

Written evidence submitted by Open University

House of Commons Education Committee Inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services

Executive Summary

1. The Open University (OU) is the world's leading distance learning provider and the only provider in the UK dedicated to distance learning. We also make available a considerable amount of open educational resources free of charge via our OpenLearn and FutureLearn platforms as part of our social mission.
2. We have taken a number of actions to mobilise our expertise in online learning, distance education, research, scholarship and public engagement to respond to the current national emergency. This includes:
 - **Promoting our free open educational resources to help people develop their skills during the lockdown.** For example, the number of unique visitors to OpenLearn every day has trebled since lockdown began, with more than 1 million course enrolments in just 8 weeks.
 - **Developing new open educational resources tailored towards the current situation,** including on effective home working, mental health and wellbeing and Covid-19 package aimed at the general public and frontline professionals.
 - **Collaborating with the UK Government and devolved administrations around the UK in developing free online courses,** including as part of the UK Government's [Skills Toolkit](#), targeted at workers who have been furloughed.¹
 - **Supporting other educational providers in developing their distance learning offers** including other HE providers as well as primary and secondary schools.
 - **Prioritising research to support the national effort in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis.** For example, researchers at the OU are playing a key role in a new [project](#) to track the spread of misinformation about Covid-19 on social media platforms.
3. In terms of the impact on teaching, in the short-term OU students have been affected somewhat less than students at other HE providers. The impact thus far has been largely limited to:
 - **The need to cancel most exams and end-of-module assessments and put in place remote assessments where necessary** to ensure academic quality, fairness and to meet the requirements of professional bodies. The need to make alternative assessment arrangements has been a particular challenge to the OU due to our size and scale – we have 127,000 directly-registered students.
 - **The impacts of the lockdown situation on our staff.** We have had to rapidly put in place new business arrangements based on all of our staff working remotely and have had to put on hold a number of business-as-usual processes both due to the additional work required and the impact of schools and nurseries being closed on our staff with young children.
 - **The knock-on impact on our apprenticeship programme,** as one of the largest providers of higher and degree apprenticeships in the country because of the impact of Covid-19 on employers. This has particularly affected our NHS nursing apprenticeships, with almost two thirds of requests for Breaks in Learning coming from NHS Trusts.

¹ See <https://theskillstoolkit.campaign.gov.uk/>

4. We anticipate that the impacts on OU students will be bigger in the medium-to-long term, especially if the current restrictions on day-to-day life persist over the course of several months. There is a risk that OU students could be particularly affected as other parts of their lives have to take priority over their studies: most are in work (76% of OU students are in full-time or part-time work), many have childcare responsibilities (36% of part-time students have dependent children), a significant number are managing a disability or long-term health condition (21% of OU students), and most have significant financial responsibilities.
5. In terms of supporting students and the economy as we move into the next phase of the response to the Covid-19 crisis, we recommend that the Committee:
 - **Urges policymakers to protect funding intended to support mature and part-time learners to be successful in higher education to avoid further declines in lifelong learning in England.** The Bank of England is forecasting a 28% decrease in GDP in the first two quarters of 2020, with unemployment reaching 9% of the workforce and the economy not fully recovering until at least 2022.² The Chancellor has acknowledged the importance of helping those who lose their jobs as a result of the Covid-19 crisis to reskill to help them avoid the potential scarring effects from the anticipated recession and associated increase in unemployment: *“Every person who loses their job through this difficult period is a person the Government are determined to stand behind, whether that is with new skills, new training or indeed through supporting businesses to create new jobs. We are determined to make sure this happens”*.³ Flexible learning is crucial to achieving this goal as well as for the UK Government’s broader productivity and “levelling up” agendas.
 - **Focuses on the medium-to-long-term funding and sustainability of the apprenticeship sector in England** in light of the current crisis to ensure apprenticeships are able to effectively support the economic and social recovery from the Covid-19 crisis. In the short-term, policymakers should allow apprentices who have been made redundant additional time to find a new role given the current economic situation, and should also continue to require most apprentices to carry out an End Point Assessment.
 - **Notes that there are a number of challenges in providing high-quality online provision and that doing so effectively requires substantial investment.** Quality online and distance education is developed by multidisciplinary teams and tested extensively to ensure prospective learners get the most from the medium. It is not as simple as just putting lectures and course materials online. This is not cheap - the OU’s offer to students includes virtual face-to-face teaching from our 3,800 associate lecturers as well as the high course development costs involved in designing effective up-to-date online programmes and supporting materials based on cutting-edge innovative pedagogy and learning analytics. However, thanks to the OU’s scale, long-standing expertise in online learning and the importance of our social mission, as well as direct teaching funding via the part-time student premium, we are able to keep our tuition fees relatively low at £6,192 per full-time equivalent student.

