



Chris Wilson, Managing Director of Oxford Fire Safety, believed a university education was beyond his reach, but the Institution of Fire Engineers fired his passion for study

Exploring alternative routes to higher education through the Open University

Audio accessible



As a young man, my two older brothers attended traditional universities for free, while I went to technical college to study catering, having left school at 16. I spent many years as a chef and hotel manager. After 15 years, I needed a change and joined the Fire Service in Oxfordshire as an on-call firefighter in 1993.

When I joined the Fire Service, I discovered the Institution of Fire Engineers (IFE) exams, which ignited my passion for study and professional development. Recognising the potential for advancement in knowledge and position, I pursued IFE and many diverse qualifications, albeit without the prospect of attaining a university degree.

By chance, during my tenure as a learning and development manager, I stumbled on a language programme offered by the Open University (OU). Although I did not pursue the course, I discovered the possibility of utilising prior study to obtain Unit Credit, opening doors to higher education opportunities.

With the study I had achieved in previous years, I 'cashed in' all the credit I could and was offered a BSc Open (with Honours if I wanted), and by choosing some unique OU courses at a higher level, I began my studies. In 2017, I achieved a Bachelor's Degree in open subjects and



attended the awards ceremony in uniform to receive it from the Dean of the OU. It was one of my proudest moments, witnessed by my wife and young son.

Having recently retired and established my own awarding centre with Skills for Justice Awards, coupled with my involvement with the Institution of Fire Engineers, I felt it worthwhile to explain, for the benefit of others, the further educational pursuits facilitated by credit transfer mechanisms offered by institutions like the Open University and how this can be assisted with professional bodies such as the IFE. But first, let us analyse the educational process and the perceived barriers to higher learning.

Perceived Barriers to Higher Learning

Higher education today is no longer dominated by young adults transitioning directly from school. An increasing number of mature students are returning to education, motivated by factors such as career advancement, personal growth, and the need for new skills in a rapidly changing job market. These students, often over the age of 25, bring unique perspectives and experiences, enriching the academic environment. However, before starting on any course of study, the modern learner is presented with a number of personal and professional issues.

Financial Considerations

One of the primary barriers to higher education, especially for mature students, is the financial burden. Tuition fees, textbooks, and other expenses can add up quickly. Fortunately, various funding options are available to alleviate these costs. Scholarships and grants, often based on merit or need, do not require repayment, making them an attractive option. Many institutions also offer financial aid packages that combine scholarships, grants, and

low-interest loans. Additionally, some employers provide educational support to their employees, covering tuition fees or offering reimbursement for job-related courses. This employer support not only eases the financial strain but also encourages continuous professional development, something I was fortunate to benefit from several times due to having supportive bosses.

Time Constraints

Effective time management strategies are essential for success in this context. Creating a structured schedule that allocates specific times for study, work, and family activities can help maintain balance. Prioritising tasks and setting realistic goals are crucial steps in managing these competing demands. It is also important to communicate with employers and family members about academic commitments to gain their support and understanding.

Work Commitments

Many individuals devote a significant portion of their time and energy to their professional roles. Long working hours, irregular schedules, and demanding job responsibilities can make it challenging to carve out time for studying and attending classes. Furthermore, work-related travel or remote work arrangements may further complicate the scheduling of academic commitments.

Balancing Responsibilities

Mature students often juggle multiple responsibilities, including work, family, and academic commitments. In today's fast-paced world, time constraints are a ubiquitous challenge for modern workers seeking to pursue higher education. Balancing the demands of work, family, and personal commitments alongside academic pursuits requires careful planning and effective time management strategies. For working adults with families,

the responsibilities of caregiving, parenting, and household management often consume a substantial portion of their time. Balancing the needs of family members with academic pursuits can be particularly challenging, as family commitments are often non-negotiable and require flexibility and adaptability. Many individuals struggle to prioritise their own or their family's needs and interests while juggling multiple commitments, leading to feelings of stress, burnout, and overwhelm.

