



## Measuring educational gain: The Open University case study

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The Open University's conception of Educational Gain is grounded in its core social mission of offering quality higher education to anyone without any entry requirement and has been informed by institutional research on Learning Gain. The Open University student body is heterogeneous and comprises mostly part-time and mature students with a range of prior educational qualifications (from none to postgraduate) with 32% of those starting in 2022-23 not having an A-Level or equivalent. Motivations and goals are linked not only to career aspirations but also to personal achievements. Confidence-building, self-esteem, and positive mental and physical health can be considered as valuable gains from their education.

The classification of Educational Gains adopted by the Open University has been discussed at academic committee. This was informed by institutional research conducted in 2022 into how staff in strategic positions understand the concept, framing and present institutional measurement of Learning Gain and early HEFEC funded research led by the university into the relationship and measurement of affective, behavioural and cognitive component of Learning Gain (Rogaten et al., 2020; Rogaten & Rienties, 2021; Rogaten et al., 2019).

Educational Gains are defined as the student perceptions of their:

- Academic gain: subject knowledge and academic skills
- Personal gain
- Graduate gains

The reporting of measures associated with these gains has drawn on internal and external survey data, written and video testimony from students, and the presence of embedded processes that help assure quality or offer student opportunities to monitor their own gain.

### **Academic Gain**

Open University students come with a very wide range of previous educational qualifications and learning experiences. For many the distance travelled from the point of joining the university and the point that students conclude their studies can be huge. The measurement of academic is further complicated because many students do not study in what may be considered a conventional, linear path. An internal Early Student Survey indicates that interest in their subject is the most frequently mentioned reason for study followed by developing confidence in their academic potential. To measure Academic Gain the university has used self-report data from the NSS ('Q3: The course is intellectually stimulating' and

'Q5: Opportunities to explore ideas of concepts in depth') and from the Graduate Outcomes Survey ('I am utilising what I learnt during my studies in my current work' and '(I am utilising what I learnt during my studies in my current activities)'). Qualification and module level learning outcomes are central to defining educational gains and these are underpinned by our Levels Framework which describes general attributes for each level of study to ensure alignment with the requirements of the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications. Clear guidance on developing learning outcomes is given to module teams and supported by a learning design process.

## **Personal Gain**

Personal Gain is an important motivator and goal for Open University students and is well evidenced and documented.

For the TEF, the university selected four indicators of Personal Gain from three datasets. First, a measure of self-confidence from our internal Student Experience of a Module survey which is sent to all students at the end of every module ('My studies are helping me with self-confidence'). Second, two measures relating to personal goals and confidence are taken from our Employability of Qualifiers survey which is sent to alumni three years after completion ('The OU has helped me achieve my personal goals' and 'My course has helped me to present myself with confidence). The final measure monitors communication skills using data from the NSS Student Survey ('My communication skills have improved'). Confidence building is a key aspect of the educational gains we intend our students to achieve, reflecting the atypical backgrounds and entry points of many of our students. The use of student voices in social media campaigns and marketing ensures that our engagement begins even before students commence their studies. Innovations such as Access modules (that enable students to study a course before their first undergraduate level module) and online events via our Student Hub Live help sustain this and data relating to the success of these programmes in improving retention and in attendance provides further evidence for the support of Personal Gain.

## **Graduate Gain**

Graduate Gain is the final component of Educational Gain as adopted by the university in its TEF reporting. In a competitive labour market it is essential for employers to recognise the strengths and unique experience of students and for us to recognise that, as mature students, many learners already have experience of paid or voluntary work and an awareness of the importance of graduate attributes. The Employability of Qualifiers survey provides evidence for the quality of Graduate Gain (9-item question 'How well did your overall experience with the OU help you to further develop these skills'). Items include: self-management, problem-solving, communication and literacy, and autonomy and accountability with data appearing to align with the results of the university's annual employer perceptions survey.

The Student Employability Strategy has been a key enabler for student Graduate Gain and is structured around the themes of enhancing student support and engagement, embedding employability in curriculum design, and deepening employer engagement. This is supported by an Employability Framework comprising three domains: core skills and competencies, personal attributes and behaviours and external awareness. These address aspects of all three of the university's Educational Gain categories. Evidence of the implementation of additional initiatives, such as the FutureYOU programme designed to support students in understanding and articulating employability skills and attributes, further illustrates how the university is creating a learning context supportive of Educational Gain.

Together, the three components of Educational Gain present complementary perspectives on how the university supports and achieved Gains for its students. These are not mutually exclusive but each informs aspects of teaching and learning practice from innovation to core delivery and may also support the development of additional measures in future.

## References

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