

Ofcom – Future of Public Service Media: Open University Response

Summary

1. Education is a crucial part of the Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) requirements. Several of the statutory requirements set out in Section 264 of the Communications Act 2003 relate to educational objectives. There are opportunities to strengthen these requirements as part of the new Public Service Media (PSM) offer.
2. The Open University (OU) plays a key role in supporting the delivery of PSB requirements around education through its partnership with the BBC. The partnership co-produces high-quality [factual content](#) across several channels and platforms, which is developed in collaboration with academic experts and closely linked to related educational materials hosted by the OU. A key objective of the partnership is to encourage people to embark on learning journeys from the informal, factual content produced with the BBC, through online and printed educational resources which enhance and enrich their broadcast/digital experience, to taking up formal learning opportunities inspired by watching, listening to and engaging with the content produced as part of the partnership.
3. In 2019/20:
 - A total of 257 hours of content produced via the OU/BBC partnership was broadcast by the BBC.
 - This resulted in a combined total of 308 million viewing/listening “events” and digital engagement interactions.
 - The three most popular television programmes broadcast – A Perfect Planet, Springwatch and Hospital (Series 5) all saw viewing figures in excess of 22 million.
 - There were 765,000 unique visitors to the online educational content related to the OU/BBC partnership hosted on the OU’s free online learning platform, OpenLearn.
 - There were 387,000 requests for printed educational materials related to programmes produced as part of the partnership.
4. Engaging adults in lifelong learning is becoming more important to the success of the UK economy and is central to the UK Government’s “levelling up” agenda, especially in light of the Covid-19 crisis. Broadcast media has unique power and reach as a medium for inspiring them to do so and is also able to engage unconfident learners who would not normally consider the possibility of lifelong learning. It is therefore essential that PSM requirements are in place which encourage broadcasters to both produce high-quality educational programmes and to give them sufficient prominence to attract viewers.
5. Indeed, the importance of engaging more adults in lifelong learning is a good argument for increasing PSM requirements covering *schools and education* and *adult informal learning* specifically, as well as factual content more broadly, as this type of content has reduced significantly in recent years. Public service media could also do more to highlight appropriate learning content that is complementary to their output as one way of furthering their educational objectives.
6. There is a real opportunity to build on the recent expansion of public service broadcasters’ educational activities in response to the Covid-19 crisis, for example the BBC’s [package of educational programming and materials](#) produced at the start of the pandemic, and more recently the daily broadcasts covering school curriculum, includes OU/BBC co-produced programmes. These initiatives have supported schools and children with their learning during the lockdowns when most children were unable to attend lessons face-to-face.

3. What do you think should be included in the Public Service Media 'offer'?

7. Education forms a crucial part of current public service broadcasting requirements. Several of the statutory objectives [set out](#) in Section 264(6) of the Communications Act 2003 relate to this, including:
 - The dissemination of information and for the provision of education and entertainment.
 - Facilitating civic understanding and fair and well-informed debate on news and current affairs.
 - A suitable quantity and range of programmes on educational matters, of programmes of an education nature and of other programmes of educative value.
 - A suitable quantity and range of programmes dealing with each of the following: science, religion and other beliefs, social issues, matters of international significance of interest and matters of specialist interest.
 - A sufficient quantity of programmes that reflect the lives and concerns of different communities and cultural interests and traditions within the UK and locally in different parts of the UK.

