of part-time and distance learning. Some 23% of our students live in the 25% most deprived areas of Northern Ireland, so we are reaching a student cohort and communities that may not always think of higher education as the next step for them. Some of the new materials and the developments that I will share over the next few slides will show how we can add much more value to the armoury of the Department in taking forward the wider skills agenda.

As a fully fledged university, we obviously have some particular areas of expertise. One specialism that we were very proud to launch last year was this building becoming the Open University's postgraduate science student support team headquarters. So, as well as serving students across Northern Ireland, we cope with curriculum and learning queries from postgraduate students across the globe. We pushed very hard within the university to ensure that we were able to do that, as it fits with the Executive's push on the knowledge economy and STEM. We are delighted that that has taken off so well, and were pleased that the Minister was able to come down this time last year and formally launch the student support team in Belfast.

Another subject area that people do not think that we are involved in is nursing, and we work with Queen's and the University of Ulster to provide nurses with degrees. Our programme is a little bit different. We tend to work with existing employees in the health sector, and, over a period of five or six years, they become fully qualified with degrees. From the picture on the slide, you will recognise Janice Smyth from the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), and we have worked closely with UNISON, the RCN and the Health Department to take that forward. That has been a very successful programme for us. We probably contribute around 25 nurses to the Northern Ireland health sector per year and are exploring how we can further develop that with both Departments.

Being the Open University, we have to use many types of media. Years ago, when I worked in different educational settings, multimedia meant using a computer. From the complicated diagram on the next slide, you will see that we work with broadcasters like the BBC and major knowledge economy providers like Google to provide our materials across a range of platforms.

OpenLearn is our in-house free learning platform, and anyone across the world can tap into that and get free learning across the full range of subjects. That is not just throwaway learning; a high proportion of that comes from existing undergraduate and postgraduate modules. Again, it is part of our mission to foster the desire for learning and satisfy that need, and OpenLearn has been a very successful platform for us.

We have also worked with iTunes U and are one of the most downloaded universities across the globe. We have in the region of 68 million downloads of educational material from iTunes and have now expanded into Google Play. The reason for that is that we want to make sure that we are equitable to citizens, whatever devices they are using. If you have to buy an Apple iPad, that is quite an investment, so more and more people are using Android devices, which are much more inexpensive. We are also driving material now through Kindle Fire. Google Play now has a fully stocked suite of e-books that anyone can download. We are putting more material through audioBoom and Facebook and are using Twitter to engage with students and employers. Amazon has been a route for us as well in many regards, and we are probably the biggest university in Europe for educational material on YouTube. The little step diagram that you can see there is for

FutureLearn, which is an initiative that was kicked off by the Open University in 2013 when we set up our own massive open online course (MOOC) platform. That involves over 30 academic partners across the British Isles, and we are delighted to be working with Queen's University locally. It has now launched its third MOOC, and I will give you some figures on that in a moment or two.

We will move on to a graphic that shows the sort of quality you get from an e-book. I am happy to show you those in more detail later, but they are fully fledged interactive books. So, they will have large amounts of embedded video and audio. They are beyond the sort of thing that you will necessarily get on your Kindle if you are relaxing on a beach, and we have found those exceptionally popular in toppling people towards taking on a full course. That suite of materials is also available within Google.

I will show you a short video about OU Anywhere, which is an app that we launched within the last 18 months. It basically means that a student can have their individualised virtual learning environment on their smart device, whether that is an iPad, Android device, iPhone or whatever. It means that you can have course materials and interaction with tutors, and it won two awards with 'The Guardian' last year. We continue to develop that and are engaging with students and users on a daily basis to make sure that we make it as tight as possible. The video will last one minute and will give you an opportunity not to listen to me for a minute or so.

That was a short taster of the power of that application, and we continue to develop it. I should say that students still get books, so the postman will probably still get a sore back delivering some of the materials to OU students. For a lot of students, if they are in work and are travelling, that gives them an opportunity to keep in touch with their studies and move along. It is interesting that that video started with the moon and finished with the moon, and we are really pleased that we have just confirmed that Professor Monica Grady from the university will be taking part in the Northern Ireland Science Festival, which kicks off in the coming weeks. She was one of the lead scientists on the Rosetta mission, which landed the device on the comet. So, it is great to have her in Belfast over the next number of weeks. Again, it is that sort of leading-edge learning and science that attracts a lot of students to the Open University.

