Summary of Feedback

Consultation with Tutors & Students on the
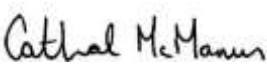
Open Learning programme

A message from the co-Directors

In Spring 2025, we, as the newly-appointed co-directors of Open Learning (OL), conducted a consultation exercise with tutors and students on OL courses in 2024/25. We wanted to get a sense of how the Open Learning programme is experienced and perceived by those who have helped Queen's keep alive its noble tradition of extra-mural education for some 175 years. This report contains a brief summary of the feedback received, along with some of the key action points identified.

We would like to express our sincerest gratitude to all who took part in this consultation, including the 319 survey respondents and every focus group participant. Your enthusiasm and engagement is wonderfully encouraging and motivating as we work together with the team and tutors to see Open Learning flourish.

Professor Katy Hayward   Dr Cathal McManus

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Student survey feedback

Why people choose an Open Learning course

The subject of the course is by far the most important for the majority of respondents, with almost all stating that it is at least quite important. A wish to learn something new is the second most important reason for taking a course, closely followed by its timing and the teacher. The location in Queen's is appreciated by over half, as is the opportunity to socialise. Gaining credits from assessment is of the least importance to those who responded. When given the opportunity to mention other considerations, the most common points were whether it is online, affordability and accessibility (including for those with limited mobility).
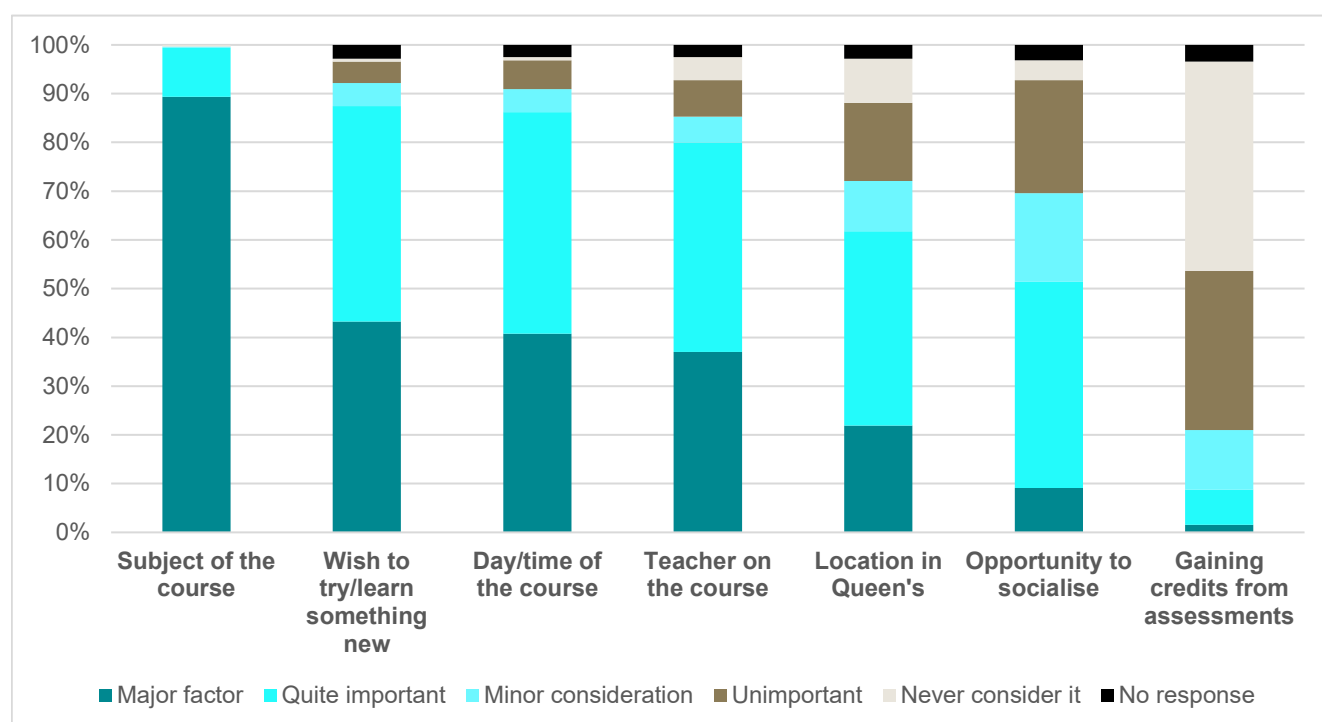

Fig.1. What factors are important in deciding on an Open Learning course?