The OU/BBC Partnership

8. The OU plays a key role in supporting the delivery of PSB requirements around education through its [partnership](#) with BBC. The OU/BBC partnership began in 1971 with the broadcast of late night OU course programmes and has evolved to a wide range of educational peak time [series](#) aimed at the wider population such as *The Planets*, *Blue Planet II*, *Hospital* and *Forensics: The Real CSI*. It also includes radio co-productions, with programmes for *Thinking Allowed*, *BBC Inside Science*, *The Bottom Line*, *All in the Mind* and *More or Less* as well as programmes for the World Service such as *Project 17*. There are up to 35 OU/BBC partnership projects per annum ranging from TV series, radio, digital, social and online content to outreach engagement activities. The partnership also produces content for [BBC Ideas](#) covering a wide range of subjects relating to OU teaching and research, and the OU playlist currently has over 2.5m views. The partnership also produces content across the nations, including networked series like *Our Coast*, to series for exclusive nation transmission for example BBC Scotland's *Gold Town*, and BBC Northern Ireland's *Languages of Ulster*, for which the University produced free online resources.
9. OU/BBC partnership programmes are co-produced with the close involvement of OU academics. Key points of consultation include: attending and contributing academic expertise to editorial meetings for the programme and related online content; commenting on draft scripts; providing feedback on the rough cut; advising on the academic approach and providing a fact check on the final commentary script; signing-off the fine cut from an academic perspective; the development of additional materials; and contributing to the production of supporting online materials.
10. The OU/BBC partnership produces high-quality programmes, several of which have been nominated for and/or won BAFTA awards. In the last five years, OU/BBC co-productions have won 8 BAFTA awards (*Blue Planet II*, *Exodus: Our Journey to Europe* and *The Hunt* have each won two awards, and *The Detectives: Murder on the Street* and *Blue Planet Live* have also won awards) and been shortlisted for a further 10 BAFTA awards. BBC Ideas also won a Webby Award in 2019.

The direct impact of the OU/BBC partnership – educating and informing the public who watch or listen to programmes

11. The OU/BBC Partnership has a significant direct impact in educating and informing the public via people watching or listening to programmes. For example, in 2019/20 a total of 257 hours of educational content produced via the partnership was broadcast and this generated 308 million viewing/listening “events” and digital engagement interactions.
12. OU/BBC content is consumed across BBC channels and platforms, including those aimed at younger audiences such as BBC Three, BBC Ideas and social media. iPlayer offers a significant opportunity to extend reach including to 16-34 year olds, who have given the platform an 82% rating for learning purposes in 2019/20. Streaming services have seen a huge rise in consumption across the pandemic and iPlayer has had nearly 2 billion requests – a 60% increase in the same period in the preceding year. The continued success of streaming services and consumption and personalisation of OU/BBC content on iPlayer is central to the ongoing OU/BBC partnership.
13. This is an essential contribution to both the BBC’s public service broadcasting requirements and the OU’s social mission to be open to people, places, methods and ideas, widening access to education to all.

The most viewed OU/BBC co-productions in 2019/20

Title	Viewing Figure (millions)
Springwatch	35.6
A Perfect Planet*	34.3
Hospital (Series 5)	22.2
Inside the Supermarket	17.4
Secrets of the Museum	10.2

* incomplete figure

The broader impact of the OU/BBC partnership – engaging the British population in lifelong learning

14. The impact of the OU/BBC partnership is far bigger than this. A key objective of the partnership is to create learning journeys from the informal, factual content produced with the BBC, through online, digital, social and printed educational material which enhances and enriches the broadcast/engagement experience, to ultimately encourage people to find out about formal learning opportunities inspired by watching, listening and engaging with the factual broadcast content.
15. In order to support these learning journeys, the partnership aims to deliver content which:
 - Inspires people to find out more about subjects or topics by engaging with content on OU and partnership platforms, including the OU’s free learning platform, [OpenLearn](#) and the OU’s Citizen Science platform, [nQuire](#).
 - Provides the stimulus for further study at the OU.
 - Is intellectually challenging and focus on priority subject areas.
 - Explores new ways of delivering content and interactivity for the audience.
 - Stimulates ‘local’ audience and provide outreach in Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and the English regions.
 - Connects to the OU’s teaching and provide material for modules.

