

# Open University<sup>1</sup> - Written evidence (FFF0014)

House of Lords Public Services Committee – Designing a Public Services Workforce fit for the Future

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1. The Open University (OU) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the House of Lords Public Services Committee Inquiry on Designing a Public Services Workforce fit for the Future. We have responded to select questions based on our expertise as a provider of part-time higher education.

## **Recruitment, retention and training**

- 1) It is difficult to predict accurately how the public services workforce will need to change in the long term, and yet it is necessary to prepare now for the future. What is an appropriate approach to long-term planning for workforce needs and demand in public services, and how should current training adapt, not just at the point of employees' entry into the workforce but throughout their careers?**
2. Lifelong learning matters now more than ever. Enabling a policy and funding framework for employees to upskill and reskill in a flexible way suited to their needs is essential. This includes the need for a growing transferability of core skills, as well as access to more bite-sized, shorter chunks of learning. This enables quick diversification of skills sets, and makes it easier to meet the immediate needs of the economy. Flexible and modular study - and a funding model that supports it - can ensure workers can gain new skills as they are required. The OU's open degree, for instance, enables students to study a variety of modules – across all academic disciplines - when suitable for them. Students have up to 16 years to complete enough modules to achieve a full degree should that be their intention. This allows students who are in employment (62% of OU students are in part-time or full-time work<sup>2</sup>) to upskill as is required by their workplace, or the shifting requirements of the economy.
3. Developing smaller and more specialised qualifications, such as microcredentials, would enable experienced people already working within an occupation to update their knowledge or move to a related occupation in which they already have many of the technical skills. Microcredentials are online professional development credit-bearing short courses, taking just 10-12 weeks of online study, that provide our students with in-demand skills and knowledge. The OU currently offers 24 [microcredentials](#) across a range of topics, and many are focused on specific occupations,

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<sup>2</sup> As of 2020/21

and courses that will help people upskill within work. For example, we offer a 10-week course in *Business Management: Financial Accounting for Non-Financial Roles*, and *Business Management: People Management & Leadership*, among several other.

4. Yet currently there are many restrictions that make flexible lifelong learning more difficult. ELQ regulations currently mean that individuals cannot gain access to student loans if they have already studied a qualification at that level, and part-time distance learning students cannot gain access to maintenance loans in England. This is particularly problematic when the majority of those who will be seeking to upskill or reskill are mature learners who, due to a range of financial commitments, are likely to be debt averse anyway.

**2) Conventional approaches to training have not enabled enough professionals to enter the public services workforce to meet demand. How might training change to maximise the number of public services professionals and improve their skills?**

5. To maximise the number of public service professionals and those improving their skills, a diverse range of educational routes are needed. This is particularly important as training shouldn't just be about people entering the public service workforce, but also about developing existing employees too. Progression routes help maximise retention, as well as improving the diversification of skills within the public service workforce. Progression routes include apprenticeships, higher technical qualifications, microcredentials, all with the ability for individuals to 'earn while you learn.'
6. Apprenticeships, for example, quickly improve skills without a time lag; the individual learns new skills and knowledge that they can immediately put into practice in their work. Furthermore, there is a 'halo-effect' from their study, whereby those around the individual may also pick up the skills through a form of workplace-diffusion. Yet apprenticeships, and other educational routes, are still underutilised by the public sector. Public sector bodies in England with 250 or more members of staff currently have a target to employ an average of at least 2.3% of their staff as new apprentice starts, and yet the average is currently only 1.7%. A particular missed opportunity is the fact that in the NHS the percentage is only 1.5% and in the police only 1.1%.<sup>3</sup> Yet apprenticeships in nursing and policing are producing highly trained professionals, and often doing so in skills cold-spots. For example, the OU has a partnership with the Isle of Wight NHS Trust to deliver a three-year apprenticeship programme with investment of over £2m from the Trust's Apprenticeship Levy to increase

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<sup>3</sup> Apprenticeships and Traineeships Q1. Gov.UK.

the number of registered nurses and nursing associates on the island, helping address its high number of nursing vacancies.

7. Specialised training packages may also enable more public service professionals to enter the public service workforce and improve their skills. One such example is the OU's work with the Health Education England Workforce Development Fund, where we offer a range of qualifications and modules on their continuing workforce development framework to help support the clinical workforce. As with all OU programmes, flexibility is at its core with content delivered online allowing students to choose when and where to study, minimising fixed time attendance and travel time. They also have the support of a dedicated online tutor group.

