

## Open University in Wales - Response to the Welsh Government's consultation on support for foundation years

### 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.
3. In 2015, for the eleventh successive year, The Open University was at the top of the National Student Survey in Wales for 'overall student satisfaction'. 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. It is particularly relevant to this consultation to note that The Open University operates an open admissions policy and that over a third of our undergraduate students in Wales join us without standard university entry level qualifications. Widening access to higher education is part of the OU's social mission and we offer pathways into study that enable non-traditional learners to study and succeed at HE level.

### About Open University course provision

5. The Open University in Wales is pleased to respond to the Welsh Government's consultation on support for foundation years. It is unclear from the consultation document itself whether part-time and distance learning (the modes via which all OU students study) are included within the scope of this consultation. It is important to note that The Open University's 'Access' provision, which is Foundation level provision, is not included in the tables or graphs referenced in the consultation document (pages 3 and 4) as these display information about full-time provision only. However, we feel that it is important to ensure that the dedicated provision made available for part-time learners and delivered by the OU is thoroughly understood by those making policy decisions in this area.
6. The Open University in Wales currently offers 3 'Access' modules. These are 30-credit modules which can be studied as part of a qualification or on a standalone basis. The modules are: *Arts and languages*; *People, work and society*; and *Science, technology and maths*. Each module takes around 30-weeks to complete with students being expected to spend around nine hours per week on their studies. The courses are all taught via distance learning, this includes printed and online materials and all students have a personal tutor to support their studies.

7. Many OU in Wales students are able to study an 'Access' module with us for free due to their financial circumstances, this is supported by funding provided to us by the Welsh Government via HEFCW.
8. For academic year 2015/16 we have 302 students in Wales registered on an 'Access' module. 113 of these received a full fee waiver.
9. The content of our 'Access' modules is set at Level 0 and is designed to develop skills and confidence for higher level study.
10. The OU in Wales believes that our access provision is a unique offer that meets the needs of a specific set of learners who would not otherwise be able to access higher education. The flexible, part-time, distance learning approach and the fact that the courses carry 30-credits set them far apart from foundation year provision at other institutions (whether in further or higher education). We do not believe that this course provision is duplicated by other providers or that it could be offered elsewhere as the OU is the leading expert in part-time, flexible, distance learning.
11. Our evidence suggests that OU students who prepare by taking an access module are more likely to succeed in their future studies. Open University data for Level 1 modules undertaken in 2014/15 indicate that across a range of modules students who had previously passed an OU Access module were more likely to pass their level one module than those who had not studied an access module.
12. The Welsh Government's [Policy statement on higher education](#) states that "*Higher education should be available to all those with the potential to benefit regardless of age, gender, mode and level of study, country of origin and background.*" It also states that widening access initiatives should "ensure that modes of provision include: the Welsh medium; flexibility; community- and workplace-based outreach; bite-sized learning; appropriate to learners of all ages." The Open University's 'Access' provision makes a significant and unique contribution to this objective.

### **Response to consultation questions**

*We have outlined a series of concerns regarding foundation year provision principally that it represents poor value for money and does not obviously provide any benefit to the student when compared to the available alternative routes into higher education. Do you agree with this analysis? Why?*

13. The Open University in Wales is not in a position to comment on the full-time foundation years provided by Wales' other institutions. The consultation document suggests that foundation years represent poor value for money, this concern is linked to the Welsh Government's policy decision to provide enhanced tuition fee support for full-time undergraduate students. Part-time students do not receive equivalent support so the value for money argument in respect of part-time students is likely to be different. The consultation document does not make this clear.
14. The consultation states that it is not clear that there is any "shortage of initiatives designed to raise attainment to a necessary level for entry to higher education or

that there are significant problem with those initiatives.” The Open University believes that its ‘Access’ provision and the community and partnership based widening access work that we carry out alongside that provision is one such successful initiative. We do not see any case for making changes to the way our provision is supported as it is unique.

15. In respect of OU ‘Access’ modules we believe that they provide benefit to the student and represent value for money. This type of provision is not offered anywhere else in Wales and meets needs that traditional HE and FE institutions do not currently meet. The OU Access offer provides student choice enabling anyone anywhere in Wales to study a short Level 0 course provided via distance learning. This offer is a unique contribution to the Welsh HE landscape and is not duplicated, nor could it be delivered, by any other provider. **Any decision to withdraw support from the OU Level 0 courses would have a detrimental impact on student choice as they constitute a unique offer and form of provision. This provision also costs less to support than a full-time foundation year.**

*Which of the four proposals do you think should be implemented?*

16. Based on the evidence presented in the consultation and as a result of the lack of clarity as to whether OU provision is included in the scope of these proposals we cannot, at this stage, make an assessment of which option should be implemented.

*Do you think our definition of foundation years at paragraph 30 will capture the type of provision we have discussed.*

17. The definition at paragraph 30 is not clear and in particular offers no clarity as to whether part-time and/or distance learning courses come within the scope of the type of provision this consultation is seeking to address. We would welcome much greater clarity on this.

*What do you think the impact on widening access will be if the Welsh Ministers were to cease support for these courses? Do you think any particular groups would be disadvantaged by this policy? What are the characteristics of the people taking these courses?*

18. The Open University in Wales can only respond to this question in respect of our part-time courses and more specifically our ‘Access’ provision. If any of our provision was to come under the agreed definition of a foundation year and support was withdrawn for that provision we believe there would be a detrimental impact on part-time student numbers in Wales as it would remove a form of provision that is not provided elsewhere.
19. Part-time student numbers in Wales are already decreasing. There has been an 11 per cent decrease between 2009/10 and 2013/14. The Open University in Wales has managed to buck this trend and our overall student numbers have remained relatively consistent throughout that period. If support was withdrawn for our ‘Access’ courses we believe that it may impact on our ability to recruit students and to ensure that they are ready to study at HE level.

20. Women are more likely than men to study part-time (56.7% of part-time students in Wales are women compared with 51.5% of full-time students) and a considerably higher number of older people study part-time than full-time (21.8% of part-time students in Wales are over 40 compared with 1.5% of full-time students).
21. Twenty-three per cent of OU in Wales' students live in a widening access area (as defined by HEFCW widening access criteria) and 17 per cent of OU in Wales' undergraduate students have declared to us that they have a disability.
22. Of the students currently registered on an 'Access' course with The OU in Wales 25 per cent have declared that they have a disability, 36 per cent are from HEFCW widening access areas and 67 per cent are female. These courses are an important tool for opening up access to higher education and the unique mode of delivery (distance learning) means that we are able to reach more non-traditional learners.

## **Conclusion**

23. While it is unclear whether OU 'Access' provision is within the scope of this consultation and potentially subject to a change in support we believe that it is essential to understand that this provision is unique, costs less to support than a full-time traditional foundation year, and opens up HE to non-traditional learners. The Open University in Wales believes that our provision should not be included within the scope of this consultation and should remain supported as it is currently. Any decision to remove support from OU Access courses will have a detrimental impact on student choice and widening access. We also look forward to working towards a more sustainable funding system for part-time HE in Wales following the publication of the Diamond Review later this year.

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