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# Are apprenticeships working for disabled students?

50 years of opening access to higher education: some interesting examples across Ireland and a focus on apprenticeship developments in England

## The Open University in context

The Open University is currently celebrating its 50th anniversary. Established in 1969 with a mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas, The Open University is quite unique with its open access model. It is also different in that it operates across a number of different jurisdictions, notably Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England.

Of the 4,000 or so undergraduate students in Northern Ireland, some 18% of those individuals have a disability. In the Republic of Ireland, of the more than 1,000 undergraduate students, some 11% of those individuals have a disability. Part-time, distance, blended learning through The Open University is meeting the needs of many students with a disability.

In addition to The Open University's standard courses, the university's free online resources, through its OpenLearn platform, have proven to be exceptionally popular with citizens across the island of Ireland. In the academic year 2017/18, 61,652 unique visitors from Northern Ireland accessed content of OpenLearn; with a further 71,402 unique visitors from the Republic of Ireland accessing free learning from their homes, their workplaces or indeed anywhere they could get an internet connection.

A key advantage of working across a range of nations is the ability to look at how government policies in different jurisdictions impact on the lives and learning opportunities available to citizens, and to consider how such policies might offer insights across nations.

An interesting example is the introduction of The Apprenticeship Levy in England, which came into force in April 2017. Since the introduction of degree apprenticeships in England, universities and employers have enthusiastically embraced this new and exciting opportunity to both supercharge skills development and transform partnerships and collaboration.

Over two years into the new apprenticeship system in England though, there are still some policy tweaks that are required. The Open University now has over 1,800 higher and degree apprentices on programmes in England, we believe this includes changes better to support apprentices with declared disabilities. That's why we recently published the [Access to Apprenticeships](#) report, a survey of over 700 employers in England. The report looks at just how effectively the English skills system supports employers to recruit and develop people with physical and sensory impairments, mental health conditions and learning difficulties and what employers would like to see done to improve the system in England.

## A diverse and skilled workforce

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At the heart of creating a diverse skilled workforce is having a skills system that supports **everybody** to thrive and develop no matter what background they come from or which barriers they may face.

Apprenticeships should be the perfect pathway for people with disabilities to access work and develop skills. Worryingly, however, official statistics would suggest that there remains a gap in employment between those with declared disabilities and those without. Department for Education (DfE) statistics show that in 2018/19, 12.3% of individuals starting an apprenticeship in England declared a Learning Difficulty or Disability (LDD). Although the proportion has increased slightly each year from 7.7% in 2011/12, this still only represents just over half of the total proportion of people with disabilities in the UK – almost one in five (19.5%) of the working-age population.

Encouragingly, The Open University's Access to Apprenticeships report showed a strong desire to increase apprenticeship recruitment across both public and private sector employers and a focus on hiring more apprentices with a declared disability. In particular, over one in three employers told us they had started to proactively recruit individuals with a disability over the past three years.

The employers we talked to did, however, highlight some significant barriers to meeting their ambitions including a lack of knowledge around the support available to them and insufficient financial and human resources to provide any extra support needed to recruit and develop individuals with a disability. This is particularly the case with small and medium size enterprises (SMEs).

The survey also revealed that employers are looking to their providers for support. This ranges from simple advice and guidance, through to help with navigating the various sources of funding available. Often, however, these providers are themselves unclear on the eligibility criteria and unsure how to access the funding.

The latter barrier was highlighted in the Department of Education's own report, 'Exploring the funding and support for apprentices with additional support needs' that it commissioned via the Learning and Work Institute in 2018 which stated that

Most providers interviewed do not claim Additional Learning Support for these apprentices as they are unsure of the eligibility criteria and/or find it challenging to evidence the specific impact that mental health issues have on learning.

Little appears to have been done to date to fix this issue.

The Open University is, therefore, encouraging the Department for Education to see how it can simplify the eligibility criteria for additional funding support in England and do more positively to encourage providers to draw upon it. Shouldn't every apprentice have a thorough assessment of their needs from the very outset and any additional support put in place quickly and easily? The Open University recommends that the Department of Education looks at how funding and funding criteria can be simplified and float the idea of a 'top-up allowance' – drawn from the existing Additional Learning Support funding – to cover assessment and put in place any adjustments that will support learning throughout the apprenticeship.

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The readiness of leaders and operational teams to support apprentices with disabilities was also cited as a barrier with many employers feeling that their staff were ill-equipped and not sufficiently trained to support individual needs. We know that many large employers are increasingly looking for support from University partners in this area. This support ranges from simple advice and guidance on different types of disability and how to make adjustments to learning through to training and preparation of their staff in how to support apprentices with disabilities.

Whilst the challenge is significant, Higher Education Institutions such as The Open University, with our 50 years of experience supporting students with disabilities, are well placed to be able to step up and meet it.

The Open University has a wealth of experience in delivering accessible learning ranging from its undergraduate programmes through to its higher, degree and graduate apprenticeships and has over 24,000 students with declared disabilities. The Open University can support employers to skill their workforce and access flexible learning tailored to their individual needs.

The Open University's mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas means we want to be at the forefront of providing support to apprentices from all backgrounds, up and down the country. Businesses are starting to recognise that nurturing a fully diverse workplace could benefit from considering employees from a variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, as well as those with a range of abilities. It is our job to support that.

We hope this report sparks a debate and continues the conversation around how we can all better support apprentices in England with declared disabilities and ensure that, whatever an individual's situation, an apprenticeship can be a fantastic way to learn and earn, boost their career and deliver quality outcomes. Beyond England, the messages are the same – recognise, celebrate and support diversity in developing work opportunities but remember that support, financial but also in people skills, is vitally important.



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Open University in Ireland

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John D'Arcy has been Director of The Open University in Ireland since October 2010. Before that he was CEO of Colleges Northern Ireland and prior to that was a Director at BDO Northern Ireland: Principal Officer, Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment; and Research Fellow with the Northern Ireland Council for Educational Research. He is a Board member of AONTAS in the Republic of Ireland and a Board member of the Open College Network in Northern Ireland.