Interest in different modes of course delivery

In comments on the topic of online provision, it is clear that many respondents would never consider an online course because they enjoy the face to face learning experience. We should reiterate that we have no intention of replacing in person classes with online-only options. However, it is also evident that the online options are essential for some learners to participate, including for health reasons as well as those relating to travel and convenience.

One way forward would be to offer more hybrid classes as well as to encourage tutors to think about offering an online course.
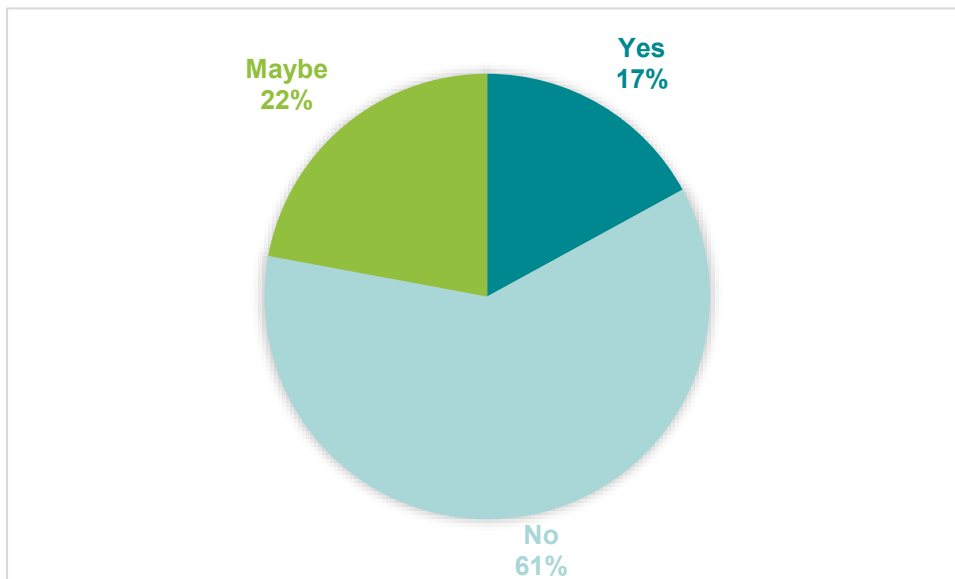
Fig.2. Would you be interested in participating in an online-only course?
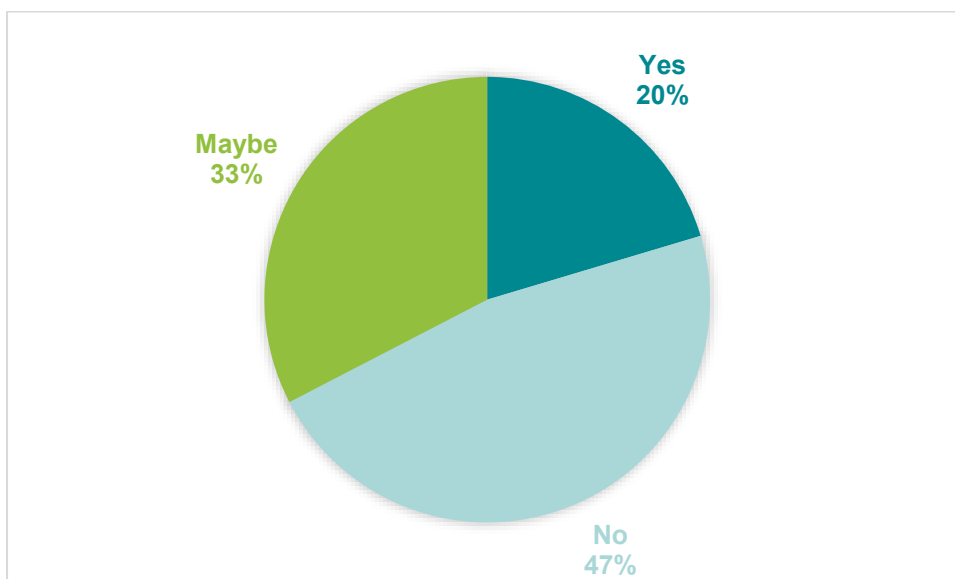
Fig.3. Would you be interested in participating in a course outside of Belfast?

