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Association President



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## Forewords

Our goal at the Open University (OU) Students Association is to advocate for improvements for our members across all four nations of the UK and beyond in order to improve their student experience, remove barriers, and enable them to achieve their potential.

The OU in Ireland provides an amazing way for people from all backgrounds to learn and gain qualifications flexibly and at their own pace. However, we want our students in Northern Ireland to have parity of esteem with full-time students, which is why we are asking for the next Northern Ireland Assembly to address specific issues that create barriers to access and reduce the quality of student experience for current and prospective part-time supported distance-learning students in Northern Ireland.

The inequity in the student finance system presents the single largest barrier to accessing part-time study. Part-time students are not eligible to receive any of the Maintenance Loan, Special Support Grant, Childcare grant, or Parental Learning Allowance that full-time students are entitled to. Recent legislative changes in Wales have demonstrated the hugely positive impact a fair funding deal for part-time students can have, with significant increases in both new students and continuing students a result of the Diamond reforms.

Making education more accessible to everyone also means ensuring that technological barriers are removed, so that when someone decides to study via supported distance-learning, their experience is engaging and enjoyable. That's why we want the next Northern Ireland Assembly to prioritise high-speed broadband availability in every community to enable students to be better connected with their studies, each other and potential employers.

We believe that the policies in this manifesto will make a real difference to OU students, local communities and the wider economy, and we hope that all candidates will show support.

In 2022 we celebrate The Open University Students Association's 50th anniversary. Fifty years of helping all OU students realise their ambitions, regardless of their background and their needs. It is a time to reflect on the Association's many achievements and a time to take pride in the difference it has made to many lives.

The global pandemic has changed life as we knew it. Our lives, society and economy have utterly transformed.

I have been heartened by the resilience of OU students throughout this difficult time as they navigated their studies, family and work obligations.

The Open University is proud that we have, for the seventeenth year in a row, once again been ranked no.1 university for overall student satisfaction in Northern Ireland.

The 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections will lead us to a new mandate and Programme for Government. The next few years will be crucial in reshaping our society and economy. We must get it right.

A flexible higher education system which values part-time study and supports skills development will ensure that all of Northern Ireland's citizens play a valuable part in our future.

That spirit is central to the mission of The Open University: to open up education and lifelong learning to all our citizens, and to be a movement for change. As Northern Ireland recovers and rebuilds, we are ready to play our part.

The OU Students Association is the students' union for OU students. 2022 marks our 50th year as the community and voice for all OU students, which currently totals around 174,000 students across the UK, the Republic of Ireland and beyond. The OU Students Association is run by students, for students.

**Facts about OU Students in Northern Ireland**

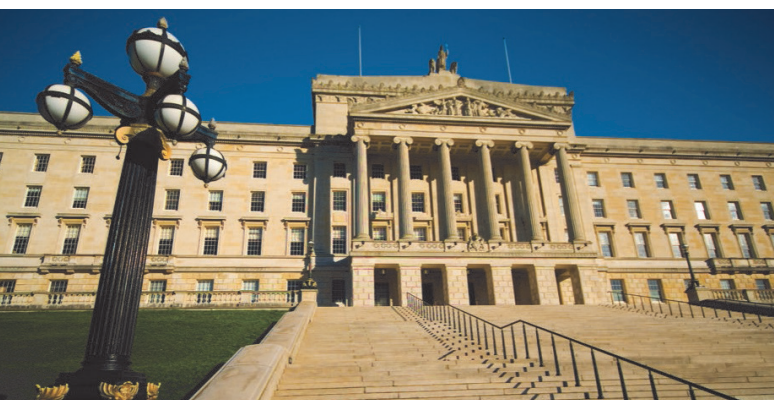
- Over 5000 students are currently studying with the OU in Northern Ireland, all of whom are automatically members of the OU Students Association
- There are OU students in every constituency
- Over 20% of new undergraduates join without standard university entrance qualifications
- Three quarters of OU students are in full- or part-time employment
- Over 18% of OU students in Northern Ireland declare a disability
- Over 30% of students are in receipt of some kind of financial assistance
- 17% of new undergraduates are from the most-deprived quintile

\*figures from 2020/21 academic year

**The OU Students Association specifically asks Northern Ireland Assembly candidates to...**

**... ..Extend Maintenance Loan and Special Support Grant availability to part-time students**

The introduction of Maintenance Loans for part-time students in Wales has had a hugely positive impact on the number of people accessing higher education and the number of people choosing to continue their studies. Part-time learners often choose to study at a reduced capacity because they have additional life commitments that make the expense of entering higher education a particular barrier. This means that both the Maintenance Loan and the means-tested Special Support Grant would be particularly relevant in making part-time higher education qualifications more accessible and supporting lifelong learning for all. The next Northern Ireland Assembly should therefore ensure the extension of Maintenance Loans and Special Support Grants to part-time students.



**... ..Extend the availability of support for parents from the Childcare Grant and the Parental Learning Allowance to part-time students**

Parents face significant challenges in entering and completing higher education study. Often, they are working either full- or part-time alongside the responsibilities of childcare. As such, the idea of committing to retraining or upskilling is a step too far. This is especially the case when the Childcare Grant and the Parental Learning Allowance won't support them to study part-time.

We would therefore ask the next Northern Ireland Assembly to support the extension of the eligibility criteria for the Childcare Grant and the Parental Learning Allowance to include part-time students, so that parents can be supported to retrain and upskill to advance their careers and employment prospects.

**... ..Work to eradicate digital exclusion by supporting the extension of high-speed broadband to all communities in Northern Ireland**

OU students choose to study at distance due to the convenience of being able to gain skills and qualifications whilst managing their other day-to-day commitments. However, we hear from our members regularly that poor internet speeds limit their ability to access and enjoy a fulfilling learning experience. The Northern Irish higher education sector as well as the wider economy overall would benefit from prioritising universal access to high-speed broadband internet that will enable better connectivity and opportunities while reducing social isolation as an additional benefit.

**... ..Support the higher-education sector to better understand and overcome barriers to accessing and achieving success in higher education by carrying out a wide-ranging review into the experiences of individuals within Section 75 categories**

In spite of efforts across the higher education sector, awarding gaps are still prevalent for many protected characteristic groups, with BAME students, disabled students, and those from a lower socio-economic background significantly less likely to access higher education at all. A review of the higher education sector is required to provide an understanding of systemic barriers to access and participation, and begin a conversation about how those barriers can be broken down.

If you would like to discuss any of these policies in more detail, please contact the OU Students Association's Director of Engagement, Dan Moloney at [Dan.Moloney@open.ac.uk](mailto:Dan.Moloney@open.ac.uk).  
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