As well as working for ourselves, we are a very collaborative university and, as I mentioned earlier, we set up FutureLearn in 2013. The UK, and Europe in general, have been a bit behind the ball compared with Canada and the US in setting up platforms for MOOCs, which are generally very short courses delivered through the Internet and using video. They are free of charge and give someone a little bit of learning. The Open University decided that it would invest significant funds in setting up a platform where we would not just put on our own courses but work with top-quality universities across the UK and Ireland. Queen's University and Trinity College Dublin are partners with us. They have delivered some of the most successful courses to date and have great interaction with students.

The big statistics that we are really proud of are that, within 18 months, from zero, we have engaged with over 750,000 learners across the globe. Obviously, within the UK and Ireland, the bulk of the students are within the top four countries, but we are reaching out to China, the US, India and Europe. Those 750,000 students have, so far, done over 1,700,000 courses. At the minute, it is learning almost for fun, but it is giving people an experience of tasting higher level education. I know that our partner universities will see a lot of interest in those FutureLearn learners becoming full-time or part-time students over time.

The figures are very interesting, and I apologise that that text might not be awfully legible. We are finding that, of the people who join, 55% are fully engaging with the programmes, so they are contributing to electronic forums and taking part in live discussions with other students and with their tutors. We did a presentation skills course just before Christmas called Talk the Talk, and it involved students recording presentations of themselves and putting them up for peer review. Believe it or not, it was incredibly successful, and people got over their shyness, because, if you are doing a presentation, you need to get over that. So, they were getting feedback from tutors and from peer students while they were doing that. A key thing for us is that 44% of people doing a FutureLearn course will re-engage with other courses, and we are working with our university partners to see how we can build accreditation into those courses. So, typically at the moment, if you are doing a MOOC, it will be three hours a week for maybe 13 weeks. A number of our partners are looking at how they can build in a short test or examination, and eventually that will involve credit points. There will probably be a cost for that, but maybe that is the way that some education is moving forward: a lot of stuff is much more openly accessible but, to get the accreditation, there must be an investment from the learner.

One thing that we will be sharing with the Committee and the Department in the coming months is a new development called badged open courses. These will address, in particular, the widening participation market, and what we are trying to do is create, free to the user, courses like getting ready for FE, mathematics part 1, mathematics part 2, English, skills for work, digital literacy and study skills. They will be short courses, but there will be built-in assessment. It will not give a formal qualification or accreditation points, but it will give students a badge to show that they have been assessed and that they have reached a certain level of achievement. That is a conversation that we would like to take forward with the Department, particularly around the economic inactivity strategy that it is about to take forward and the different types of widening access. Again, that is something that we will be taking forward actively with communities across Northern Ireland, and we have just employed a new community partnerships manager who is already taking that forward to local community groups. We expect those to launch probably in March, and we think that they will be a strong asset to Northern Ireland. If there is a MOOC for the course getting ready for FE, there should be a spin-off for our sister universities and colleges, because we see that as helping to assist people back into a form of study.

We work very closely with Queen's, the University of Ulster and the Northern Ireland Assembly, and we are a full partner in the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series. That is very good for showcasing our research. Like Queen's and Ulster, we were very active in the recent Research Excellence Framework. Research is at the heart of what we do. Every university has to have a very strong research focus in order to make sure that the teaching and learning that we are providing for students is top-notch. So, we contribute actively to the research community. This year, we finished in fifty-fourth place in the Research Excellence Framework, which is a similar position to the University of Ulster. Queen's also performed very well, coming in at forty-second place. We are very pleased with the results, and we are now keen to work closely with the Department and other Departments on how we can bring some of that leading-edge research to Northern Ireland so that we can all benefit from it. We were particularly strong this year in music, drama, dance, sociology, and computer science and informatics, which is obviously a hot subject for Northern Ireland as we begin to develop the knowledge economy sector here.