16. Programmes produced through the OU/BBC partnership include invitations to the audience to continue their learning journey by accessing free complementary materials produced by the OU and hosted on OpenLearn. Certain projects also offer viewers free printed materials.
17. The objective of encouraging people to access formal learning opportunities is at the heart of the commissioning process, with a focus on priority curriculum areas identified by OU faculties and delivering content which can be used in teaching and learning. Current priority areas include: arts and history; business, management and law; education and languages; health, wellbeing and social care; technology including engineering, maths and computing; science and nature; social sciences including psychology; and current affairs.
18. The OU/BBC Partnership also supports a range of free public engagement activities. These range from OU lectures and workshops at museums such as the Science Museum, to screenings and press events. There were 5 OpenTalks in 2019/20 across Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Ireland from OU academic consultants on OU/BBC co-productions including *Our Dementia Choir*, *David Harewood: Psychosis and Me* and *Our Coast*.
19. To give an indication of the impact of this activity, in 2019/20, the OU/BBC partnership attracted 765,000 unique visitors to the Broadcast pages on [OpenLearn](#) with 378,000 requests for printed materials.
20. Programmes produced via the OU/BBC partnership can also have a significant social impact through improving the civic understanding of viewers. The best recent example of this is *Blue Planet II* from 2017/18. The programme reached 45 per cent of the population and generated over 830,000 visits to the OU website. It had a huge impact in raising the profile of the issue of marine plastic pollution, inspiring several campaigns to tackle the problem, [encouraging people](#) to change their behaviour, stimulating several Parliamentary debates and ultimately having a [big influence](#) on the UK Government's decision to [take action](#) to achieve zero avoidable plastic waste by 2042, including introducing a ban on plastic straws and drink stirrers.
21. The OU's partnership with the BBC is central to our social mission to reach and engage at scale to create greater impact. This extends to collaborating in key areas of critical social importance including climate change and sustainability, mental health and wellbeing and identity. For example, the University is working with BBC Education around green careers for both new and existing jobs across sectors. The OU/BBC partnership have also been running social media campaigns aimed at younger demographics focusing on sustainability and providing information about mental health to BAME communities during lockdown.
22. The OU makes every effort to support opportunities for informal engagement and to inspire learning which replicates our diverse range of subjects working in partnership with the other public service broadcasters beyond the BBC. Educational objectives are relevant to all public service broadcasters and are explicitly part of the public service remit for Channel 4.

Renewing the statutory educational requirements on public sector broadcasters

23. Engaging adults in lifelong learning is becoming more important to the success of the UK economy. It is central to the UK Government's "levelling up" agenda especially in light of the Covid-19 crisis, and "Encouraging Lifelong Learning" is a key theme within the UK Government's new economic plan, [Build Back Better: Our Plan for Growth](#).

24. Television has unique power and reach as a medium for inspiring and encouraging adults to engage in lifelong learning and is also able to engage unconfident learners who would not normally consider the possibility of lifelong learning. It is therefore essential that PSM requirements are in place which encourage broadcasters to both produce high-quality educational programmes and to give them sufficient prominence to attract viewers.
25. Indeed, the importance of engaging more adults in lifelong learning is a good argument for increasing PSM requirements on television content for *schools and education* and *adult informal learning* specifically, as opposed to *factual content* more broadly, as this has reduced significantly in recent years. Public service media could also do more to highlight appropriate learning content that is complementary to their output as one way of furthering their educational objectives.
26. There is a real opportunity to build on the recent expansion of public service broadcasters' educational activities in response to the Covid-19 crisis. For example, the BBC's [package of educational programming and materials](#) produced as part of the *Daily Bitesize* learning initiative to support schools and children with their learning while school buildings were closed during lockdown, which utilised OU/BBC co-productions among other things, shows how accessible factual programming linked to education curricula can be utilised to support PSM objectives across the age range. Specific PSM requirements around providing content aimed at schools, education and adult learning would encourage further development of this and similar initiatives by public service media.
27. Another way in which the impact of PSM requirements in achieving their educational objectives could be strengthened is by ensuring that devolved administrations have real input into PSM requirements around education and the assessment of the extent to which they are being met. Most elements of education and lifelong learning policy are devolved to the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive and so this would ensure that there are sufficiently close links between education policy and PSM requirements to maximise the effectiveness of these requirements in achieving their objectives around education.