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils’ progression to the next stage of education or employment

6. The OU has continued to teach all of our courses and students are able to continue to engage with and study all of their learning materials, which they have full access to for the duration of their module, our academic staff continue to support them with their studies, and students continue to be able to access pastoral support.

² Bank of England, [Monetary Policy Report](#), May 2020

³ House of Commons Hansard, [Covid-19: Economic Debate \(Column 130\)](#), 12 May 2020

7. However, after careful consideration, we have removed the final end-of-module assessment on modules where we are able to assess the student's level of understanding of the academic content and their learning outcomes utilising previous assessment from other assignments they have completed on that module. We have retained end-of-module assessments and are facilitating remote exams in approximately half of our modules due to requirements set by Professional, Statutory or Regulatory bodies, where the summative assessment component has a particularly heavy weighting, or where the final assessment is a substantive piece of work such as a dissertation. This policy is being kept under continuous review.
8. We took these measures to ease the burden on students who may find themselves struggling to keep up with their studies and submit assignments while dealing with the additional pressures at this time. These decisions were made by faculties on a module-by-module basis and took into account the need to maintain academic quality and the need to ensure that students have achieved the module and qualification learning outcomes. The OU's internal Module Results Approval and Qualifications Classification Panel will continue to ratify module results, considering the impact of current circumstances on student outcomes to ensure fairness.
9. Where the end of module assessment has been cancelled, students have been given the option of postponing their end-of-module assessment until a later date at no additional cost. If a student chooses not to do the assessment at a later date, their module result will be calculated using the student's overall continuous assessment scores and by comparing the distribution of results obtained by the current cohort of students against academic standards achieved in previous years. This is a standard approach and is used as a quality assurance measure to ensure achievements in one year are of a comparable standard to previous years to ensure equity of grade allocation.
10. The change to end-of-module assessment has had a knock-on impact on the way that the OU administers other related policies and a number of temporary amendments have been made to allow additional flexibility and prioritise minimising the adverse impact on the student experience. Additional considerations have been made for students particularly impacted in different ways across our student body, including: Students in Secure Environments, those studying via a partnership and those with disabilities or additional requirements.

Support for pupils and families during closures

The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning

11. As the leading distance learning provider in the UK, our model of online supported learning has proved resilient. While there have been significant challenges due to the impact of the lockdown on our staff and on our ways of working to deliver our courses, there has been little immediate effect on the teaching we offer to our students.
12. In addition to supporting our current cohorts of registered students, we have focused on how we can help in the national response to the Covid-19 crisis through sharing our world-leading expertise and capability in the delivery of high-quality online teaching. Our experience with remote working can be quickly utilised and shared with other organisations across the education sector and beyond. Our expertise has been shared in a variety of ways, including informal webinars, free short courses, resources that can be adapted by other providers for staff training, and a full Masters in online education.