Moving forward, what is next for the Open University in Northern Ireland? On this slide, you can see a gentleman trying to look into the future. Obviously, like every provider at the moment, we await with interest the finalisation of the Budget. As a Committee and as Members, you have been very good in listening to universities, including the Open University, about the concerns that we have about the draft Budget. Reflecting on the first slide that I showed you on the sorts of students who we work with, we work with people who are in work, people who are not your typical 18-year-olds, people who have a disability and people who are wanting to upskill. So, the impact of a severe budget settlement for HE in particular would pose us considerable difficulties in taking forward our mission and helping Northern Ireland citizens take forward their lives and their careers. We value the support of Members, and we are very supportive of the motion that you will be taking forward in due course. We offer our support for you there.

We do see what we provide as being particularly useful, and, of course, I would say that. We get feedback from employers and students and also from Members of the Assembly on how we are helping citizens in their constituencies. Just before Christmas, we were able to send out some statistics to all 108 Members about the number of citizens who were availing themselves of OU study in their areas. These are significant numbers, and they are doing significant subjects as well.

Chairman, thank you very much for the opportunity to give you a very quick overview of what we do. We look forward to answering any questions that members have, and, probably more importantly, we look forward to you engaging with our students and staff later this morning.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): John, thank you very much. For transparency, I should have declared that I am a graduate and an alumnus of the OU. That is just in case I get accused later of bias.

John, you touched briefly on the Budget. Ulster and Queen's have defined the effect that it will have, as have the colleges, in what they have said about 16,000 places. How will it hit the Open University? Where will it hit you hardest?

Mr D'Arcy: We will be impacted on just as Queen's and Ulster will be. We think that it will impact us on being able to deliver services to numbers of students. It is difficult, in a sense, for us to estimate because ours are part-time students. We are estimating that, if the cuts are of anything between 10.8% and 15%, there could be between 350 and 500 fewer part-time students getting OU study in the next year. It is a significant number of people. We have been very careful about trying to get those statistics as accurate as possible. We want to be positive about moving forward, and we want to work

with the Department and the Finance Department in trying to secure an adequate budget for HE and for OU in particular. We are hoping that we will not get to that sort of stage, but, if you are looking at the big challenges facing the citizens of Northern Ireland in maintaining their employment, moving into better jobs or getting into employment after a period of incapacity, whether that has been through illness or from rearing a family or whatever, the part-time sector is a vital sector for Northern Ireland to be concerned about.

Our students have a median age of 30, so they probably do not have the same university choices as an 18-year-old coming out of school. When you met us informally before Christmas with the other two vice chancellors, there was talk about the brain drain. Young people have that choice of moving elsewhere. We do not want that to happen, but our students do not have that level of choice. Many of them are carers for family members. They are either in employment or rearing a family, so they do not have the choice to go anywhere else. Our concern is that the Budget is particularly punitive to HE and that our students will be almost doubly disadvantaged. There were positive noises coming out of the Assembly yesterday for perhaps a better settlement for DEL, and, obviously, as the university sector, we would be very supportive of that. Although we are the smallest university in Northern Ireland, dealing with around 4,000 students, the impact on us will be as serious as on any other university, if not more serious.

Mr Michael Bower (The Open University): I will add to John's point: due to the nature of the scale of the Open University in terms of staffing to numbers of students, the funding that we get from the Department is very much loaded into direct student support and supporting students on their courses. We think that, proportionately, the funding cuts to the Open University mean that, when it comes to the direct impact on students, we do not have the ability to be particularly flexible with our internal staffing arrangements and things like that. That means that there is probably a disproportionate impact on our offering to students.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): One of your statistics is that 23% of your students come from socially deprived backgrounds: in your opinion, Michael, will they be hit hardest?

Mr Bower: Whether any reduction in places reduces that proportion —

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): You seem to be saying that it was support to students.

Mr Bower: It would ultimately lead to a decrease in student recruitment, as opposed to our being able to do much internally to minimise that impact at this stage. That 23% is roughly about 1,000 of our part-time students who are from the 25 most deprived areas in Northern Ireland, so if our numbers are cut, there would be a significant impact on that cohort.