Most of our respondents come from the Belfast area, and so it is unsurprising that they were not keen on attending courses outside the city. However, some have to travel considerable distance to attend classes at the moment and would appreciate if they were closer by. There was a wide range of suggestions as to where these might be, with many being suggestions being further afield in Co. Down or Co. Antrim which again reflects the typical catchment area for Open Learning at the moment.

New course topics

We invited students to suggest topics and subjects they would like to see covered in Open Learning in the future. There were over 180 responses to this, covering a wide range of areas. Below is a non-exhaustive list of some of the suggestions – all of which are courses that we agree would be fantastic to be able to offer.

Northern Ireland
- E.g. Community Development in Northern Ireland, Political History in Northern Ireland Since 1968, Ulster Scots History
- E.g. The Troubles in Northern Ireland & Comparisons to Other Global Conflicts
- E.g. Northern Ireland Writers, Artists & Musicians

Politics & History
- E.g. Political Theory, European Politics, American Politics, History through Personalities (Patton, Churchill, Hitler, etc.), Religious History (Christianity, Huguenots in Ulster)

Literature & Creative Writing
- E.g. A Poet's toolkit, Popular Literature (Crime Fiction, Science Fiction), Irish myths and folklore

Science & Environment
- E.g. Introduction to Psychology, History of science, Geology, Palaeontology, Botany
- E.g. Climate change
- E.g. Architecture, urban planning

Art, Film, Music & Drama
- E.g. Art appreciation, History of Art
- E.g. Introduction to Music Appreciation, Music Production & Recording
- E.g. Greater range of courses on Global History, Politics & Cultures, including via film

Humanities and Social Sciences
- E.g. Social Media, Sociology Theory, Criminology
- E.g. Philosophy, Critical thinking

Languages

- E.g. Portuguese, Greek, Russian, Irish Conversation, Chinese, Turkish, Ukranian
- E.g. Sign Language & Makaton

Technology, Business & Finance

- E.g. Artificial Intelligence, Keeping Abreast of Technology, Cyber security for the cautious, Post-GCSE Maths

Travel & Leisure

- E.g. Country-Specific Facts & History, French cuisine
- Some fun and entertaining courses, e.g. Life of Houdini

Personal Development

- E.g. Tips for growing older, Good mental health, Personal Finance
- E.g. Family History Research

Other suggestions

In response to the opportunity to offer comments or suggestions with regard to the future development of Open Learning, the following themes came through from around a hundred respondents:

- **Quality of Teaching**: Courses are led by exceptional tutors. Well-prepared and engaging lecturers are highly valued.
- **Course Availability & Scheduling**: More evening and weekend courses are requested to accommodate working professionals. Weekday 6-8pm slots would be particularly helpful. Better promotion of Open Learning could boost enrolment and reduce cancellations.
- **Course Variety & Preferences**: Strong appreciation for a wide selection of subjects, particularly history, literature, languages, and philosophy. Requests for more history classes, online offerings, and practical course options (e.g., social media, cost of living crisis).
- **Social & Learning Experience**: Open Learning enhances quality of life, especially in retirement. Some feel Queen's lacks opportunities for social interaction. A proposed coffee morning/social event to celebrate Open Learning and bring students together.
- **Course Accessibility & Administration**: Issues with online booking system, evening courses being too late, preference for morning or twilight sessions, and the need for better promotion of Open Learning.