13. We make a wide range of open educational resources available for free on our [OpenLearn](#) platform across a wide range of different subjects as part of our social mission.⁴ This includes:
- Over 900 short courses, ranging from 1-100 hours of study.
 - Thousands of articles, quizzes and interactive games.
 - Hundreds of videos ranging from Greek history to modern-day politics and everything in between.
 - Printed posters and booklets made for our TV and radio programmes co-produced with the BBC.
 - Resources to support people in developing their study skills.
 - Resources for people to develop their life skills including skills for work, family and relationships, health and wellbeing, and money and finance.
14. We also have a wide range of open educational resources available via our joint ownership of the FutureLearn platform, alongside SEEK, Australia's top employment marketplace, and in partnership with HE providers across the UK and around the world.⁵ FutureLearn has recently launched [FutureLearn Schools](#) in partnership with Pearson and the TES Institute, a new initiative that gives millions of students aged 13+ free, upgraded access to over a hundred relevant short courses to support their learning during the Covid-19 lockdown.⁶ It has also launched a [new course](#) for educators to help support them in moving learning online during the pandemic.⁷
15. We have undertaken a number of activities to support the response to the Covid-19 pandemic including:
- **Promoting our free open educational resources to help people develop their skills during the lockdown.** Our research suggests that awareness of OpenLearn and FutureLearn among the adult population has doubled since lockdown began on 24 March.⁸ As a result, the number of visitors per day to OpenLearn has trebled, with 2.5 million unique visits in April compared with an average of 0.8 million per month and more than 1 million course enrolments in the 8 weeks between lockdown beginning on 23 March and 17 May.⁹ Looking at online learning more broadly, by 10 May, 14% of adults in GB said they had started a free online course since the Covid-19 crisis began, including 28% of 18-24 year olds, 31% of those made redundant and 20% of those who have been furloughed.¹⁰
 - **Developing new open educational resources tailored towards the current situation,** including on effective home working, mental health and wellbeing, Covid-19 and online learning, with resources aimed at both the general public and frontline professionals.
 - **Collaborating with the UK Government in developing free online courses** as part of the [Skills Toolkit](#) targeted at workers who have been furloughed.¹¹
 - **Supporting other educational providers in developing their distance learning offers** including other HE providers as well as primary and secondary schools.

⁴ See <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/>

⁵ See <https://www.futurelearn.com/>

⁶ See <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/collections/futurelearn-schools>

⁷ See <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/teach-online>

⁸ Polling commissioned by the OU on May 9-10 2020 of adults in GB with a sample size of 2,062

⁹ OU internal data

¹⁰ Polling commissioned by the OU on May 9-10 2020 of adults in GB with a sample size of 2,062

¹¹ See <https://theskillstoolkit.campaign.gov.uk/>

- **Prioritising research to support the national effort in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis.** For example, researchers at the OU are playing a key role in a new [project](#) to track the spread of misinformation about Covid-19 on social media platforms.

Children’s and young people’s mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

