

RET 15

Ymateb gan: Y Brifysgol Agored yng Nghymru
Response from: The Open University in Wales

Introduction

The Open University in Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's inquiry into routes into post-16 education and training.

Throughout this response, we offer evidence, suggestions and reflections on the questions which the Committee is considering as part of its inquiry. As a general point, while we understand that the Committee is concerned with the progression of pre-16 learners to post-16 education and training, we encourage the Committee to remember that supporting post-18 learners back into learning is equally important.

The Committee will be aware that the operationalisation of Medr is an excellent opportunity to improve access to learning, bring coherence to the system, and ensure that we have an education and training system that is fit for the future. There exist already some good examples of collaboration across the tertiary education sector, and we hope that Medr will be able to build on this so that it becomes more strategic, better coordinated, and, importantly, better funded.

Institutional autonomy is an important principle, but we take this opportunity to remind the Committee that if we as a nation want a comprehensive offer in which everyone has the opportunity to learn throughout life, then that must be coordinated, supported, and funded sufficiently by the Welsh Government through Medr.

1. Quality of information given to learners about the full range of post-16 options (vocational and academic routes post 16, i.e. further education, sixth form, apprenticeships and training, and onward to higher education)

High-quality and independent information, advice and guidance (IAG) is crucial because our system remains one in which the decisions taken by pupils pre-16 have a significant impact on their future education and employment prospects.

Although more attention has been given to it in recent years, the provision of IAG continues to be a challenge. The tertiary education system is increasingly diverse, which is a good thing, but this also means that young people have to navigate an increasingly complex landscape.

We would also argue that IAG cannot and should not be limited to pre-16 learners. In a Wales of second changes, more and more adults are going to need and want to return to learning several times throughout life.

We would argue that this is positive and is characteristic of a nation where lifelong learning is valued. Alongside this, though, adults will need to be able to access IAG that reflects all of the options that may be available to them.

We would argue that the system as it stands is not set up to enable this to happen, or at least not to the extent that it should. We recognise at the same time that Careers Wales has limited resources and capacity and must prioritise its work.

We would welcome recognition of this by the Welsh Government, in terms of funding, and further believe that Medr has an important role to play in coordinating IAG across Wales.

2. How effective careers support is at compulsory school age

As we are at the post-compulsory level, it is difficult for us to comment on these questions directly, but the Committee may find it useful to reflect on some lessons learned in our sector.

Our experience is that careers support, including work experience, can meaningfully encompass a much broader range of experiences than traditional placements. Indeed, providing a greater range of experiences can help to overcome barriers that learners may be facing.

For example, shorter and less intensive experiences, such as taster and insight days, can help to build confidence and dispel myths. Virtual placements and employer events are also important in this context.

Higher education providers have found that applied problems, e.g. a project brief submitted by an employer representing a real-world issue to which students can apply their skills and knowledge, can also be a useful curriculum tool.

All of these kinds of opportunities can be stepping stones towards more substantive experiences and be built upon as learners take decisions about their education and career paths. They can also be less resource-intensive and therefore a pragmatic option for employers delivering work experience opportunities at scale.

As noted above, it is also important to consider those aged older than 18. We know, for example, that some 53% of OU in Wales students are studying with us in order to advance in or change their careers, but almost the same proportion (46%) tell us that a lack of experience continues to be a barrier to career progression.

The economy of the future will need to be able to support people to change careers more than once, and so attention will need to be given to careers support not just at the pre-16 or pre-18 level, but throughout life.

3. Changes in routes post-18

Data clearly show that there is a significant challenge in participation in higher education. Indeed, Wales has the lowest participation rate of all UK nations, and the gap between Wales and rest of the UK is now at its widest in 15 years. Data also show that there are even sharper declines among widening access groups and in the most underprivileged communities.

Unfortunately, data also suggest that the young people not entering higher education are not turning to other kinds of education, such as apprenticeships, instead; rather, they are becoming NEET.

Research undertaken by Universities UK indicates that, by 2035, 95% of new jobs in Wales will be graduate level and that Wales will need 400,000 extra graduates¹. Further, we believe that a highly skilled, mobile, and agile economy requires there to be more people entering higher education. Increased participation in education also has many wider benefits that have been borne out in various pieces of international research, such as improved health outcomes, lower crime and improved social cohesion, and improved democratic participation.

In common with our colleagues throughout the higher education sector, we would welcome a continued focus on this challenge from both the Welsh Government and Medr, and efforts to work with us as providers to stem the tide of falling participation rates.

The Committee may wish to reflect on the fact that part-time higher education participation continues to grow. Although it can't be measured in the same way, because the higher education participation rate measures the proportion of 18-year-olds entering higher education whereas part-time participation is all age, we know that every year since the reform the student finance system in 2018, more and more people across Wales have chosen to study with us. Indeed, with over 16,000 students currently, we have experienced a 113% growth in undergraduate and postgraduate students since 2018. Strikingly, we have seen a 160% growth in widening access students, and 55% of new students are now from widening access backgrounds.

¹ <https://uniswales.ac.uk/demand-graduates-wales-set-soar-2035>

We believe that this reflects a growing trend in learners' choices. Learning options that allow students to combine their studies with work and other responsibilities and learning that is more modular or bite-sized in nature are increasingly popular, and we believe that this trend is likely to continue into the future. For that reason, it is even more important to ensure that pathways are clear and that all options can be shown to learners so that those who may benefit from a more flexible approach can be identified before they are 18 years old and not pushed into routes that are unsuitable for them.

