

## Open University in Wales – Response to the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee consultation on Degree Apprenticeships



### 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 10,000 students across Wales are currently studying with The Open University. 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.
4. The OU is delivering degree apprenticeships in all four nations of the United Kingdom and has 35 apprentices registered on the Applied Software Engineering pathway in Wales.

### Response to consultation questions

5. Below we have set out our responses to each of the questions set by the Committee.

*Have any issues become apparent during the rollout of degree apprentices and what lessons can be learnt from their introduction?*

6. The Open University (OU) in Wales found that in year 1 the timeframe to launch degree apprenticeships was too short and did not provide enough time to resource, develop, accredit and promote in time for the October 2018 start

date. The OU in Wales would welcome longer lead times for future changes to prevent this from happening again.

7. The OU in Wales found that the allocation of funding being announced in mid-July for the 2019/20 academic year was too late. As a consequence, The OU in Wales has been unable to fill our allocated numbers, particularly apprenticeship vacancies, as employers did not have enough time to advertise, recruit and employ degree apprentices. This process can usually take up to three months, which is less time than we had ahead of our registration cut off for October and does not take into account the holiday period in August. For comparison, The OU in Scotland received their funding allocation for 2020/21 in November 2019, which is allowing them to plan recruitment of apprentices and take time to grow strategically. The OU in Wales would welcome funding being allocated to HEIs immediately after the HESA reference period two to provide adequate time to recruit apprentices for the following academic year.
8. In years 1 and 2 of the pilot, the bid process included a requirement for employers to provide signed, indicative degree apprenticeship numbers. The OU in Wales found the process to be disruptive to employer engagement and was, in both years, an inaccurate reflection of the employers that converted. The OU in Wales found the time delay between employer engagement for the bid, and then re-engagement after contract award in July, was too long and as peak holiday season arrived, employer priorities changed and they were unable to respond quickly enough. The OU in Wales welcomed feedback from HEFCW that this would not be a requirement for the 2020/21 funding bid.
9. The OU in Wales has found, through employer engagement for our existing offer, that there is demand for more level 6 provision and the introduction of level 7 provision from employers and employees. The OU in Wales would welcome plans to broaden degree apprenticeships at these levels. Please refer to points 12 and 13 for more detail.

*Was the process and criteria used for approving proposals from providers to deliver degree apprenticeships satisfactory?*

10. The OU in Wales feels that aside from the timeframe for bringing degree apprenticeships to market in year 1 and the lateness of the funding allocation in year 2, the process was satisfactory.
11. The OU in Wales commends HEFCW for the way it has managed the roll out of degree apprenticeships, and for its on-going support, which has been effective in supporting the university to grow the programme.

*What are your views on the demand for degree apprenticeships and how that demand should be managed, both in terms of the range of frameworks and demand from employers and learners?*

12. Demand for degree apprenticeships is continuously growing as awareness improves. The OU in Wales feels that it is important to provide employers with

the confidence that there is a long-term plan for the provision. The OU in Wales also believes HEIs should have some assurance on the continuation of degree apprenticeships so that there is sufficient return on investment into the programmes for the longer term. In addition, it should be noted that the lead time for developing new courses in terms of curriculum and quality assurance necessitates a longer lead in.

13. The OU in Wales has identified, through employer engagement for our existing degree apprenticeship offer, demand for broader provision at level 6, specifically in the following areas:

- Digital – a flexible digital framework which allows apprentices to gain mandatory/core digital skills in the early stages of their degree, then select specialisms in the latter stages. Many employers recognise digital skills as a requirement for their organisations to grow, irrespective of industry, but feel a specific competency (i.e. Software Engineering, Cyber Security or Data Science) is a difficult long-term commitment. Many HEIs in Wales will already offer a range of Computing & IT degrees and The OU in Wales proposes that this could be a pathway introduced into the existing Digital Apprenticeship framework.
- Leadership and management – The OU's Business Barometer 2019 highlighted that managerial roles at senior, intermediate and junior level were the most difficult to fill. A degree apprenticeship in this area will provide opportunities for employers to address skill shortages within their own organisations and develop staff from within. It will also provide a useful progression pathway for apprentices completing programmes at levels 3,4 and 5 in a variety of sectors.
- Health and social care – The OU in Wales would be interested to know, given the size and priority sector status of health and social care, if any area would be planned for degree apprenticeship development. The OU in Wales would welcome seeing guidance from the Welsh Government on any long-term plans for this provision.
- Professional Services – The OU in Wales has also had smaller numbers of requests for legal, accountancy and HR degree apprenticeships. These skills are listed in each of the Regional Skills Partnership priorities and The OU in Wales would be keen to explore this further.