16. As a specialist distance learning provider, the OU has considerable experience in supporting student mental health outside of face-to-face education for students of all ages. Indeed, many students with mental health issues actively seek out the OU as their study choice due to the flexibility which the OU offers.
17. The [University’s Help Centre](#) provides an initial gateway to signpost students to support and advice about mental health and well-being. We have recently added some [specific information](#) tailored to the current Covid-19 crisis.
18. Part of this support is providing all of our students access to an online network, “[Big White Wall](#)”, which provides a safe space for members to air their concerns, explore their feelings and learn techniques to self-manage and improve their mental health and wellbeing. The network is always moderated by clinically trained staff and all posts on the site are completely anonymous. This is an additional resource for staff in student-facing roles to signpost students to.
19. Some specific initiatives include:
 - Virtual coffee mornings to promote a learning community in response to student feedback about feeling lonely.
 - Creation of a wellbeing toolkit by academics, students and the scholarship team.
 - Creation of a student mental health online induction block covering mental health and wellbeing for study, mental health difficulties, being proactive and taking accountability, what happens when a student declares a mental health concern, and case studies and videos from existing students who have experienced mental health challenges.
 - An inclusive curriculum checklist focused on mental health to audit tutorial materials to enhance engagement, wellbeing and student outcomes.
 - Piloting a peer-to-peer mentoring scheme to help support student wellbeing and signpost to student mental health.
20. We have a range of resources to support our frontline staff with helping students with mental health issues:
 - The OU has two specialist Mental Health Advisors who are responsible for providing guidance, advice and training to staff who support students with mental health and wellbeing issues.
 - Mental health training is provided for OU staff at a level appropriate to their role. All frontline staff receive a short mental health awareness course and more bespoke courses are offered to specialist staff and our tutors. We also deliver the Mental Health First Aid England one-day Mental Health First Aid in HE Champions course and the two-day Mental Health First Aid course to staff in key roles. Since 2018, we have trained over 120 staff as Mental Health First Aid Champions and 128 as Mental Health First Aiders.
21. We also utilise StudentHub Live – our live connection with students – to help support students mental health and wellbeing. Activities are in a range of different formats, from live studio broadcasts, Adobe Connect sessions and a new radio show format. Due to the flexibilities of this provision, they have been well-placed to flex to put on new ad hoc sessions to support our students through the Covid-19 situation. These new sessions have

proved extremely popular with students and have had to be ticketed due to demand, with catch-up-on-demand options made available.

22. Specifically around the current Covid-19 crisis, actions include:

- Producing a series of content on social media under the umbrella of “The Self Care Toolbox”. This tackles different themes under each week, with the initial content focusing on managing our worries, mindfulness and creating a happier mindset. One piece of advice is added per day, including signposting to other resources.
- Online drop-in sessions for students by Mental Health First Advisers in the OU’s Graduate School and online forums moderated by Student Support teams who have relevant mental health training.
- Offering our staff mental health training tailored towards the Covid-19 situation and increasing the number of staff with Mental Health First Aid training.
- The OU has [created](#) a free online counselling course, in collaboration with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, aimed at helping counsellors and therapists to move their services online during the Covid-19 crisis. Such is the demand, that to date this is the fastest growing enrolment and digital badge course that the OU has ever had on its platform.
- Partnering with the BBC to co-produce [a digital series](#) to support good mental health during the Covid-19 crisis including informative clips from experts offering guidance on using social media for good purposes, finding positives in lockdown, talking about emotions, mental health problems while working from home and self-care

The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses

23. As one of the largest higher and degree apprenticeship providers in England, the OU is already seeing a number of impacts of the pandemic on our apprentices and their employers in England.

24. The OU’s large and small employer partners are doing their best to provide the flexibility that allows apprentices to continue to train and undertake their apprenticeship, even if they are unable to work in the short-term. This has been supported by the OU’s high-quality blended learning teaching model, in which the teaching is delivered online with a focus on the pedagogy of learning and which can be adapted for a range of different styles of learning.

25. To fully support the apprentice with their programme, and to continue to contextualise their learning to their work environments, we have moved our face-to-face support involving ‘practice-based tutors’ (workplace coaches) to online meetings and phone calls. However, some apprentices – and in particular those working at our NHS and other public sector employer partners who are focused on the frontline in this time of crisis – have taken a break from learning. These apprentices hope to resume their studies later in the year. In the NHS, we have also witnessed a number of deferrals from apprentices and employers who had been due to start their training in May.

26. To support the apprenticeship programme in the short-term, we would urge policymakers to:

- Retain a continuing requirement for examination via End Point Assessment to complete their apprenticeship in apprenticeships, such as the Healthcare Assistant Practitioner, that are not presided over by a professional body qualification.
- Review the rules which require apprentices who have been made redundant to find a new role within 12 weeks in order to continue with their apprenticeship given how challenging this will be within the current economic environment.