- **Certificates & Accreditation**: Desire for the return of the QUB Certificate in Liberal Studies that we used to be able to offer through Open Learning until a change in the central QUB policy a decade ago. Some suggest more CPD-accredited courses and structured qualifications.
- **Online Learning**: Requests for more literature, philosophy, science, and music courses online. Some concerns about unreliable online platforms for online courses. Interest in more accredited online courses.
- **Engagement & Feedback**: Enthusiasm for continued consultation. Requests for better communication on feedback responses, clearer booking processes, and opportunities for student input.
- **Learning Experience & Accessibility**: Calls for improved social interaction opportunities, disability support, and clearer progression pathways for certain subjects.
- **Lecturers & Accreditation**: Desire for lecturers from various faculties to contribute to Open Learning. Some suggest accreditation or quality assurance for course instructors or sight of the tutor's CV.
- **Practical Considerations**: Issues with parking and travel logistics, especially for those attending two-hour courses. Adjustments to literature class formats (shorter readings or one book per month), better hearing support in classrooms.

Focus group feedback

Summary of key points

1. **Student Experiences & Preferences**
   - Participants come from varied backgrounds—retirees, university staff, and working professionals.
   - Many value interactive learning and meeting different types and groups of people.
   - Most tutors were praised, though teaching experience clearly helps.
   - Students appreciated the engaging teaching styles in Open Learning
   - Some students want CATS points reinstated, while others enjoy the flexibility of non-exam-based courses.

2. **Facilities & Administration**
   - Issues the lack of coffee spots during class breaks were raised.
   - Some students missed confirmation emails after registering.

- o Some rooms were hard to find and not properly configured, and buildings were locked until or during class time.
- o Challenges with QUB website navigation
- o Some see online learning as convenient, while others struggle with technology or find it less motivating.

3. **Suggestions for Course Offerings: structure**
- o Interest in five-week Autumn courses.
- o Would like more diversity in evening classes offered (e.g. more literature).
- o Interest in more Saturday workshops and short one-day courses.
- o More evening and Saturday classes would help working participants.
- o Interest in more discussion-based classes rather than lecture-style formats.

4. **Suggestions for Course Offerings: topics**
- o Requests for cyber security/social media safety courses.
- o Requests for current events courses on topics like world politics and the NHS.
- o Desire for follow-on courses and dual-level options (with or without qualifications).
- o History courses outside UK/USA
- o Geography and philosophy courses were suggested as new subjects.

5. **CATS Points Discussion**
- o Some students valued CATS points for academic rigor and self-discipline, while others preferred informal learning.
- o Most students value OL for social engagement rather than formal assessment.
- o Interest in micro-credentials, though institutional culture would need to shift.

6. **Future OL Plans & Institutional Considerations**
- o Overall, students found OL courses to be good value for money.
- o Calls to promote OL and engage a wider range of students (e.g. undergraduates).
- o Would like expansion of courses outside Belfast, although logistical challenges exist.
- o Minimum student numbers are necessary for funding purposes.

Some generous pats on the back!

I really enjoyed my time on the Open Learning Programme. I've learnt a lot! Many thanks.

Please preserve Open Learning. It is a vital and valuable resource.

Queens offers excellent value in open Learning. Please keep up the good work!

Absolutely love my course and it has enriched my days.

Very interesting and painlessly educational!

Well done and many thanks for providing such wonderful educational opportunities.

I've always enjoyed, and benefited both culturally and in my career, from the adult learning classes I've taken in Queens, it's a great resource to have in the community

I think the Open Learning programme is excellent. Any courses that I have undertaken have been well organised and delivered with enthusiasm, the lecturers being well qualified in their subject area. As they say, 'Keep 'er lit!'

Queens courses are very important for me for expanding my knowledge.

I have done many courses in Open Learning and have enjoyed all of them. There are a great variety of subjects from which to choose and the teachers are always very approachable and encourage lively discussion.

