

Scrutiny of Covid-19 and its impact on children and young people (including students in further and higher education)

Date: 1 May 2020

Introduction

1. The Open University in Wales (the OU in Wales) welcomes the attention being given by the Children, Young People, and Education (CYPE) Committee to the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on children and young people, including students in further and higher education.
2. We are pleased to have the opportunity to share our thoughts and experiences with the CYPE Committee and would be very happy to provide further evidence, should the committee find that useful.

Financial stability of the sector

3. The OU in Wales benefits from being part of the larger UK-wide Open University, operating across all four nations, and able to benefit from the economies of scale of that larger institution.
4. However, as a Welsh university, we are part of the Welsh higher education sector and depend on HEFCW for a significant proportion of our funding.
5. We are highly concerned at reports of financial pressure on Wales' universities as a result of e.g. reduction in the number of international students, loss of income from accommodation.
6. While our position is slightly different, in that we do not benefit from the income normally generated from international students and from student accommodation and thus are not subject to the current vagaries of those income sources, we are wholly supportive of the ask from the wider sector for help from government during this time. Universities are vital parts of the economic and social infrastructure of Wales and will play a key role in economic recovery after the current crisis.
7. We welcome the indicative budget allocated to HEFCW by the Minister for Education on 9 April 2020¹, but stress that the sooner the sector understands its core funding

¹ <https://gov.wales/notification-hefcw-provisional-funding-allocation>

position for 2020-21, and the sooner the necessary additional support can be made available to stabilise finances, the better.

8. The overall instability in the sector poses a risk to planned growth and the intended increase in innovation and research activity that would have been delivered across all Welsh universities from the additional investments planned as a result of the release of the so-called 'Diamond dividend'.
9. The HEFCW Circular of 24 April 2020² concerning Innovation and Engagement (I&E) funding gave an indicative figure of £685,389 to the OU in Wales for 2019-21. This is a decrease of £288,794 in what had been expected before the Covid-19 outbreak.
10. This funding will be used to support a range of activities, such as partnerships with public and private sector organisations to increase access to skills, supporting collaboration with FE, supporting local, regional and national economic activities, and supporting our civic mission and public engagement activities.
11. While funding is protected for the first year, albeit with a 50% reduction from the Research Wales Innovation Fund, the uncertainty of is expected in years 2 and 3 will mean we will have to review, and reduce, planned activities.

Impact on students

Changes to courses

12. The OU at large has been the leader in the field of distance learning since our foundation in 1969, and in the field of online learning since the turn of the millennium.
13. As such, we were already delivering high-quality learning and teaching online regardless of Covid-19.
14. There have been no substantial changes to courses, or course content, as a result of Covid-19.
15. Despite being an 'online university', some elements of our courses were delivered in person, e.g. examinations, some seminars. As a result of Covid-19, all in-person activities have been cancelled.
16. Almost all examinations and End of Module Assessments (EMAs) have been cancelled, save for a small number of postgraduate or professional courses. In most cases, this means students are completing their continuous assessments as best they can under the circumstances and the mark they would have received for their cancelled examinable component is being replaced by an average mark.
17. Some students may opt to postpone their EMA or examination instead of receiving an average mark. They will then sit the exam or submit the EMA at the next opportunity, which is likely to be alongside the next cohort of students.

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https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/circulars/circulars_2020/W20%2009HE%20Innovation%20and%20Engagement%20Funding%20for%20Wales.pdf

Student services

18. Since the imposition of 'lockdown' measures, we have closed our physical office in Cardiff and all staff are working from home.
19. This has been an enormous shift, particularly for our Student Recruitment and Support Services colleagues, who are now providing support to students exclusively by email and webchat, whereby the majority of this was previously delivered over the phone.
20. We are confident that we have done everything in our ability to maintain an effective service to our students as possible but are grateful to our students who have borne with us while we have adjusted to the reality of the current situation.

Degree apprenticeships

21. Two thirds of our degree apprenticeship modules are academic and delivered remotely in any case and have continued as normal.
22. We have been working closely with HEFCW to ensure that degree apprentices have continuity with their studies. If any of the apprentices are furloughed, they can continue their studies as normal.
23. Face-to-face support e.g. with practice tutors is no longer happening, but alternative arrangements have been or are being made for this to be delivered online.
24. We have made provision for apprentices who have the time to take on extra study time and are using OpenLearn courses to develop their knowledge for future modules.
25. Progress is monitored through fortnightly calls with practice tutors and other colleagues to enable early interventions for any issues and to ensure the welfare of degree of apprentices.
26. All degree apprentices are continuing to progress well, regardless of whether they are working from home or are furloughed, and no apprentices have had to take a break in learning or leave their programme as a result of Covid-19.
27. The Open University has issued further guidance to apprentice employers³.