27. Looking ahead, much of the picture about the impact of Covid-19 will begin to emerge over the next three months as employers refocus their strategies and adapt their future plans for recruitment and training. There will be an immediate impact on the apprenticeship programme from delayed starts with possible reductions in new start recruitment, breaks in learning and challenges in completing End Point Assessments. As well as having a detrimental impact on apprentices themselves, these will also have a big impact on the funding for providers. Such challenges will add to pre-existing questions around how to ensure the market remains sustainable and that employers and apprentices continue to be supported by a choice of high-quality and specialist providers given possible reductions to funding bands and questions over the future funding of the apprenticeship levy. These issues need to be considered holistically.
28. It is therefore important that the Committee focuses on the medium- to long-term funding and sustainability of the apprenticeship sector as well as the immediate challenges. The OU believes we are already facing a potentially fractious and siloed policy-making picture, with the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education undertaking a review of how funding bands are determined in tandem to a Treasury review of the apprenticeship levy in England ahead of the Comprehensive Spending Review. Even before Covid-19 hit, there was a risk that these reviews could result in huge changes to the funding of higher and degree apprenticeships that could have stifled quality and innovation and forced many providers to exit the market. Now, with the current crisis, we believe the sector needs to reconvene to have a wider, strategic debate geared towards the Comprehensive Spending Review, that takes into account the significant effect of Covid-19 on the economic and skills landscape across all Standards and all Levels. This would then allow the UK Government, providers and employers, large and small, to work together to assess the new skills and training environment and discuss new solutions and ideas.
29. The apprenticeship sector across the UK could suffer long-term consequences and feel huge shockwaves if apprenticeships are not seen as part of a wider solution to help kick-start the economy again. The OU believes the positive transformation of apprenticeship policy over the past few years could be undermined unless there is a holistic strategy that takes into account the specific needs and requirements of the economy to boost supply and demand. Apprenticeships are – and will continue to be – vital to help large and small businesses get the skills they so desperately need to boost productivity. They will play a key role in enabling people to upskill and reskill as their business needs change and to transform people's lives by boosting their career prospects.

The financial implications of closures for providers, pupils and families

30. The Open University went into the Covid-19 crisis with a robust financial position thanks to financial prudence over the last few years as we have adapted our operating model to the huge decline in part-time student numbers that was caused by the 2012 student finance reforms in England.
31. The short-term financial impact of the Covid-19 crisis for the OU has, to date, been relatively limited in comparison with some other providers and, other than the challenges with apprenticeship provision discussed above, mainly relate to additional costs associated with the necessary changes in our ways of working and the impact of the lockdown on our employees rather than any loss of income. However, there are a lot of uncertainties and we anticipate that there will be a substantial medium-to-long-term impact of the crisis on our financial position. This includes:
- The potential impact of the recession on demand for lifelong learning. Historically, demand for part-time study has been pro-cyclical, increasing in times of economic growth

and reducing in terms of recession due to the impact on real wages and expectations of the potential earning returns to studying.¹²

- The impact of a prolonged Covid-19 lockdown on the sustainability of apprenticeship provision.
- The impact on the OU's delivery model if the Covid-19 lockdown continues into the new academic year meaning our staff, policies and processes have to adapt to our offices being closed and our employees being unable to work at full capacity.
- The impact of our students who lose their jobs or see a drop in their earnings being unable to afford to continue with their studies. OU students in England are not eligible for maintenance support and over three quarters are in full-time or part-time employment. This lack of maintenance support is likely to be increasingly perceived as unfair by our students if maintenance loans are extended to students at other institutions studying via distance learning due to the Covid-19 situation. Research demonstrates that part-time students are more susceptible to cost issues than other students and more anxious about finance, more price sensitive and more debt averse.¹³ This is partly because, unlike young full-time students, other parts of their lives take priority over their studies. For example, many are in work, have dependent children or other caring responsibilities (36% of part-time students have dependent children), are studying while managing a chronic disability or long-term health condition (21% of OU students declare a disability) or have significant financial responsibilities such as a mortgage.
- The impact of the substantially worsened fiscal outlook and the big increase in the national debt in creating pressure on the UK Government to cut essential teaching grant funding and to reduce student loan outlays via introducing new academic entry requirements and reducing tuition fees.

