

[MUSIC PLAYING]

LIZ MARR:

Hello, everybody, and welcome back. You've probably realised by now that I'm not Karen. Karen is having a well-deserved break. Possibly gone to change her shoes again. I don't know that. But those of you who were watching last night may remember me. My name's Liz. And I'm going to host this session, which is a first for Student Hub Live and long overdue, I think.

I want to introduce three very special colleagues who represent, who lead, if you like, or look after our nation's students, so the students in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, and who are part of the big OU family.

And I think one of the unique things about the Open University which makes it very special and different from other universities is that we do operate across all four nations of the UK, and indeed, all over the world as we can tell by the people that are in the chat at the moment. We've got people from Kenya. We have people from Canada. And people from Scotland, and hopefully Wales and Ireland, as well as England.

And so I'm going to introduce my colleagues now, and I'm going to ask them to say a little bit about the context in which they work and why they think it's particularly important to have a nation presence in each of the nations of the UK. So I'm going to go first to Northern Ireland. And I'm going to ask Michael to introduce himself, say a little bit about what do you do, and a little bit about your students in Ireland.

MICHAEL BARR:

No problem, Liz. It's great to be here. My name's Michael Barr, and I am the external strategy and innovation manager for the Open University in Ireland. And my role is quite broad. I do a little bit of work with our local government in terms of trying to influence the direction they go and make sure that it's conducive to part-time study in the Open University. But I also then try to make sure we're responding to local priorities from the government as well that are like the politicians and ministers set for us.

I also do quite a bit of work on the employability side of the local Irish students, so developing some higher level apprenticeship pilots, work placements schemes, and then doing general work in terms of with local employers and making sure that they see Open University study as being important to them and to their business model.

So we have, I think, around in 5,500 students in Ireland, I think about 3,600 in Northern Ireland, and the rest in the Republic of Ireland. And yeah, very keen that we developed the Irish Open University identity, and we support local students as close to them as possible, and that we showcase the impact that they have locally, and their importance to Irish society, and the Irish economy both north and south of the border.

LIZ MARR:

OK, thanks, Michael. There's quite a few really important points that I want to come back to, but I'd like our colleagues to introduce themselves. And then we'll pick up on some of those employability issues, some of those local priorities and national priorities that need to be recognised.

So off to Scotland, Susan.

SUSAN

STEWART:

Hi. Hi, Liz. Well, I'm Susan Stewart. I'm the director of the Open University in Scotland and have been for only nine months. I joined the Open University in December, so I am still learning. Every day is a school day.

We have around 15,000 students in Scotland. And our priorities are set by the Scottish government as well as the Open University's overall strategy, students first. So our priorities are, first and foremost, to provide the best possible experience for our students in Scotland.

And I'm delighted to say that in the National Student Survey, which gauges the views of students across every university in the UK, the Open University in Scotland has achieved over 90% in every one of the 10 years it's been running. And we're the only university in Scotland to do that. So I'm delighted with that. Not complacent; we continually strive to improve the service for students, and it's our number one priority.

The Scottish government has made widening participation and access to higher education a very important part of their agenda going forward. And we are at pains to ensure that part-time education is not lost within the mix. The first minister was focused very much on equity for school leavers. But we believe, and indeed research suggests, that for many people it will be a more productive experience when they are older. So the importance of part-time and mature learning.

And like Michael seeking to help our students and OU graduates with careers and employability, ensuring that employers in Scotland know of the kind of skills that an OU graduate uniquely has because they've tend to be juggling lots of different priorities. So lots of

soft skills that employers are looking for, you'll find OU graduates have in abundance. And we can get into some of the other details as the discussion goes on.

LIZ MARR: Yeah, thank you. And to Wales. Simon?

SIMON HORROCKS: Thanks, Liz. Yeah, my name's Simon Horrocks. I'm an assistant director in the Wales office. I have a number of different responsibilities, but I have direct responsibility for the support that is provided both to those that are inquiring and applying to study with the Open University and also to our students in Wales.

So I think that gives me hopefully a reasonable understanding of the kinds of things that students are interested in. And we obviously try and do our best, and we can talk maybe a bit more in a while about the specific services that we provide to our inquirers and to students from all of the nation offices because that's one of the things that we do.

And one of the reasons we do that is that each of the national offices recognises the specific context that our students come from. And that can actually have quite a bearing on how they come to us and the kind of experience that they have, not least because the kinds of support that's available to them from the government, from various other sources are different in each of the countries. And there is actually a very big announcement even today in Wales about potential changes in the future to the kinds of fees and financial support.