**3) How might the public sector become more attractive as an employer, particularly in comparison with the private sector? How might it become attractive enough to retain workers throughout their careers while maintaining a level of turnover that brings fresh ideas to organisations?**

8. The public sector could become more attractive as an employer by offering its workforce educational progression pathways so that they have the skills to access higher level employment within the public sector. If individuals have a level 4 or 5 qualification, offering routes to help gain a level 6 qualification could boost the appeal of the public sector, and encourage those at the lower levels of the organisation to remain with the organisation. For example, being able to offer a Level 6 degree apprenticeship could attract many workers as they would be able to upskill – learning while earning.

**6) How can providers of public services recruit a more diverse workforce? How should they improve their recruitment of BAME people, people with disabilities, older people and people who use public services and live in the communities that providers serve?**

9. Those from minority groups tend to have lower levels of qualifications that exclude them from many roles in public services. For example, in 2019 21.8% of disabled people had a degree compared with 38.0% of non-disabled people; this gap has remained consistent over the period 2013 to 2019. To recruit more individuals from these groups, public sector recruitment practices should be made more flexible. Furthermore, the public sector could attract more people from minority groups by offering more in-work training that is flexible, and thus better suited to their needs (for example, many disabled people argue that flexible, distance learning is better suited to their needs as it allows them to balance work and study with other commitments such as hospital appointments and bouts of ill health).

## **Transforming workforce effectiveness**

### **8) How can digital technologies be used most effectively for training and up-skilling the public services workforce?**

10. High quality digital technology can be hugely effective for training and up-skilling if combined with flexible study. Providing training online would allow the public-service workforce to upskill and reskill at a time and place suitable for them.
11. Those in the workforce often have to balance study with work and other commitments, such as childcare. Making digital technology central to training and upskilling, however, can make study more manageable with these various commitments. In particular, it can allow individuals to study anywhere, so workers don't have to be in the office to study. Therefore workers can train outside of work hours if necessary, thus having no short-term detriment on efficiency.

### **About The Open University**

1. The OU's mission is to be *Open to people, places, methods and ideas*. For most of our undergraduate qualifications there are no academic entry requirements. We believe students should have the opportunity to succeed irrespective of their previous experiences of education.
2. The OU is the largest university in the UK with 205,420 students, including 158,000 directly-registered students, and operates across all four nations. We teach more than four in ten part-time UK undergraduates (47%). There are OU students in every single local area in the UK – we are among the five biggest providers in nine out of ten Parliamentary constituencies in England – and tend to be stronger in higher education “cold spots” with limited face-to-face provision and/or low young HE participation rates.
3. The OU is a world leader in distance learning. Our undergraduates do not attend a campus; they live in their own homes throughout the UK. Our students study flexibly and value the ability to fit their study around the demands of their home and work lives.
4. The OU's curriculum is comprehensive. We provide courses across the full breadth of science and technology, arts and social sciences and business and law. We have specialist capabilities to teach science and technology using digital media and our award-winning OpenSTEM labs. We also have over 3,300 students on our apprenticeship programme at over 882 employers, making us one of the largest degree apprenticeship providers in England.
5. The OU works with a range of employers from the public and private sector and from SMEs to large multinationals to support their skills needs.

75 companies from the FTSE 100 have sponsored staff on OU courses in 2020/21.

6. The OU is crucial to social mobility –we are the largest provider of widening participation provision in England, and we are the 14<sup>th</sup> biggest provider for disadvantaged young people (those aged 21 and under from the lowest IMD quintile). Nearly two thirds of OU students are from a Widening Participation background.
7. There is no typical OU student. People of all ages and backgrounds study with us and for many reasons – to update their skills, get a qualification, boost their career, change direction, prove themselves or keep mentally active.
  - 70% of our directly-registered students work full or part-time
  - 26% of our undergraduates live in disadvantaged areas.
  - Over 36,000 students with disabilities studied with us in 2020/21.
  - Three quarters of OU students begin their studies without holding the traditional entry qualifications demanded by most universities of three or more A-levels.
  - The average age of OU undergraduates is 28.

Ends.

**February 2022**