Mr D'Arcy: We have a degree of interaction with the students before they sign up to a course, and we have information from colleagues working in direct student interaction. It probably takes a student up to two years to make a decision from first having looked at a prospectus or going to an open day to making that big decision to start with the Open University. I think that any concerns about reducing numbers will be a chill factor for people who are seriously considering going to university. That is one of the reasons we probably have not been as upfront about numbers. We have two enrolment periods during the year, and we did not want to unduly concern students. That is why we have been working very closely with you and the Department to make the case for HE and part-time study and obviously the Open University.

"Vulnerable" is maybe too strong a word to describe the part-time student body, but people have to build the confidence to make that bold step to give their family time to study. Any impediment to that is a big barrier. We are concerned that, if the budget is reduced and our numbers are potentially reduced, that could have a much longer-term impact. Even if budgets were to radically improve over the coming years, getting people's confidence, particularly those in the 25% most deprived areas, to even think about HE will be a big challenge for us all across the three universities and, indeed, the colleges.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): When we were discussing the budget with the representatives of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and its partners, one of the things that was presented to us was the change in ESF funding at level 1. The issue at level 2 is accessibility, but the Department was looking solely at ESF at level 1 for disability groups. How does your BOC interact with that? Does it pick up the slack, or is there an engagement with the voluntary and community sector?

Mr D'Arcy: We are very keen to take forward work, particularly with NICVA and the voluntary sector. As I said, the badge programmes will probably be launched only in March or April, and we think that that is a really good offer to people who want to try out a little bit of HE with zero cost to them. These courses will be free to them, but as a university, we need to make sure that we have the capacity to work actively with communities. There is no point in us saying that there are free courses that can be downloaded from the Internet, because that puts all the work on the potential student. We have to encourage people to see higher education as a viable option.

We want to work with other partners, such as the community sector and the FE sector. We think that we can take some of these badged courses to them as well. It is also important for us to have a strong conversation with the Department, because the badged courses will be soft accreditation, if you like. It is not going to be like a GCSE or a credit accumulation and transfer scheme (CATS) points. We need to have that conversation with the Department saying that this is a valuable step on a student's journey. Our view would be that this will encourage a student to take an accredited course with us or with another educational partner.

You are right; there is potential for us to take forward this new initiative. Again, if it is free to the user, that breaks down a very strong barrier at the outset. Our concern is that, as a university, we need the capacity to get people out to train the trainers, if you like. We are actively doing that at the moment with a number of groups across Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): What level will those badges be at?

Mr D'Arcy: They will be entry level or below. They are largely taster sessions, but we hope that people will progress to a more complicated module over time.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Just to finish on the badges, is that a Northern Ireland or a UK-wide initiative?

Mr D'Arcy: It is a UK initiative, but we think that we can make a very strong Northern Ireland offering out of this, because it strategically fits with a lot of the programmes that the Minister and the Department are taking forward to help people to upskill. As a fully devolved part of the university, one of the things that we can now do is make the strong case that we can have Northern Ireland versions. We are working on another programme based on OpenLearn that will be called Pathways to Success, which will have a rooted version. The Department might have a strategy like that, so we may have to change the name. Basically, that programme chunks free learning, and it is free for the learner in a sensible way. Lots of those courses are in areas that I think citizens, employers, the Department and community groups will be interested in. They are in areas of health and social care, STEM and creative writing, so all those sectors are covered. It is part of our day-to-day engagement with the Department, and I have to say that it has been very open to what we can offer, and we look forward to taking forward those conversations as the new budgets begin to settle down.

Mr F McCann: Thank you for the presentation, John and Michael. I thought that it was excellent. I echo what the Chair said. All of us are concerned about the impact of the Budget across all aspects of education, especially about the medium- to long-term impacts that it will have on people coming through. It is interesting that 23% of your students come from the most deprived areas. How do you attract people from communities that suffer from deprivation? What effort does the Open University make to go in there? I represent a constituency that has a number of communities that are severely socially deprived. In many ways, many of those communities see education as bypassing them, so there needs to be a stronger effort made to reach them. How does the Open University set about attracting people from those communities?