Student financial support

28. We are extremely pleased that our students have continued to receive their student funding during this time, which has meant they have been able to continue studying despite the circumstances.
29. The OU at large has made an additional £670,000 available through its Student Assistance Fund (SAF) to support students with a wider range of costs incurred as a result of Covid-19 and their personal responsibilities (e.g. home-schooling).

³ <http://www.open.ac.uk/business/covid-19-apprenticeship-employers>

Health and social care

30. We have sent OpenLearn resources to Health Education Improvement Wales (HEiW) to support those returning to work for the NHS during the crisis.
31. We have been working closely with partners, sponsors, and in liaison with Social Care Wales to maintain student in placement wherever safely possible, and most have continued. Some 23 Social Work students and 1 Nursing student have had their placements suspended as a result of COVID-19.
32. We have been working with our employer partners to monitor placements on a regular basis.

Impact on wider activities

Civic Mission and partnerships activities

33. Covid-19 has affected our wide range of civic mission and partnership activities, requiring a number of events to be cancelled, external activities with partners cancelled or paused, and wider external activities cancelled or postponed.
34. Where possible we are also looking at different ways of delivering activity during this period and are seeking out opportunities to collaborate with partners on projects relating to the response to and recovery from Covid-19 as well as medium- and longer-term activities.

Business engagement

35. In light of Covid-19, we have reached out to employers to offer support for staff through our OpenLearn platform. Meetings arranged with employers before the imposition of 'lockdown' measures have been postponed to later dates; this could have an impact on future recruitment.

Contribution to Covid-19 response and recovery

36. We have been proud to use our resources and platform to support the national effort to respond to Covid-19 and plan for recovery through a number of our relationships.

Furloughed workers

37. We are working with the Welsh Government and Careers Wales through Working Wales⁴ to make a wide range of free learning available to workers who have been placed on furlough. We are also planning webinars for Careers Wales/Working Wales advisers to support learners and provide webinars for furloughed workers.
38. We have over 1,000 free short courses, videos and tutorials which help workers improve their skills, learn new skills, and maintain their personal well-being while not working.

⁴ <https://workingwales.gov.wales/change-your-story/furlough-support>

Continuity of Learning

39. We are also working with the Welsh Government on its Continuity of Learning project aimed at supporting learners who are post-16 learners and transitioning from one level of education to another.
40. We have provided a range of resources, available through the Hwb⁵, to support Key Stage (KS) 4 learners preparing to transition to KS 5 or vocational training, and KS 5 learners preparing to transition to higher education.

OpenLearn

41. Through our free online learning platform, OpenLearn, we have thousands of courses, including a range of bilingual and Wales-interest courses developed in Wales⁶.
42. In a normal week before Covid-19, we would expect somewhere in the region of 4,200 visitors in Wales. Since the imposition of 'lockdown' measures, we have seen this rise to around 16,000 visitors per week.

Supporting the pivot to online teaching

43. We are working with Cardiff Council following their request for support to help teachers pivot to online teaching. As part of the Cardiff Commitment, we are working with Cardiff Council's Schools' Services to deliver a pilot Cardiff teachers' webinar to support online education pedagogy. If successful, we will be rolling this out to wider schools and teaching staff in Cardiff.
44. We are progressing our discussions with Cardiff and Vale College with a wider-than-planned programme of accredited progression pathways and validation and licensing. We are working with the college to provide webinars for staff to assist their move and upskilling them in online teaching. A package of online support for college students will also be available in early June.
45. Working with Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales, we are providing a pilot webinar for staff on online teaching and learning, to grow into a funded programme of support; identifying courses and programmes of learning within OpenLearn that will form the core of curriculum around which their tutors would provide support and guidance to learners; and supporting and training staff to be Open University pathway and progression advisers.
46. Working with Wales TUC, we are developing a higher-level skills webinar for Wales Union Learning Fund project managers and are in discussions to establish a Union Learning Representatives OU Champions/Ambassadors programme. Additionally, OpenLearn and FutureLearn are currently promoted on the Wales TUC website.
47. Our academics are also offering a wide range of informal support to their peers at other institutions who are teaching on-line for the first time.

⁵ <https://hwb.gov.wales/distance-learning/resources/post-16/#overview>

⁶ <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/openlearn-wales/> <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/openlearn-cymru>