But like my colleagues from Northern Ireland and from Scotland, one of the things that we do is to ensure, wherever possible that part-time students are considered very carefully when those kinds of decisions are made. And indeed, the announcement today, I think, is very strong in terms of the way that it actually looks after the future of part-time students.

LIZ MARR: We'll come back to that in a moment, if we may, Simon, because I heard about the announcement, and I've read some of the things that been trailed, and it looks really exciting, but possibly very expensive for Wales. But I wanted to nip over to the social media desk. And Sophie, Kate, have we got any questions or comments from?

SOPHIE: Not many questions. We've got quite a lot of people from the nations. We've got Matthew. He's in Northern Ireland. We've got Libby in Wales and Davin in Wales, and we have got Kerry from Africa. So there's quite a lot people joining us from all over the place. And we're currently learning about tea, and Kenyan tea, and having a debate as to Yorkshire tea or Kenyan tea.

SUSAN Or Scottish iron brew.

STEWART:

LIZ MARR: I think I should let my colleagues know that food and drink does tend to be a theme in the chat at these events.

MICHAEL BARR: So this is the year of food and drink in Northern Ireland, 2016. So that's all good.

SUSAN Well, this is a bit dull but.

STEWART:

LIZ MARR: I suppose in following on from the cocktail party earlier on for those of you who are watching it, working up a thirst. So yeah, iron brew. What's the Irish tippie?

MICHAEL BARR: It's whisky. And actually an interesting fact is an MBA graduate of ours is actually starting the first new whiskey distillery in Northern Ireland for probably a hundred, a couple of hundred years, OU graduates starting it up in Echlinville Distillery in the Strangford Peninsula. So there's an Open University, indeed.

SIMON Yeah, Irish whiskey, it's whiskey with an "e."

HORROCKS:

MICHAEL BARR: Whiskey originated in Ireland.

SIMON Tut-tut-tut.

HORROCKS:

LIZ MARR: Now then, I might have to separate you two if this battle is going to commence. But Simon, what's the tippie in Wales?

SIMON I think we should join the competition really because Wales is also now trying to get its sort of foot in the door where the whisky market is concerned. But I think we're all going to struggle to compete with Scotland, aren't we, where that's concerned.

SUSAN Thank you, Simon.

STEWART:

MICHAEL BARR: Penderyn whisky also.

LIZ MARR: We'll say nothing about England. We can't even make wine. So I want to come back to what

you were saying just then Simon about the Diamond Review in Wales because I think people will be very interested to hear about what's coming out from that, particularly the students in Wales, about how they might be funded in future. But it has implications also for the wider higher education sector, I think. So can you give us the highlights?

SIMON

HORROCKS:

I think the important thing to sort of say is that the systems for supporting students across the UK are very different now in each of the nations. And so I think that's one of the reasons why each of our individual offices has a team of people who are there to provide the specific support and advice, information around what you can expect in terms of the kinds of support available.

And currently, for instance, the fee level is different because it is something which the governments of each of the different countries kind of take a different approach to in terms of how much support they provide to universities. And that's something which I think has been the subject of this big review that's taken place.

And the proposal really is that, in the future, the focus in Wales is going to be providing students with much more maintenance support for the kind of cost of living, whether they're a part-time student, whether they're a full-time student. And there are some good kind of grants available now, and our staff in the Wales office are in a good place in terms of providing advice and information where that's concerned.

But I think that that's really where the focus of the Diamond Review is going to be is to ensuring that whoever you are, whatever kind of study you're doing, you're going to have the right kind of support that you need during that study so that you can really focus on it and get the most out of it.

LIZ MARR:

And is that going to be in the form of loans or grants? Do you know, or is that not clear yet?

SIMON

HORROCKS:

Well, this is just recommendations at the stage. And obviously, so the main thing at the moment is to see how the recommendations are received by the government, and what is actually brought in. And whatever is brought in actually won't apply until probably 2018 at the earliest.

So in some respects, I think for the students watching today, the most important thing is to know that any advice, any information they need about what is currently the case in Wales or indeed in the other countries, then they need just to kind of use the phone or the email kind of

contacts that they've got, and they will get that specialist support from their respective nations.

LIZ MARR: And in Scotland, Susan, what are the differences there?

SUSAN STEWART: Well, it's different again. I mean, Scotland, since we got our parliament back in 1999, Scotland has taken a different approach to tuition fees, all five successive governments. But in 2008 or 2009, the then Scottish government decided to abolish tuition fees.

