

**Consultation response**  
**Priorities for the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee**



31 August 2021

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## **Priorities for the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee**

### **1. Introduction**

The Open University (OU) in Wales welcomes this opportunity to submit our views to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee about what we think should be its priorities during the Sixth Senedd.

We would be happy to provide additional evidence or briefings as part of this consultation or others.

### **2. Strategic priorities for the next six months**

#### **Skills development and Wales' recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic**

As Wales' largest provider of part-time undergraduate higher education, we know that ensuring that learning is open to everyone, regardless of circumstances or background, is crucial to our country's economic growth and its recovery from the pandemic. Indeed, [research](#) for the OU found that those join us with GCSEs as their highest prior qualification can earn an extra £203,000 on average in real terms over their career.

Committee members may be familiar with the [work](#) we delivered with Working Wales last year to provide furloughed workers with free online learning. We are also continuing to open up apprenticeship opportunities through our [degree apprenticeship provision](#) and developing exciting new work across the OU on [microcredentials](#).

While the long-term economic impact of the pandemic remains to be fully felt, what is clear is that the economy has changed and will continue to change. Employers were already [reporting](#) significant skills gaps and [challenges](#) adapting to the pandemic, and many are [reporting](#) having to make fundamental changes to their businesses as a result of the pandemic.

We would encourage the committee to give early attention to skills development policy in the context of our recovery from the pandemic. In particular, we would like the committee to look at what skills gaps exist, how these can best be filled, how the Welsh Government can best deploy its resources, and what role a flexible approach to learning has to play.

### **3. Longer term objectives and priorities during the Sixth Senedd**

Beyond the immediate term, and alongside what we presume will be joint scrutiny with the Children, Young People and Education Committee of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill, which is due to be introduced this autumn term, we would welcome your attention to the following areas:

#### **Future skills**

Alongside looking at skills development in response to the pandemic, we would welcome the committee's attention to what skills Wales will need in the future. This was [recommended](#) in your predecessor committee's legacy report. Even before the pandemic, Wales was facing significant social, economic, and technological change. We believe the committee could make an important contribution to responding to these changes, which have been accelerated and exacerbated by the pandemic, by assessing what skills Wales will need in the future and how best these can be achieved.

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## Microcredentials and modular learning

As noted above, you may be aware of work being undertaken across the OU to develop our provision of microcredentials. You may also be aware that HEFCW is [proposing](#) to fund research into areas where microcredentials are most needed to support economic recovery together with piloting small amounts of this provision, following a [direction](#) included in its March 2021 remit letter. We believe this development has huge potential and would welcome the committee's scrutiny of how microcredentials can best be delivered to support the Welsh economy. We would also welcome consideration of how short course provision can be developed and incentivised, particularly in response to employer-identified need.

## Accessibility and operation of degree apprenticeships

Continued scrutiny of degree apprenticeships, building on the [work](#) of your predecessor committee in the Fifth Senedd, would be welcome. We agree with the [recommendation](#) of your predecessor committee in its legacy report that attention should be given to the development of new frameworks and diversifying entrance to apprenticeship programmes.

## Pathways to higher learning

We would like to see the committee looking at how pathways to higher learning can be streamlined, aligned, and clarified. In particular, we would welcome your assessment of the extent to which the pathways which presently exist support people to progress to further and higher learning. We further suggest that it would be useful to assess how these can be improved, and how further and higher education providers can work with adult learning and skills providers and other public bodies and service partners to achieve better pathways. This should also include consideration of the value of flexible and distance learning methods.

## Lifelong learning

We would welcome the committee working alongside the Children, Young People and Education Committee to assess the evidence base of lifelong learning and adult skills development. We would particularly welcome your joint attention to what barriers people face in accessing lifelong learning and skills development and what measures could be implemented to increase access and uptake. As a part of this, we would encourage you to consider, alongside the relevant committees, the many multiplier benefits of lifelong learning, such as increased prosperity, better social cohesion, improved health outcomes, raised well-being, engagement in democracy, and so on.

## 4. About the OU in Wales

The 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 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.

Over 14,500 students across Wales are currently studying with the OU. There are OU students in every Senedd constituency and we are the nation's leading provider of undergraduate part-time higher education. Almost three out of four OU 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.