32. It is also important to note that there are a number of challenges in providing high-quality online provision and that doing so effectively requires substantial investment. Quality online and distance education is developed by multidisciplinary teams and tested extensively to ensure prospective learners get the most from the medium. Failure to do this risks a backlash against poor quality learning that seeks to replicate the face-to-face model, without accounting for the challenges and opportunities of online provision. The costs associated with providing high-quality online learning are not substantially lower than the costs of conventional face-to-face provision. The Open University's offer to students includes virtual face-to-face teaching from our 3,800 associate lecturers as well as substantially higher course development costs in designing effective up-to-date online programmes and supporting material based on cutting-edge innovative pedagogy and learning analytics. Remote learning also involves substantially higher student support costs for the provider, both from the perspective of there being more students per FTE due to lower study intensity and due to the unique challenges for student success of studying as a distance learner, especially as a mature student combining full-time work and/or family responsibilities with study.

33. These additional costs outweigh many of the savings in estate costs from providing courses remotely. However, despite this, tuition fees at the OU are £6,192 per full-time equivalent student – 33% lower than at most conventional providers – thanks to our scale, our long-standing expertise in online learning, our social mission and direct teaching grant funding via the part-time student premium which supports student success.

¹² See e.g. London Economics, [How is the demand for part-time higher education affected by changing economic conditions](#), 2017

¹³ See, for example, Department for Education, [Impact of the student finance system on participation, experience and outcomes of disadvantaged young people: Literature Review](#), May 2019 (pages 115-117)

What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency?

34. The OU had a robust Pandemic Planning Framework and Emergency Response Plan which it was able to invoke swiftly with key stakeholders as required. However, it is clear that scenarios that had been tested were based on single location incidents (e.g. shutdown of one location) and not widespread worldwide disruption on such unprecedented scale. Although we have achieved working from home for the vast majority of our workforce, and did so within 48 hours of the Prime Minister's announcement of guidance for people to work from home where they possibly can on 16 March, we now have evidence to refine the frameworks and plans to cover a greater scope of eventualities. Support from policymakers in enabling the sector to work together more effectively in response to such an emergency again including through testing scenarios with others in the sector would be welcome and help develop solutions in advance.
35. In terms of the Office for Students, their approach in temporarily reducing reporting requirements and in pausing business-as-usual policy development work has allowed us to focus on what matters: delivering services to students and maintaining academic standards without distraction.

About The Open University

- 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.
- The OU is the largest university in the UK with 175,000, including 126,000 directly-registered students, and operates across all four nations. We teach four in ten part-time UK undergraduates. 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.
- 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, including through changing their study intensity over the course of their studies. Recently there has been significant growth in “accelerated part-time study” – part-time study involving a period of full-time intensity study – with one in five of our undergraduate students at any point in time studying at full-time intensity, twice as many as in 2012/13.
- 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 2,000 students on our apprenticeship programme at over 550 employers, making us one of the largest degree apprenticeship providers in England.
- In this year's National Student Survey, overall satisfaction with the OU remains at 87%, keeping the OU in the top 20 of UK universities. The OU continues to rank first for assessment and feedback.
- The OU is crucial to social mobility – one in ten of all undergraduate entrants from disadvantaged areas study at the OU and we are the 11th biggest provider for disadvantaged young people.
- 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.
 - 76% of our directly-registered students work full or part-time
 - 22% of our undergraduates live in disadvantaged areas.
 - Over 26,000 students with disabilities studied with us in 2018/19.
 - Almost two thirds 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.

May 2020