So students in Scotland whether full-time or part-time do not pay tuition fees. If you earn less than 25,000 pounds, you will get a part-time fee grant, which will cover the cost of your tuition with Open University.

So the Scottish government decided that they viewed higher education as a public good and chose to invest in that way. The pattern in terms of maintenance support is more patchy in terms of a mixture of loans and bursaries depending on means.

But Simon's right. One of the consequences of very diverse and perhaps increasingly divergent funding, fees, and policy approaches amongst the different governments in the United Kingdom is that the expertise which resides in each of the offices in Cardiff, and Belfast, and Dublin, and Edinburgh is really critical to make sure that the individual student is getting the most relevant and bespoke advice which is relevant to their nation's priorities.

And that's not just to do with fees and funding. That's to do with different school exam system and different skills, apprenticeship approaches. And so I mean, I guess the take home message is that we all strive to ensure that every single student no matter where they live in the UK is given the best possible advice and support relevant to their own individual circumstances.

LIZ MARR: Yeah, so if you do have any queries, the answer is just phone. Get on the phone, and you'll get the information that you need. Because I am aware that some new students may still not have sorted out their finances.

And it is important to get that done because it can loom large in your mind and become a really off-putting future if you've not got it sorted out. So get on the phone, ring the offices. If you've got any questions now, just get in touch through the chat and Sophie and Kate will relay those questions to us and we can -

SUSAN No, no, phone the offices. We have experts in Edinburgh. I'm by no mean an expert.

STEWART:

LIZ MARR: So for Ireland and Wales.

SUSAN No, please do email in.

STEWART:

LIZ MARR: No, please send your questions, and we'll put those to this esteemed panel. So Michael, earlier on we were talking about employability, and you were talking about the kind of local contacts. You mentioned higher apprenticeships. Degree apprenticeships, are they developing in an Ireland as well?

MICHAEL BARR: Yeah, well, more in Northern Ireland than the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland's probably a bit further ahead from that point of view. And again, the apprenticeship agenda in Northern Ireland's very different from the apprenticeship agenda in England, and Scotland, and Wales. Again, another example of total divergence in policies right across the UK.

So we don't have a separation between the higher level apprenticeships and the degree apprenticeships. It's all badged in with higher apprenticeships. So we have probably, potentially a bit more flexibility for what can be considered an apprenticeship in Northern Ireland as compared to, for example, England.

So we have actually developed pilots, very innovative pilots with the independent health care sector in Northern Ireland, working with residential homes and care homes to skill-up care assistance potentially on a nursing pathway through a higher level apprenticeship model, and meeting huge skills shortages in that sector. And so the OU is very much being seen as the organisation to really help address this skills issue locally because no other institutions are doing it.

And we're potentially changing not just the lives of the students who are becoming care assistants and moving from care assistants, senior care assistant, potentially through to a registered nurse within the care environment, but also the people on the receiving end of that care.

More and more services that are traditionally held by the statutory sector moving out into the independent care sector. But the training hasn't followed that, so we can really positively influence thousands and thousands of lives by training a number of nurses within that sector. So it's an example of where the nation office and having local staff can be responsive to local

government priority to address a local skills need and really create big impact.

LIZ MARR: That's fantastic. As I see Susan would like to come in on that as well.

SUSAN STEWART: Well, it's an important point, Liz, that it's not only in the higher education that different governments take different approaches. It's in a range of policy priorities. So in Scotland, for example, there's a commitment from the government to double the number of early years places for pre-five children. We've had health and social care integration.

So those kind of policy priorities need to be reflected in our curriculum and the support that we offer students. We all have different professional accreditation bodies for social workers and health professionals, et cetera.

So it's important that those opportunities within each of the nations are also taken advantage of because I think we all, as well as providing the best possible experience for our students, we all at Open University want to have a positive impact on our society, our local economy, and the countries that we live in.

LIZ MARR: Yeah, Simon, I'm just going to you because I know that in Wales, you do a lot of work, as in Scotland and Ireland, with trade unions. And it may be that some of our audience have come through one of the trade union routes. So do you want to say a little bit about some of the work that's been done there.

SIMON HORROCKS: Yeah, sure. I mean, I think just to follow on from what my colleagues have been saying, obviously the employment context in each of the nations is actually very different. And I think that one of the things which is particularly striking about Wales is how strongly dependant it is on public sector employers rather than necessarily a private sector.

