



Manifesto

for Lifelong Learning

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Students ASSOCIATION



Foreword by the 2022-24 Student Leadership Team

The Open University (OU) Students Association represents all OU students, the largest population of part-time and distance-learning students across the UK's four nations and beyond. We are therefore proud to present a manifesto that calls on policy-makers to address the diverse range of barriers that prevent so many people from accessing a life-changing educational experience. Within this document, we will be focusing on two key areas surrounding open access to education; financial flexibility and the inclusivity of our Higher Education system.

For over five decades, the Open University has provided those from non-traditional educational backgrounds with an opportunity to learn, develop, and progress. The opportunities this provides to people at all stages of life - economically, educationally and socially - is unrivalled as a true example of the power of higher education to transform lives. It is vital that the OU's future is safeguarded by any future government to ensure that higher education is available to everyone.

In a post-Covid society where students are struggling more than ever to make ends meet, the lines between full-time and part-time student, and distance-learning and hybrid-learning student are increasingly blurred. As a result of this, many of the policies that apply to distance-learning students, especially around student finance, are now unfair, outdated and based on false assumptions. Moreover, many of those who would benefit most from a higher education qualification via distance-learning are the least likely to be able to access it due to structural and systemic barriers that are no fault of their own. We believe there are several opportunities to address these inequities, and in this spirit, this manifesto focuses on two critical pillars: financial flexibility and inclusivity.

We invite political leaders and policy-makers to embrace the idea of a society where lifelong learning is not just an aspiration but a practical choice available to every individual, regardless of their age, background, or circumstances. This document lays out a series of 'asks' on behalf of OU students, we hope that you will support them, and we invite you to engage with us to create a more inclusive and flexible higher education system.

About the Open University Students Association

The OU Students Association is the students' union for Open University students. We are the representative body for OU students, with over 175,000 members, and are led by students, for students. Our mission is to make a positive difference for all OU students, and we do this by:



empowering the student voice to represent our members both within the University and beyond;



working collaboratively with the University to ensure that students are at the centre of decision-making;



building an inclusive community which nurtures a sense of pride and belonging, and;



providing relevant, quality services that enhance the student experience.



Statistics about OU students

In the 2022/23 academic year, there were approximately **200,000** OU students across the UK and internationally

Over **90%** of OU students stay in their local area after graduating

70% of OU students are in full-or part-time work

37% of part-time students have dependent children

There are over **37,000** OU students with a declared disability or long-term health condition

51% of OU students don't have two or more A-levels on entry

In 2022/23, **28%** of OU undergraduates lived in the 25% most economically deprived areas (IMD Q1)

#1

Student Finance (financial flexibility)

A student finance system that supports and enables people to study the way they choose

We believe that the student finance system should not be an additional barrier to education. It should be flexible in terms of what students actually want and need: modular study, personal development, upskilling and remote learning at any age. People who choose to study later in life face significantly different financial challenges, including having mortgages, private rent to pay and childcare or other caring costs. They often face difficult choices around whether to reduce their working hours and income to pursue education and cannot necessarily commit face-to-face study on campus. With the forthcoming reforms via the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE), there is an opportunity to create a fair system of student finance that encourages and supports people to achieve their educational goals throughout their lives by providing solutions to these financial barriers.





The problem:

Currently, maintenance loan support is not available to distance-learning students in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. This, alongside the way it is calculated more broadly, does not consider personal circumstances of non-traditional students. e.g. the financial strain of studying with dependants. Unfortunately, this omission of part-time distance-learning students does not seem to be addressed by the LLE, which means that it will not incentivise people who cannot relocate or commute to pursue a qualification to enter education later in life.



The problem:

Linked to the above, the Childcare Grant and Parents Learning Allowance are only available to full-time students, despite people with dependents being much more likely to need to study at part-time intensity and not be able to relocate for their studies. This prevents people caring for dependents from accessing qualifications that can support them to rebuild confidence and re-enter the workforce. Furthermore, the plan within the LLE to introduce an age-cap of 60 for access to tuition fee loans is not only discriminatory, but it fails to recognise the trend of people increasingly working later into their lives and therefore needing to upskill to remain employable in the competitive jobs market. While the retirement age moves ever higher, this policy does not make sense.