Travel and Commuting

For workers who commute long distances to their workplaces, time spent travelling can further exacerbate time constraints. Commuting eats into valuable time that could otherwise be allocated to academic pursuits, leaving individuals with limited opportunities to engage in studying or attending classes.

Technological Accessibility

Technological advancements have significantly improved access to higher education. Digital resources and online platforms play a pivotal role in enabling remote learning. Learning Management Systems (LMS) provide a centralised platform for accessing course materials, submitting assignments, and interacting with instructors and peers. Video conferencing tools facilitate live lectures and discussions, while online forums and discussion boards enable continuous engagement and collaboration. These tools make it possible for students to participate in courses from any location, reducing the need for physical presence on campus. Access to reliable internet and a suitable device are essential components for leveraging these digital resources effectively.

With effort, all of these barriers can be overcome. I completed my first degree while moving house, getting married, and having a child. It was not easy, but it was possible. With the support of my family and my employer,



“Research and innovation thrive in environments where learning institutions and professional bodies collaborate”

I succeeded. Even though I found it difficult at times, it made the achievement all the more worthwhile.

The Evolving Landscape of Higher Education

Higher education is undergoing significant changes, particularly in response to the increasing number of mature students and the rise of flexible learning models. These developments are transforming the traditional educational landscape, making it more inclusive and accessible.

Flexible Learning

Flexible learning models have revolutionised higher education, making it more accessible to mature students. Traditional full-time, on-campus programmes are not, or should not be, the only option. Part-time, online, and distance learning programmes offer the flexibility needed to balance studies with other commitments. Part-time programmes allow students to take fewer courses per semester, extending the time needed to complete a degree but offering a manageable workload. This flexibility is particularly beneficial for those who need to maintain employment while studying.

Online and Distance Learning

Online learning breaks down geographical barriers and provides unmatched flexibility. Students can access course materials and complete assignments from anywhere, making it ideal for those with busy schedules or living far from educational institutions. Online programmes often offer asynchronous learning, allowing students to engage with content at their convenience. Distance learning includes online education and other forms of remote learning, such as correspondence courses and hybrid programmes. It is appealing to those who need a high degree of flexibility due to work, family, or geographical constraints.

Technological Advances

The advancement of technology has significantly transformed the landscape of higher education, particularly through the proliferation and success of flexible learning models. Modern LMS now serve as comprehensive platforms that deliver course content, facilitate communication, and track student progress. These systems are equipped with various tools such as video conferencing, online forums, and digital libraries, which support interactive and collaborative learning experiences. This makes remote education not only more accessible but also more engaging and effective.

One of the most notable advancements is the evolution of blended learning. Educational institutions

are increasingly adopting this approach, which combines online and face-to-face instruction to offer the best of both worlds. In a blended learning model, students can enjoy the flexibility of online education, accessing lectures, readings, and assignments at their convenience. At the same time, they benefit from in-person interaction through scheduled classes, labs, or discussions, which can enhance understanding and retention of the material. This hybrid model has been shown to improve learning outcomes by leveraging the strengths of both online and traditional classroom settings.

Distance and online learning have also seen significant improvements, thanks to technological advancements. High-speed internet and sophisticated digital tools now allow students to attend virtual classrooms, participate in live discussions, and collaborate on projects from any location. Asynchronous learning options enable students to engage with course materials and complete assignments on their own schedules, accommodating various time zones and personal commitments. This flexibility is particularly beneficial for mature students who often balance education with work and family responsibilities.

Overall, the evolution of blended and online learning, driven by technological advances, has made higher education more flexible, inclusive, and effective. This transformation allows educational institutions to reach a broader audience and cater to the diverse needs of today's learners, ensuring that more individuals have the opportunity to pursue their academic and professional goals.

Partnership with the Open University

The Open University (OU) is a renowned institution offering distance learning programmes accessible to all, regardless of previous qualifications or personal circumstances. Founded in the UK in 1969, it pioneers innovative teaching methods and supports lifelong learning through flexible study options, including credit transfer and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

Credit transfer for qualifications recognised by the Open University represents a pivotal strategy in reducing the time required for individuals to attain higher qualifications. This process acknowledges the knowledge and skills acquired through previous study, work experience, or training, allowing learners to receive credit towards their desired qualification without duplicating coursework they have already mastered.