I deeply appreciate the opportunities to participate in the Open Learning programme. The breadth of subjects on offer is tremendous, although to date I have focused on learning Italian. The concession fee for the courses is very affordable. I have been taught by excellent teachers - they have thoroughly prepared their lessons, shared insights into their native region, inspired the students and shown patience. I have also met wonderful fellow learners. Well done to the Open Learning team.

I'm sure you're aware that these courses are very much loved and so I feel that I would not like to see too much change.

Enjoy taking part in Open Learning courses and thank you for providing them

In almost 50 years of attending courses I have only been disappointed once! And that was 10 years ago..

I'd like to add that attending Open Learning courses is vital for my mental well-being, keeping me challenged, alert and outward-looking as well as offering congenial social contact.

Since I retired in 2012 I have found the Open Learning courses a life line through winter and to keep me mentally alert. It's an essential service the Arts subjects of which mitigate the culling of Arts subjects for undergraduates..

Feedback from tutors

Key points raised

Curriculum & Teaching

- Teaching an Open Learning course is an **enjoyable experience**, with fantastic, engaged and diverse students

- Introduce **teaching qualifications** for tutors

- Adopt a **coursebook** consistently across language classes

- Provide **shorter class options** for language learners (e.g. max 1hr 30mins)

- Increase **language variety** (e.g. Ukrainian, Turkish, Chinese)

- Address **attrition in beginner language courses** over the year

- Engage learners beyond first year by allowing **smaller group classes**

- OL tutors are also interested in taking OL courses

Website & Visibility

- Improve **front page messaging**—make it clear that anyone can offer a course

- Display the **full-year course schedule**, not just by term

- Make **contact details for course submissions** easier to find

- Offer **end-of-term promotional materials** to raise visibility

Tutor Support

- The switch to the use of QWork for tutor contracts had a negative impact, including in restricting access to university resources (e.g. library, email)

- Improve **pay to offset travel costs**

- Allow part-time tutors **morning access to 20 College Green**

- Ensure more access to **email, iTrent, CPD courses, and library**

Student Experience

- Provide **spaces to socialise over coffee**

- Address **parking difficulties** near the university

What is our response?

There have been very many helpful suggestions and requests for improvement made through this consultation exercise, and we are aware now of some issues and problems that we didn't know about before. So, thank you again for the feedback.

While some of the requests will be difficult if not quite impossible to achieve without quite significant transformation in the central university, many can be addressed through our own action and initiative in the Open Learning team. We do have a longer-term plan that includes and builds on a number of the points raised in this consultation. In the meantime, we have prioritised taking immediate steps that enhance the delivery of the main Open Learning programme.

Below is a selection of some of the actions we are undertaking in response to the student/tutor consultation. We warmly encourage our students and tutors to continue to share their views and suggestions with us.

Course offerings & delivery

- Secured the necessary facilities and changing the course proposal form to allow tutors to offer hybrid (i.e. online as well as in person) courses
- Changing the course proposal form to enable tutors to offer more options in terms of timing and length of classes and courses
- Actively recruiting new tutors in areas most frequently requested, e.g. Irish history, environment, cyber and IT. These will come into effect from Spring 2026 onwards.
- Implementing a strategy to raise the profile of Open Learning within QUB to recruit new tutors with relevant qualifications and experience across a wide range of areas

Student experience

- Moved most online course provision from Teams to Zoom Business.
- Have proposed to QUB IT services an adjustment to the webpage format to make it easier to navigate
- Will update the General Information section on the webpage with guidance on some of the questions raised in the survey (e.g. re: class locations and email reminders)

Tutor support

- Secured a further pay increase for 2025/26, with the intention of this being repeated next year
- We are negotiating with QUB to have tutors keep QUB email and library access for longer

Raising the profile

- Working with QUB Communications team on a strategy to increase awareness of Open Learning on campus, including among undergraduate and graduate students, and in the wider public
- Developing a plan to celebrate 175 year anniversary of adult education/extramural classes offered by QUB, which will include public engagement dimensions