Part-time Matters: Higher education that works for Wales

Part-time higher education changes lives and makes a major contribution to the Welsh economy. But the number of part-time students is in decline and fewer courses are being offered. To enable Wales to thrive economically and socially we must ensure that the door to part-time higher education remains open.

The Open University in Wales is the leading provider of part-time undergraduate higher education in Wales. Here we set out seven ways to support part-time study and create a higher education system that works for Wales.
The opportunity to learn part-time offers people the chance to up-skill or retrain while they are in work or undertaking caring responsibilities. It makes a major contribution to the economy of Wales and is all the more important when we consider that demographic changes in the coming years mean that we must develop our existing workforce. Part-time study also allows people the chance to access education if they missed it when they were younger.

The Open University in Wales recommends seven areas for action to support part-time higher education:

1. Parity of esteem for full and part-time higher education

Individuals should have the right to study part-time and should not be disadvantaged because they choose to do so. An accessible higher education system will have parity of esteem at its heart. This does not mean using the same system for full and part-time modes of study; rather it means considering the needs of both student groups and ensuring they have equitable support and opportunity.

2. A sustainable funding system

The current funding system – in particular the generous non-means tested fee grant for full-time undergraduate students – is disproportionately advantageous to younger students who want to study full-time and is not sustainable. It is likely to lead to a further decrease in part-time student numbers. A sustainable funding solution for HE, with flexibility at its heart, needs to be delivered as a matter of urgency (as soon as possible following the report of the Diamond Review). This should include a rebalancing of public investment between full-time and part-time and a fair balance between student investment and public investment. Additional support (such as the course grant) should be focussed where it is needed most. Consideration should also be given to the idea of a Personal Learning or Career Account which could use public funding to match an individual’s investment in their learning and career development.

Seven ways to support part-time higher education

1. Parity of esteem for full and part-time higher education

2. A sustainable funding system
3. Enhance part-time study opportunities in employment

Welsh Government retraining initiatives should include the OU and/or distance learning as options in order to allow people to re-enter the labour market and retrain at the same time. Incentives should also be offered to employers (in the private, public and voluntary sectors) and employer organisations to engage in up-skilling and work-based learning. The cost of part-time flexible learning must remain affordable so that this provision is accessible for those supported via employers and those wishing to fund themselves.

4. Support for widening access initiatives

The widening access premium paid to institutions on a per capita basis should be retained. However, the current widening access regime in the round is not the most effective way of supporting students from the lowest incomes into HE, particularly in respect of part-time provision. The overall student support and maintenance package should be refocused on those most in need and support should be given to institutions to extend their offer to include shorter bite-size courses. Disabled Students Allowances must be protected and should take account of the very different needs of distance learning students who study at home rather than on campus.

5. Improve information, advice and guidance on part-time study options

More needs to be done to communicate the various pathways and alternative routes into HE for those over-25s who may have missed conventional routes the first time around. Careers guidance services should work with partners to consider how to deliver an all-age careers advisory and education service. In the area of financial support, Student Finance Wales should open for part-time loan applications at the same time as full-time applications and both should be available for completion online. Part-time loans should also be publicised much more prominently by Student Finance Wales and other relevant bodies.

6. Loans for postgraduate study

The Welsh Government should develop a postgraduate loan system that is open to all ages and modes of study, including distance learning.

7. Encourage digital innovation in higher education and online learning

The Welsh Government and universities in Wales should implement the recommendations of ‘Open & Online’ the report of the Online Digital Learning Working Group. This includes developing a strategy to raise awareness of the potential for online learning to support economic development. The Welsh Government should also support The Open University as a key asset by promoting its online learning platforms and considering it as the key partner for delivery of online development and training.

The Open University in Wales urges Wales’ politicians to remember that part-time matters... for the economy, for individuals, for communities and for Wales.

A more detailed document expanding on these ideas can be found at: www.open.ac.uk/wales/policy

For more information please contact Michelle Matheron, Policy & Public Affairs Manager: Michelle.Matheron@open.ac.uk

The Open University is incorporated by Royal Charter (RC 000391), an exempt charity in England & Wales, and a charity registered in Scotland (SC 038302). The Open University is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.