At the heart of this approach lies the concept of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), a fundamental principle embraced by the Open University. By acknowledging and valuing prior learning experiences, the OU enables individuals to seamlessly transition between different qualifications, building on their existing knowledge and skills. This flexibility empowers learners to tailor their educational journey according to their unique circumstances, interests, and career aspirations.

One of the key advantages of credit transfer is its ability to streamline the learning pathway through flexible and modular study approaches. OU qualifications are often structured into modules, each assigned a specific number of credits. Through credit transfer, learners can exempt



themselves from completing equivalent modules within their chosen programme, focusing instead on areas where they require further development. This modular approach not only accelerates learners' progress but also ensures that their study efforts are directed towards areas of genuine need and interest.

Moreover, credit transfer facilitates accelerated programme entry by waiving prerequisite qualifications or modules. Learners with relevant prior qualifications recognised by the OU may gain direct entry into higher-level programmes, bypassing unnecessary entry requirements. This efficient entry process enables individuals to commence their studies at an advanced level, thereby shortening the overall duration of their academic journey.

Central to the success of credit transfer is the development of personalised learning plans in collaboration with academic advisors. These plans are tailored to maximise the recognition of learners' prior learning experiences, strategically mapping out their credit transfer options. By planning their academic progression, learners can identify the most efficient pathway towards their desired qualification, minimising redundant study and optimising their learning experience.

Pathways

The Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) operates on a system where each unit has a credit value and level, ranging from Entry Level to Level 8.

One credit is roughly equivalent to ten learning hours, enabling learners to gauge the time required to achieve their desired qualification. Under the QCF system, learners can obtain three types of qualifications: awards, certificates, and diplomas.

The RQF is in part a credit transfer system that acknowledges qualifications and units by awarding credits. Since each unit has a credit value, and these credits can be transferred, the system allows learners to progress at their own pace toward their qualifications. University study is structured around levels 4, 5, and 6 of the RQF, corresponding to the first, second, and third years of a degree programme.

As someone who has successfully navigated the path to higher education, I am keen to help others understand how utilising prior learning from workplace or professional qualifications, particularly at levels 4 and above, can attract credits towards a higher

qualification, such as a Degree, Diploma, or Certificate of Higher Education.

In the Open University system, for instance, a year of study typically equates to 60 credits, while two half-year modules amount to the same. Previous attainment of a Postgraduate Certificate can attract 30 credits applicable at levels 2 or 3, given its postgraduate status. Depending on the relevance and credit value of prior study, the duration of a part-time degree programme can be significantly reduced. This means that whatever workplace qualifications a learner has achieved in the past, up to 16 years ago, can be built upon without starting from scratch.

Credit transfer does not guarantee that accumulated credits will be automatically accepted by another learning institution or awarding body but it does provide a pathway to achieving higher qualifications that might not be normally achieved. It is crucial to verify the validity of these credits on the Open University website or the OFQUAL register.

Collaboration between learning institutions like the Open University and professional bodies such as the Institution of Fire Engineers could stand as a cornerstone for the future of attaining higher learning in the field of fire safety, fire safety management, or fire engineering. Collaborative efforts can extend to professional development initiatives for both students and faculty. Learning institutions, in tandem with the IFE, can offer training sessions, certification programmes, and access to industry conferences and events. These opportunities ensure that stakeholders remain abreast of the latest developments in the field, fostering continuous learning and growth.

Research and innovation thrive in environments where learning institutions and professional bodies collaborate. Joint research projects enable researchers to tackle complex challenges, develop innovative solutions, and contribute to the advancement of fire engineering knowledge.

Incorporating all learning methods, qualifications, and bringing together professional vocational bodies and learning providers for the benefit of students can provide access to higher learning and professional qualifications beyond what is currently available. This holistic approach can open doors to advanced educational opportunities and make them more attainable for those who have already accumulated valuable experience and qualifications in their professional lives.