However, this kind of provision has been underfunded for a number of years to the point where most providers have withdrawn most of their part-time provision. The most recent data from HESA show that 51% of all part-time undergraduate students in Wales study with us and, without the OU in Wales, it is likely that part-time higher education would have fallen in the years immediately after the reform of the student finance system. At the same time, the remainder of the Welsh part-time undergraduate market has shrunk by almost a third since 2017/18. In that sense, we, and the type of provision we offer, have been central to achieving a key Welsh Government policy priority.

We understand that Medr is planning to review its funding methodologies and would welcome any efforts to better support part-time and flexible learning options, together with improved portability of learning and qualifications and more cohesive learning pathways at post-16 and post-18 level.

4. Welsh-medium provision

As a pan-UK and international provider, much of our curriculum is shared and therefore delivered in English. We do, however, have a number of professional programmes, such as our Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and Nursing programmes, that are directly funded in Wales and are delivered bilingually. We have also invested over a number of years in expanding our Welsh-medium content on our free online learning platform, OpenLearn.

More broadly, we are aware of the need to increase Welsh-medium provision across the country, and that, should the Senedd pass the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill, there will need to be greater cohesion between pre-16 and post-16 education. In that context, we agree with the recommendations 8, 9, and 11 in the Committee's report on the Bill, and look forward to clarification.

We have also been consistent in saying to the Welsh Government, Medr and its predecessor body, and the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, that expanding our Welsh-medium provision should require additional funding for that purpose.

5. Equity of access

As noted earlier, data show that participation challenges in the higher education sector are particularly sharp amongst widening access learners and those in the most under-privileged communities. The Committee may also want to consider that while part-time higher education has continued to grow, the OU in Wales has seen particularly notable growth among those same groups (see widening access growth figures above).

We agree with colleagues across the sector that now is the right time to consider the role of the Seren programme, and to what extent it is helping to address the challenges that we are currently facing. We believe that there is a strong argument to realign the Seren programme to be more focussed on widening participation and access, rather than those learners who are already likely to enter higher education.

The Committee may wish to reflect on University Ready², a project hosted by the OU in Wales but involving all higher education providers, which has been supporting young people who are transitioning to higher education with such things as study skills and life skills at university. This is an excellent example of a programme which supports access to higher education which could be aligned with other programmes, such as Reaching Wider. We believe that all of these kinds of opportunities and activities should be considered in the round.

On a separate point, the Committee may want to consider the fact that the OU in Wales is the only higher education provider in the country which serves all communities and has students in every single Senedd constituency, including the most rural. There are some excellent examples of how the OU in Wales has partnered with other providers and organisations in some of these areas to expand access to higher education in rural communities, such as our award-winning partnership with Powys Teaching Health Board, which we would be happy to provide more information about, should that be useful.

² <https://www.open.edu/openlearn/education-development/university-ready>

6. Post-16 destination data

Medr has a crucial role to play in ensuring that the right data is being collected at the right time, and that that data can be made sense of and used. We would welcome efforts to improve the transparency and availability of data to support decision-making and policymaking, both at the institutional level and more widely.

For example, at the moment we as provider don't have automatic access to learners' previous educational data, which means that it is difficult to track progress.

In response to an earlier question, we mentioned the need for increased portability of learning and qualifications and more coherent learning pathways. If these are improved, as we hope they will be, improved data will also be necessary both for the learner and for providers.

More broadly, we encourage the Committee to consider what 'post-16' really means in this context. Certainly, for the OU in Wales, our students study across the whole life course; in the future, it is our expectation that more and more people all across Wales will study at various points throughout life. If that does come to pass, we encourage the Committee to ask itself what the value is of 'post-16 data', and how the data landscape can accurately reflect these kinds of learning patterns.

We also suggest to the Committee that the concept of a 'destination' is perhaps becoming less relevant, as more and more learners up-skill, re-skill, and re-train at different points throughout life. That students and graduates are able to take time away from study or work, do something different, travel, volunteer, care for family, and return to study or work, is arguably a hallmark of a truly flexible system. So, again, we encourage the Committee to ask itself what the value is of considering a 'destination' in this context.

7. Welsh Government's role

We have already made a number of suggestions both for the Welsh Government and Medr earlier in this response.

More broadly, we would argue that, although we have seen some progress and a lot of the right things being said, our system remains one in which learning is too linear and in which a disproportionate focus is placed on learning up to the age of 21, following the traditional pathways and model. We have outlined earlier in this response how this is misaligned with future learning patterns and the future economy.

We would welcome increased effort on the part of the Welsh Government and Medr to move at pace towards a system that is significantly more flexible both for the learner and for the provider, in which it is possible to stop and start learning and move up, down and between types and modes of learning, and in which the learner can see a clear pathways to ever higher learning with a given subject and between subjects.

We would welcome expansion of more alternative learning options, such as degree apprenticeships, and anything that Medr can do to encourage collaboration, reduce fragmentation, and bring coherence to regional and national policy around priority sectors.

Again, we also stress that all of the above should consider learners throughout life, and not just those who are around 16-18 years of age.

Should the Committee feel that it would benefit from additional evidence from us, we would be very happy to provide this either in writing or by appearing to give oral evidence.