

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru	National Assembly for Wales
Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau	Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee



Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau	Priorities for the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee
EIS 06 Y Brifysgol Agored yng Nghymru	EIS 06 The Open University in Wales

## **Response to the National Assembly for Wales Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee call for evidence on issues for the Fifth Assembly**

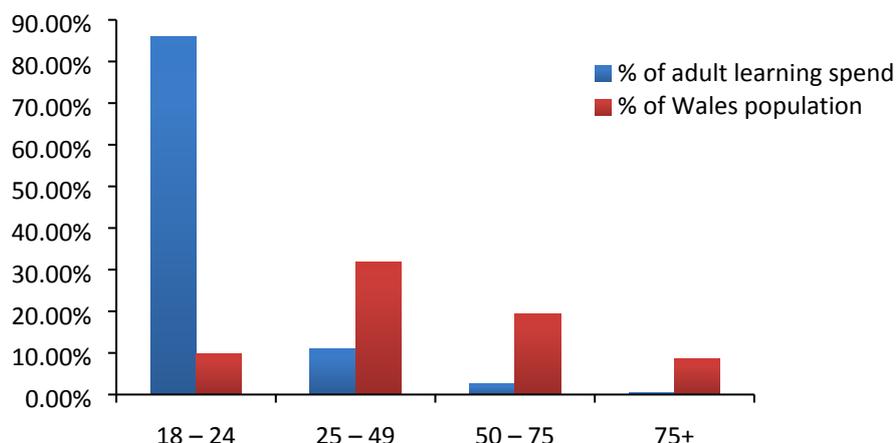
### **About The Open University in Wales**

1. The Open University (OU) was established in 1969, with its first students enrolling in 1971. It is a world-leader in providing innovative and flexible distance learning opportunities at higher education (HE) level. It is open to people, places, methods and ideas. It promotes educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential.
2. Over 7,000 students across Wales are currently studying with The Open University, enrolled on around 10,000 modules. There are OU students in every National Assembly for Wales constituency and we are the nation's leading provider of undergraduate part-time higher education. Almost three out of four Open University students are in employment while they study and with an open admissions policy, no qualifications are necessary to study at degree level. Over a third of our undergraduate students in Wales join us without standard university entry level qualifications.
3. As a world leader in educational technology, our vast 'open content' portfolio includes free study units on the free online learning platform [OpenLearn](#) (including many Wales-related materials and our Welsh Language platform [OpenLearn Cymru](#)) and substantial content on YouTube and on iTunes U where we have recorded over 70 million downloads.

### **Issues for the committee to consider in the Fifth Assembly**

4. We believe that it would be very useful and timely for the new committee to look at adult education and skills policy including part-time education and training up to and beyond degree level. This could encompass basic skills, apprenticeships, part-time study opportunities and adult and community education.

5. Higher education finance and student support is currently being considered by the Independent Review of HE funding and student support (the Diamond Review) which is due to report imminently. This report, and Welsh Government policy decisions that follow from it, will be essential in ensuring that there is a sustainable funding system for higher education which provides support for students and institutions and creates much needed stability for part-time HE funding. However, beyond HE funding issues the issue of the overarching skills policy for Wales will be crucial in ensuring that the needs of Wales' economy can be met and that Welsh citizens can achieve their potential. This wider policy area is worthy of consideration by the Committee.
6. The adult population is growing, and is set to continue to increase over the next fifty years; there are already 25,000 people in Wales aged 90 or above<sup>1</sup>. As the pace of change continues, individuals are going to work longer and change jobs more frequently. Access to skills and learning therefore is vital for people to stay healthy, productive and happy in both work and retirement. The Welsh Government must develop imaginative and flexible policies to promote adult learning.
7. At present, investment in skills and adult education in Wales is too heavily focused on young adults, to the detriment of people aged 25 and over. Investment in full time higher education, dominated by 18-24 year olds, has been shown to be a sound investment, but alternatives must be funded and widely available.
8. In 2009, NIACE carried out an Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning in the UK<sup>2</sup>, which calculated the ratio of funding for all forms of adult learning in four different age groups. The figures below demonstrate the enormous disparity in education spending on younger adults.



9. By 2016, this imbalance in funding has considerably worsened and it may be time to revisit this study and consider what Wales' skills and lifelong learning needs may be and how government policy can best meet them including consideration of the balance of public spending on different age groups.
10. Adult education brings significant economic and social benefits. A study by London Economics estimated that the total economic impact associated with The Open University within Wales was approximately £137m in 2012/13, with the cost to the exchequer taken into account. The HEFCW grant to The Open University in the same calendar year was £11m.

<sup>1</sup> Census 2011

<sup>2</sup> Tom Schuller & David Watson, Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future of Lifelong Learning, 2009

11. The same study found that the average increase in earning potential seen by students in Wales, who had non-traditional degree entry qualifications<sup>3</sup>, over their working lives, when they have completed an Open University undergraduate degree, is £93,000 for males, and £49,000 for females.
12. Despite all these clear, tangible benefits to society, to individuals, to the health of the nation and to the economy, adult learning has suffered huge cuts in recent years. A cut of 37.5% to the Adult Community Learning budget in 2014/15 was followed up by a further small cut in 15/16, alongside in year cuts of £20m to work-based learning and apprenticeships, and a total scrapping of the near £2m family learning budget. Part-time Further Education also received a cut of 50% in the latest budget round; adding further to what Professor Tom Schuller recently called the homogenisation of adult learning i.e. the increasing focus of learning policy on 16-21 year olds in full time education.
13. There are a variety of initiatives and policy developments which contribute to this agenda and their success will rely on a coordinated and clear approach to skills development and adult education. These include: the apprenticeship levy; the Valleys taskforce; the capital and city region agenda; FE and HE policies. Welsh Government activity in these areas is also split across 4 Ministerial portfolios (Cabinet Secretary for Education; Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language; Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure; Minister for Skills and Science). In order to ensure that all of these activities are coordinated and achieve the maximum possible positive impact on the Welsh economy we believe that a committee inquiry into adult education and skills policy would be beneficial.
14. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further with the Committee.

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<sup>3</sup> Five or more GCSEs at grades A\*-C (or equivalent) but less than two GCE 'A-levels.' [these figures are based on the remaining working life of an average OU student who started their degree at the age of 33, and completed at the age of 39].