The problem:

There is an obvious crossover between student finance and the benefits system in the UK and yet the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) is not at all joined-up with the student finance systems in any of the UK's nations. Education should be a path back into employment for many people receiving Universal Credit, and yet it is often the case that the choice to study for those receiving it is penalised through deductions to their benefits. Moreover, DWP advice in relation to education and student finance is worryingly inconsistent and regularly fails to provide clarity and support to people who are seeking to advance themselves through higher education. The result is a system that creates confusion and disincentivises the decision to study.



The ask:

Create a student finance system that enables people to study flexibly throughout their lives by:

- Extending the availability of maintenance loans to distance-learning students as part of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE)



The ask:

Ensure that however individuals choose to study is financially viable by:

- Extending the availability of the Childcare Grant and Parents Learning Allowance to part-time students
- Removing the upper age-limit for tuition fee loans from the Lifelong Loan Entitlement, and the existing cap on post-graduate loans (age 60).



The ask:

Pursue a joined-up benefits system across the UK that enables the choice to study by:

- Conducting a review of the relationship between DWP and the student finance systems across the UK's nations with a view to joining-up the processes and eliminating the practice of penalising the decision to study.
- Prioritising cross-training DWP advisers and student finance advisers to increase the expertise available to support students and potential students who are in receipt of Universal Credit to make the best decisions for their futures.

#2

Inclusivity

The removal of barriers to provide equitable access to higher education

'Non-traditional' learners, such as distance-learners, mature students, disabled students, and parents face many barriers preventing them from accessing or furthering their education. We know that these barriers do not exist in a higher education vacuum. They are also problems throughout society: from digital and transport poverty to access to healthcare, therefore systemic policy solutions are required.





The problem:

Digital connectivity remains a major barrier to accessing flexible learning opportunities. For many people who are the most isolated, geographically or socially, distance-learning is a link to the world and to future opportunities. However, for this to be possible, the UK's high-speed broadband network needs to give every household the opportunity to connect. Without this structural framework, the principle of lifelong learning for all cannot be realised.



The problem:

Although we have seen a necessary culture shift in awareness and understanding of neurodiversity, this is still not reflected in the support provided for those affected. The result is a growing proportion of the adult population realising later in life that they have been living with undiagnosed neurodivergent conditions preventing them from progressing socially, in their careers or in education and apprenticeships. For this population, diagnosis and adequate support to achieve a qualification could be a life-transforming process that leads to opportunities and prosperity.



The problem:

While we support the principle that higher education courses should provide students with value for money, we believe that this assessment should be based on more than just the career-focused outcomes that some students go on to achieve. This approach is not at all inclusive of the wide variety of motivations for studying in a marketised university system, where students have a broad range of aspirations, from social to professional. We firmly believe that if the student is the 'consumer' in the higher education sector, then the definition of value and success should be determined by students, and not the government.



The ask:

Provide affordable, high-speed broadband access to all UK households by

- Accelerating the rollout of high-speed broadband to all communities across the United Kingdom.
- Support students with the cost of their broadband, and block providers from increasing their prices mid-contract.



The ask:

Improve access to diagnosis and healthcare support for students with additional learning needs at any age by:

- Pursuing a joined-up approach to diagnosis of additional educational needs at any age that includes the health and social care services and education sector.
- Ensure that higher education institutions are adequately resourced to provide appropriate support for students with additional educational needs, including apprenticeship providers.



The ask:

Promote a regulatory viewpoint that recognises the broad range of motivations for studying by:

- Directing the OfS to broaden the definition of success and value in higher education to be based on students' expectations using the TEF and National Student Survey rather than just student career outcomes data.
- Decreasing the emphasis on regulatory employability-based outcomes, increasing the value of holistic personal development that goes beyond securing a graduate job and extends to other outcomes including volunteering, caring for someone, starting a business and more.



Get in touch:

If you want to find out more about the work of the OU Students Association, visit www.oustudents.com or to get in touch, email oustudents-campaigns@open.ac.uk