And it's obviously strong SME culture as well. And I think that we work particularly with public sector bodies and the trades unions within them to provide the specific training skills and kind of education needs that they have identified.

And we have people who engage with the unions on a regular basis to understand what those needs are within a particular sector, so whether it might be teaching assistants or kind of a different part of the employment market, and try and support them in ways which work for them.

So sometimes that can mean rather than necessarily just kind of having a tutorial which is kind

of open to all students, actually providing a tutorial which works in a particular workplace or a particular kind of employer's setting so that those students can kind of work together and kind of go through the experience supporting each other, and with the support of the employer as well as the Open University. So I think that's something that we're always keen to try and support wherever possible.

LIZ MARR:

OK, I think there's a really important theme coming out there, and that's about employability of Open University graduates. And I hope that the people at home who are watching can get a taste of how important we feel that is in terms of the curriculum that we're developing.

And though you might not immediately be looking for another job, and you want to get your studying out of the way, just bear in mind that there's lots of assistance and advice and guidance that you can get about the career choices that you might want to make. And it's actually really important to do that at the start of your journey rather than wait until the end.

So we do have a career service, and I'll be mentioning that a little bit later on. But get in touch with it. Find it. Seek out help. But also if you are in Wales, or Ireland, or Scotland, seek out help from our colleagues there.

I want to go over to Sophie and Kate, see what's going on in the chat.

SOPHIE:

Hi, again. We do have a quick question from Davin, or maybe it's not necessarily a question. He wants more information. So he is in Wales. He's not studying at the moment because he's looking to do a postgraduate. And he's aware that there's something that may be changing with loans soon, but do you have any more information on the loans in Wales at all?

SIMON

HORROCKS:

Yeah, so at the moment, there isn't the same loan system in Wales as there is available for our English students. And we are waiting on absolute confirmation as to when the loan system is going to come in. But we do expect it to come in, in the not too distant future.

So I think the best thing that Davin can do is just keep in touch with us and provide, if he wants to contact our office in Cardiff, then obviously we can keep him up to date with the information as it changes. But at the moment, it's fair to say that that support is not there.

SOPHIE:

Thank you. We'll put him in touch with those as well.

LIZ MARR:

Still talking about tea?

SOPHIE: Yes.

KATE: Someone did ask what your favourite type of tea was. That was a question for the panel actually.

SIMON HORROCKS: I can answer that quite straightforwardly because, well, I have to say this because my wife is Chinese. So Chinese tea is definitely, in various varieties, is definitely the staple in our house I would say.

SUSAN STEWART: I'm more of a coffee drinker, I'm afraid. Although occasionally Earl Grey with a slice of lemon and at night chamomile is soothing at the end of the day.

MICHAEL BARR: And likewise, Susan, I'm more of a coffee drinker. But if I'm pushed, Earl Grey with lemon every now and then. But peppermint in the evenings when my caffeine intake is maxed out. Peppermint tea is my relaxation.

SUSAN STEWART: I completely forgot until just now, the talk of tea, that I was going to be the English presenter here. So I was going to talk in a very English accent. And just thinking about the kind of tea, well, so long as the milk goes in first. That's OK.

SIMON HORROCKS: In bone China.

LIZ MARR: In bone China. I can't keep it up any longer anyway.

SIMON HORROCKS: Liz, can I just come back to one of the things you were talking about before because I think this whole focus on careers and employability is so important. And we know it's important to our students. And you said, quite rightly of course, the university has a fantastic careers and employability service which we may talk about more.

But we do have specialist advisors in each of our nation offices who are there to give specific kind of guidance around career aspirations, whether that's career development within your current role, whether it's career changing, in some cases, students looking to enter the employment market.

So again, we would just encourage all people watching to kind of take advantage of that. And as you say, I think there's a particular advantage of doing it very early on rather than kind of waiting because I think that can help shape how you approach your study, and even the kinds

of choices that you make of the things that you study as you go along. So yeah, please, please do take advantage of that service.

MICHAEL BARR: Just maybe and encouraging contextual story in terms of the employability of Open University students. We have been, and I think colleagues in Wales have been doing this too, piloting some local work placements with SMEs, small, medium sized businesses in Northern Ireland.

And a local law firm interviewed four Open University students, quite a prestigious legal firm. Had never engaged with the Open University before. It recruited solely from the other two full-time universities. And interviewed four for a four-week work placement and were blown away by the quality of the Open University students. Each and every single one of them they would have offered the placement with alongside the grant.