Mr D'Arcy: We take a very strong approach to that, Fra. In your constituency, we have been working very closely with the Falls Women's Centre. As you say, it is about trying to gently get people into thinking about higher-level study. If we go in and say, "Education is really good. Go do it", that is probably not the best message to take forward. One of the programmes that we have been doing has been looking at local history, and one of our history staff tutors has been very active in doing some taster sessions. Once we get people interested, we try to move them on either to courses in the Open University or elsewhere.

One of the good things about working with community groups is that they often interact with each other, so we have been able to have situations in which, for example, Falls and Ballybeen women's groups would get together over particular study issues. We also work with other organisations, like

the Salvation Army, that have a wider reach into communities right across Northern Ireland. So, we work with organisations that can help us to get into communities. We always want to build trust where we are going, and we are there for a long-term relationship.

We are keen to talk to colleges as well, because they play very important roles in communities. NICVA has been very supportive of what we are doing. We are an active member of the Forum for Adult Learning in Northern Ireland. We try to follow people through. The good thing about modular learning, Fra, is that, if people get across the bridge into formal study, they can take a module at a time. We have many citizens whom you would bump into in the street who have been studying for us for six, seven, or eight years, working their way eventually towards a degree, maybe taking a year or two out to raise a family, change jobs or whatever. Tracking them through is something that we will be increasingly doing, because one of the things we feel we need to do is showcase individuals in communities who have made that step change. There is still always this feeling with people saying, "I can't do it, because I don't know anybody who has done a university degree". In our case in particular, people say, "I do not know anybody who has done a part-time university degree." We are working actively with organisations to build up case-study material. The Department's Reach Higher campaign has been very helpful in us beginning to achieve that.

It is a matter of building a relationship with the communities, being there and having the support of our staff tutors, associated lecturers and student services people. Again, this gets back to our capacity to do that much more on the ground. Eventually, our learners will be doing a lot of learning themselves in their home environment and workplace, if they are in work, but they will want to be part of a support network. It is important for us to not just throw materials out there because they are free; we have to have that support so that, if people have a query or get to that part of studying and feel that they cannot move on to the next stage, support is there. We hope to help community groups to build their capacity as well by working with us.

Mr F McCann: I would not mind sitting down at some stage to discuss that. I know and recognise the excellent work that the Falls and Ballybeen women's groups do, and other community groups are also doing that work. The community that I live in is probably one of the more maligned, given the publicity because of the negativity that goes on with antisocial behaviour, drugs and some of the serious difficulties that are there. Yet, in the midst of all that, you have the Falls youth awards every year, where 300 young people are recognised for their activities in education and sport. A lot of that is down to the more localised work that some of the small community facilities that are there do. I would not mind sitting down to look at it. They have courses that have helped young people to complete GCSEs, study for things and encourage them into further education, but there seems to be a barrier that has existed to even going to college and into further education. Maybe the Open University can offer the lifeline that is required. Maybe, at some stage, we will sit down and have a chat about that.

Mr D'Arcy: We would be very happy to do that for you, Fra, and for other members who would like us to. We are actively working with Sammy Douglas from East Belfast, a former member of this Committee, in doing a similar thing. Now that we have Michael as a new member of staff on board who is as keen as mustard to take this forward, we will be keen to do that with you.

Mr F McCann: The Committee has embarked on an inquiry on post-19 special educational needs and learning difficulties in the context of employment, education and training. Does the OU do anything to facilitate and cater for post-19 young people who have difficulties moving on?

Mr D'Arcy: We probably do that on a one-to-one basis, Fra, as students come to us for advice. We have avenues to go down that route. I think that we will be attending one of those sessions.

Mr Bower: Yes. I think you can see that the university has a very strong profile on disability, and there is quite a big wraparound support for any student who comes with a disability. With a specific learning disability, there is one-to-one engagement. Someone with a disability goes through our general process on what options are the best for them, whether that is starting on an access module, working towards a full degree or whatever or signposting to another provider, which could be FE. It is very much done on an individualised basis to get what is right for that individual right across any disability or learning difficulty. We have a lot of people with dyslexia or dyspraxia, which is slightly different, and more general mental health problems. The university is very good at catering for and trying to support individuals who express a specific need. I suppose that it would be interesting to take that further.