14. The OU in Wales has identified demand for the introduction of level 7 provision in the following area:

- Leadership and management – leadership skills among senior level staff, often within SMEs, are in demand. Employers often have skilled senior staff with degrees relevant to their role but lack the skills to lead people and organisations. The Senior Leader Master's Degree Apprenticeship is delivered by The OU in England and includes our triple-accredited MBA. The OU in Wales recognises that apprenticeships in this area can produce higher volume and impact the overall budget, however as a level 7 offer it would cost

less to fund per head and could be managed through stricter entry requirements.

*To what extent should activity aimed at widening access feature in degree apprenticeship recruitment, and how can this be used to ensure that cohorts are representative?*

15. Higher education has a key role to play in improving fair access to the professions. We believe that Degree Apprenticeships can offer students from non-traditional backgrounds the opportunity to develop high-level skills in the priority sectors, thus contributing to economic prosperity and diversifying Wales' workforce. The OU in Wales has been successful in recruiting significant numbers of widening access students to our undergraduate programmes and we believe that we could extend this to Degree Apprenticeships, if we were able to offer an appealing range of frameworks for students and employers to draw from.

16. In our view, Degree Apprenticeships offer the potential to benefit both school leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds and mature learners already in the workforce, potentially increasing social mobility. However, we believe that the key to widening access to degree level apprenticeships is to ensure the availability of clearly articulated progression pathways from lower-level apprenticeships to those at degree level.

*Do you have any comments on the cost of degree apprenticeships, how degree apprenticeships are funded and the level of funding committed to them?*

17. The OU in Wales is satisfied with the funding committed by the Welsh Government to the pilot period. The allocation for the three years provides an appropriate level of funding to allow the pilot to grow and be effectively measured.

18. HEFCW has managed the administration of degree apprenticeships well. The notable absence of bureaucracy and onerous and frequent funding claims has enabled The OU in Wales to focus more on operational efficiency.

*How has the degree apprenticeship pilot impacted on other level apprenticeships, if at all?*

19. The introduction of degree apprenticeships has helped The OU in Wales develop new relationships with FE colleges and work-based learning providers, as we seek opportunities to create pathways into degree apprenticeships from lower-level provision. The OU in Wales feels this is positive and it will provide longer term opportunities for apprentices with lifelong learning and progression. It has also supported new dialogue about progression pathways for apprentices from level 2-7, which The OU in Wales documented in the Welsh Government's recent [Structure for Welsh Apprenticeship frameworks consultation](#).

20. The OU in Wales is working with several employers who had not been involved with apprenticeships at the point of engagement. This has led to opportunities to inform these employers about apprenticeships at all levels and all ages, which has in turn led to greater awareness of the wider offer.
21. The OU in Wales is in the process of developing a relationship with a further education college, which will eventually provide progression from apprenticeships at levels 3 and 4 onto an OU degree apprenticeship. Apprentices on IT apprenticeships in the college will soon have the option of furthering their skills and knowledge to degree level, which will support the college develop more opportunities in a priority sector and help those apprentices realise their potential.

*Should any aspect of the approach to delivering degree apprenticeships change and if so, what should be the future direction?*

22. The OU in Wales would like to see the Welsh Government showcasing the investment made into degree apprenticeships through a mass marketing campaign and use of case studies to raise awareness with all employers and future degree apprentices.
23. Including degree apprentices in categories in the Apprenticeship Awards Cymru would help to raise awareness of the programme and celebrate the successes of apprentices at this level. The OU in Wales would like degree apprenticeships to be recognised alongside programmes at all levels as a viable, high standard of work-based learning.
24. Publishing longer term plans for degree apprenticeships, alongside an implementation plan for additional frameworks and levels, will support HEIs to plan effectively and provide employers with the confidence that continued investment into this important area of skills development will be sustained.
25. It is imperative that HEIs are provided with suitable timescales to support the development of high-quality programmes and to enable suitable institutional investment into the growth of degree apprenticeships.

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