And they were so impressed by the additional skills that the Open University students were bringing and the life experience. And it didn't matter whether they were a first class student or not. It was more the other skills that they were bringing in terms of time management, the ability to present themselves, maintain conversation, resilience.

They were incredibly impressed far and above the typical student to be coming on for a graduate internship programme. So just to encourage Open University students out there to be confident in the skills that they -

LIZ MARR: I totally agree. And I was saying this last night when we were introducing Student Hub Live. That Open University students manage to look after families, they've managed to hold down jobs, they managed to care for elderly relatives, and they study as well. So I mean, what better employee could you want really? All of those skills are there.

SUSAN STEWART: I think people who understand the nature of study with the Open University, those of us who have employed people and had to look through lots and lots of applications in our day, an Open University student, I think, would automatically go to the top of the list for interview because we know the kinds of complexity that they have successfully managed.

LIZ MARR: So we've rushed you through your Open University experience, to your employment. But we've only got a few minutes left in this session. Is there anything specific, the area you would like, and comments you'd like to make about your nation context. For example, why is it important that we have, this is a controversial question, but why is it important that we have a nation office in each of the nations?

SUSAN

STEWART:

Because the United Kingdom is diverse and divergent country with four different political contexts. The Scottish Parliament and the Scottish government has chosen to take quite different approaches to higher education and a range of policies as have other governments.

Scottish education has always been different prior to, we didn't need to wait for our own parliament to have a different educational system. And that means having an awareness of that context means that we offer our students the best possible advice, support, and guidance.

And that really matters. I think it's also good for the Open University as you alluded to earlier. We are the only university in the United Kingdom that has that footprint in all the four home nations. And that gives us a unique selling point over other universities, I think.

SIMON

HORROCKS:

Just absolutely agree with everything that Susan just said. Maybe just illustrate it with one specific point from Wales, which is that I think that maybe the rest of the university recognises that one of the things that is unique about Wales is that we work in a bilingual environment.

And that means that when you call or you email the office in Wales, you have a bilingual service. And that's absolutely critical for a country where it is actually legally required, but obviously most importantly, that you're able to provide the service in the language of preference for our inquiries or our students.

LIZ MARR:

So I should really make you do the rest of this in Welsh then, Simon?

SIMON

HORROCKS:

Well, I'm not sure if we could do a subtitled version for the rest of our watchers. But, yeah , I'm just trying to work my way out of it.

LIZ MARR:

I think we've actually almost ran out of time. So I'm afraid we're going to have to just very quickly go to the social media desk, say bye to the students. What is Karen doing there?

KAREN:

I managed to get on the computer. I really wanted to see the chat. There are loads of biscuits here. It's just brilliant. So much better than out there. Thank you all. That was a brilliant session.

LIZ MARR:

Thank you, Karen.

SIMON

HORROCKS:

Diolch yn fawr

KAREN: Indeed. Well, thank you very much for that. Did you want to thank the guests and then I'll tell them what's happening next?

LIZ MARR: Well, I was going to do that Karen. You're not even supposed to be here. No, well I would like to thank my guests very, very much, and thank you because they all got up really, really, early to get here. Really early. They've flown in from the three corners of the UK.

But for now until the next session, if any of you missed the boot camp experiences that we had over the last week or so, you can catch up on them now, things like time management, et cetera.

And I think we're finished unless Karen wants to say one more word.

KAREN: No, sorry. I'm just really enjoying the chat to the students, telling them about how HJ has made a massive mess on this desk, and I'm going to have a word with him as soon as he gets back. But thank you very much. And as you say, Liz, we'll be going to the boot camp now. So if you missed that, we're going to be rerunning some of the boot camp one, some of the boot camp two, which is really useful sessions.

And if you aren't watching that live, you can watch it on the catchup, so the stuff on the programme won't be populated in terms of the catchup. But you can access it all on the website. It's all cut it into nice bit-sized chunks. The chat will, of course, be open, so please do keep talking to each other.

And I'm preparing for the quiz tonight at 6 o'clock, the wheel of ologies quiz. And then we've got a fab evening session as well talking about climate change and lots and lots of other things as well in terms of space, moons, Mars, Mercury, et cetera. So that's going to be brilliant, isn't it?

SOPHIE: Definitely. I can't wait.

KAREN: Excellent. All right. Well, thank you very much. And we will see you back live here at 6 o'clock. And keep chatting. See you then. Bye.

[MUSIC PLAYING]