Mr F McCann: The reason I raised it is that I saw one of the apps on autism, and we visited —

Mr Bower: We have a number of students who are on the autistic spectrum and demonstrate autism or Asperger's syndrome.

Mr F McCann: We visited Springvale on the Springfield Road a number of weeks ago, and we saw that it had developed a relationship with many of the schools in and around the city. It can take people so far, but for you as well, it is about trying to build a relationship that could allow students with learning difficulties to move on.

Ms Lo: Thank you very much for having us here. This is really an eye-opener for me, John and Michael. I did a very short management course about 20 years ago, and, honestly, it involved big packs of books and lots of correspondence backwards and forwards. With technology, you can do so much more now. It is really interesting. Like you said, I was one of those with the misconception that OU is all about arts subjects and social sciences, and I am pleased to hear that over one third of your courses are in hard STEM subjects. How do you manage the practical learning, such as going to the labs and all that?

Mr D'Arcy: It is interesting that you said that, Anna. We will have a demonstration in the library area after the formal meeting where you will be able to see the OpenScience Lab. That initiative has been part-funded by the Wolfson Foundation, so students can have a virtual lab experience. You will also probably meet Heather Laird, whom I think you have met before. Heather is an engineer by training, so she will be able to tell you about how we deliver engineering degrees at a distance.

So, there are opportunities for students to have knowledge of the lab-type experience. Again, a lot of that hinges on the tutor support. Our staff tutor for science, Nicola McIntyre, will be doing a demo downstairs that will show that. You can do flame tests and Bunsen burner work, and you can do a geography or a field walk. We try to work with other partners who will help us from a capacity point of view. The Wolfson Foundation, which won an award at the 'Times Higher Education' awards this year at the OpenScience Lab, has been very generous with its funding. That is something that we want to expand into other areas as well.

We did a workshop recently with the Prison Service about how we can potentially develop vocational work that prisoners can experience in the prison. Obviously, when they are released, they sometimes have difficulties getting job opportunities in vocational settings. We continue to push the use of technology, which is really helpful for having a simulated version of some of those core practical experiences, that is, some of the subjects that you talked about.

Ms Lo: Very good. I am really interested in FutureLearn, which I looked at yesterday. I am interested in a number of the courses, and the environmental courses seem really excellent. You might get a new student. *[Laughter.]*

Mr D'Arcy: That is always good to hear.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): You are lucky, Anna. You had big boxes of books. I did a science course, and I had big boxes of Bunsen burners, test tubes and all sorts of stuff. *[Laughter.]*

Ms McGahan: Thank you for your presentation. As you know, we are extremely sympathetic to your objectives, given the current Budget crisis. I hope that something positive on this will happen with the work that is happening in the background. Time will tell, hopefully very shortly.

One of the barriers to enhancing one's education is access to childcare. I am delighted that we have about 160 people in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which is a largely rural area, doing Open University courses. I think that maybe a wee bit more work could be done to get the message out there to those individuals that, as someone said, the Open University is another lifeline without that additional cost of childcare. I would like to have a dedicated meeting on that from a rural point of view.

I have no questions.

Mr D'Arcy: We would very much welcome doing that with you, Bronwyn. Again, there is a large onus on us, Chair, to get out there more, now that we are a fully fledged devolved university in Northern Ireland, to make the case that those services are available for citizens. You are absolutely right; one of the big successes that we have had right across the UK has been with carers in particular and how they can maintain any study or their job opportunities. That is because you just cannot programme

time to go to a traditional university or college on that basis. Again, Bronwyn, the technology is helping us to do that, and we want to push it forward. Northern Ireland has reasonable broadband coverage. I know that it is patchy in some areas, but it is getting better. Once your materials are downloaded through the new app, they are permanently there. Again, there may be ways in which we can work with more rural areas to help students make that happen.

Mr Bower: One of our students whom you will meet downstairs completed a foundation degree through the South West Regional College. He lives outside Omagh and has caring responsibilities, and he could not complete his full degree through a traditional university so has almost completed it through the Open University. It is interesting, and it is a good case study —

Ms McGahan: It is a good news story.

Mr Bower: It is an excellent news story, given the specific issue that you raised, so we are very keen to try to get that message out there and to work more closely on that progression route for people in rural areas.

Mr Anderson: John and Michael, thank you for your presentation. It is good to get an insight into the Open University's work. At the start, you told us that 5% of undergraduates and 9% of postgraduates are supported by employers. I am interested in that in the context of STEM projects and the jobs that we now need for inward direct investment in the future. Do you need employers to give your work a lot more support? You reckoned that 5% was a good figure, but would you like to see a lot more?

Mr D'Arcy: I would like to see more, but, at undergraduate level, that is not a bad starting point, Sydney. You are right, and one of the messages we will be putting increasingly to employers is that, and this is almost looking at that higher-level apprenticeship space, if you have an existing employee, economically, it will probably be more cost-effective for a student to do a course with the Open University, or a part-time course with someone else, than to take them out for two or three years to do a full-time degree. That is an interesting conversation that we are having with employers. It would be a figure that we would like to increase over time, that is for sure.

I think that it is certainly a good indicator of the positive benefit that Northern Ireland employers see in part-time study. We are not an area with a huge number of really big employers. We are largely an SME and a micro-SME economy, so, if 5% of our students are being funded by that sort of business, we think that that is a good sign.

Certainly, the downtime for the employer is a positive thing. People can still be in the workplace. They can take a little bit of time out to do course work on their PC, laptop, or whatever. They are not being taken out of the company, and travel time and those sorts of things seem to be interesting for employers.

Going back to the Chair, Fra and Bronwyn's point, there is an onus on us to get that message out much more strongly, and we are engaging at a much more strategic level with employers and employer groupings to get this sort of message across. You are right; I would love the number to be double or triple what it is.

Mr Anderson: You have pre-empted my next question, which concerns the level of conversation you are having with employers to get the message out and to get engagement with them. You say that you are engaging. Do you see a positive reaction coming from those you are dealing with?

Mr D'Arcy: We do. A good case study for us is the nursing programme. Obviously, that is in the public sector, and we are working with the Department of Health. However, recently, we have been working with Four Seasons Health Care. It is seeing the Open University style of study as a way of increasing its skills base, and it is very satisfied with that. We are working with a number of IT companies and a number of ministerial groupings, and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Institute of Directors (IOD) and the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) are also good partners for us.

It is about continuing to get the message out. A one-off ad in the newspaper will be just that. So, it goes back to Fra's point about building trust with people. Sometimes there is still an misapprehension, not a fear, that distance learning is something radically different, but as our lives, our expectations, and the way we work change — you have all got your smart devices in front of you — this style of study will be much more day to day.

Mr Anderson: You are pre-empting my questions. You touched on the health sector and the health trusts. I think that your presentation said that there had been 25 nurses. Is that correct?

Mr D'Arcy: It is in and around that number.

Mr Anderson: Can you see a bigger improvement coming forward in that sector with engagement there?

Mr D'Arcy: The great thing about that is that it is a great model of collaboration between the Health Department and the three universities and the way we work together. Our style of learning suits a particular type of student nurse. Largely, those are people who are already in the sector, and the great thing is that they already have practical work experience and almost a bedside manner. They are getting that from day one and are moving through. We are in conversation with the Health Department and the trusts about the ways in which we can engage. Similarly, the partnership we have with UNISON is a great way of getting that aspiration into some of its members who might aspire to be a nurse. UNISON has been very good in encouraging people to move along that way.

The figure is relatively low at the minute, Sydney, but it is an ongoing dialogue with our customers to see whether we can increase those numbers or do things differently. If you are looking at a model of good practice of how a sector works with its higher-level, higher education partners, this is a good example.

Mr Anderson: I am pleased to hear that.

Ms Lo: I have a quick follow-up on that. In the same vein as nurses, a lot of assistants working in care homes now want to do that course. What about social work? There are a lot of social work assistants. They do not want to take time off to do a three-year degree course. They can do similar courses.

Mr D'Arcy: We offer social work programmes as well, Anna. I can get you some more information on that. Again, we ensure that we are working with the Social Care Council and providers as well. It is a very attractive programme and one that we want to develop over time. I will get you some numbers on those.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): John and Michael, thank you very much for your presentation and for answering questions. We look forward to your tour later and to meeting some of the students.