

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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The Economic Contribution of Higher Education in Wales: Evidence submitted by the Open University in Wales

The Open University in Wales welcomes the Committee's Inquiry on this important theme and is grateful for the opportunity to assist the Committee in its work. The structure of this written submission is as follows:

- 1 A brief overview of the Open University in Wales: funding, provision and learners
- 2 The economic contribution of the Open University in Wales via its curriculum and in teaching, including work with employers and widening access
- 3 The wider economic, social and cultural benefits which derive from the work of the Open University in Wales

1 The Open University in Wales

The Open University 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. It provides a unique blend of expertise and experience in the design and delivery of flexible learning programmes, accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds, supported by the latest technologies, and delivered direct to homes and workplaces in every part of Wales.

The Open University in Wales is one of the 'nations and regions' of the wider Open University, and has a student population of 6,000 (2,500 FTE's approx). All of these students are Welsh-domiciled and all study on a part-time basis. At a wider UK level it is the largest higher education institution in the UK measured by student numbers, with 200,000 students (including a significant number from outside the UK).

The Open University in Wales offers a choice of over 550 courses, from taster sessions to post-graduate opportunities. Many of the Open University's qualifications – from certificates to MBAs – are recognised and accredited by professional bodies the world over. A particular feature of the University's part-time offer is the wide range of courses in the subject areas of science, technology and mathematics.

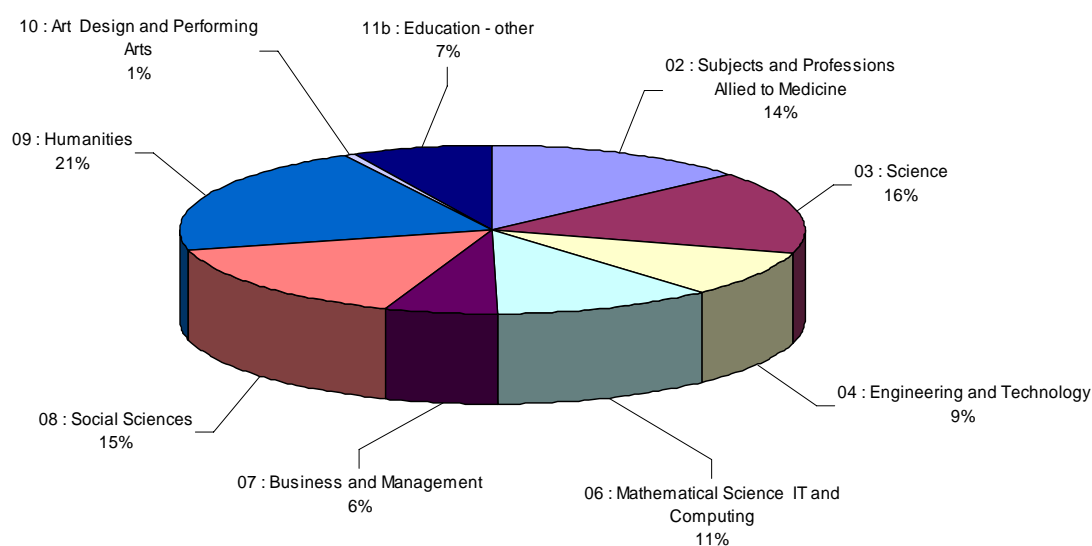
The Open University in Wales has its administrative centre in Cardiff and also has thirteen tutorial centres across Wales. It has 300 part-time teaching staff across the country who deliver courses and support students.

The Open University in Wales transferred to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) funding for teaching and learning as recently as 2005/06 in order that it might align its strategies more closely with those of the Funding Council and the Welsh Assembly Government. Prior to funding from HEFCW, the University had been funded for its teaching and learning via the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)

The current level of public funding via HEFCW to the Open University is c£7.5M with additional funding for Initial Teacher Training, additional support for part-time students and small amounts for specific project work funded via the Funding Council's Strategic Development Fund. However, during the period of transitional funding - until summer 2010 - the Open University is unable to access third mission funding and some other funding streams. The Committee is asked to note also that whilst research activities of the University involve some activity and collaboration within Wales, public funding for research comes to the institution as a whole via HEFCE.

Student profile

- 6,000 students (around 2,500 full-time equivalents) from virtually every community in Wales.
- Three out of four Open University students are in employment while they study.
- The majority are studying for skills-related reasons: job progression, professional updating, career change or re-entering the job market.
- Part-time learning with the Open University supports them to enhance their employability and to build and demonstrate key soft skills.
- The (median) average age of our new undergraduate students is 32
 - 40 % of all our students are aged under 34.
 - 31 % are aged 35 – 44
 - 30 % are aged 45 and over
- 8% of Open University in Wales students have a declared disability
- Over a quarter of our students are on low income or unemployed. They are able to study because they receive a fee waiver to cover their course fees. In many cases, studying provides a return to or a route into economic activity.
- 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
- A breakdown of Open University in Wales student population by academic subject classification is shown below



- 3% of our students are from black or ethnic minority groups
- The Open University is placed top in Wales and top in the UK for overall student satisfaction in the National Student Survey

2 The economic contribution of the Open University in Wales via its curriculum and its teaching

The Leitch review made clear that it is critically important to raise skills levels across the board in order to create a more prosperous and vibrant economy. Skills development for all also has the potential to promote social justice and equality with broader societal and cultural benefits. Leitch pointed out, significantly, that changing demography means that two-thirds of the 2020 workforce is already of working age. It follows that learning opportunities for adults must be a vital component of any skills strategy.

By enabling people to continue to work and earn while they develop their skills, the flexibility of part-time learning can help people of all ages and backgrounds to build new knowledge and capabilities. As acknowledged in the second Rees review, for many students, part-time provision is the only way of accessing HE and Level 5 skills. Within these contexts, the distinctiveness that the Open University brings to HE in Wales is evident. The nature of its provision offers learning opportunities to people who are geographically remote or home-based, or who can't afford to compromise their income or job-security. It also gives both employers and employees a high level of flexibility in the area of work-based learning, as study with the Open University does not require set attendance at a set time as is usually the case with face-to-face delivery of HE. In opening up access to higher education, part-time learning becomes available to Wales' most disadvantaged learners and communities.

The Open University works in partnership with employers to promote and develop higher-level skills. Options range from sponsoring individual staff on courses, to company-wide training and bespoke programmes. In the academic year 2006/7 there were 304 employing organisations in Wales sponsoring some 924 students. This has shown further growth with the current academic year analysis showing a 4.4% increase in Welsh-domiciled students to 965.

Over this two-year period the Welsh sponsoring organisations have been dominated by the private sector. The roles of sponsoring organisations can be broken down into the following broad categories:

Health	6%
Education	15%
Other public Sector	29%
Private Sector	50%

The curriculum offer from the Open University includes modules on *'Investigating Entrepreneurial Opportunities'*, *'Developing Entrepreneurial Business Ideas'*, and *'You and your money'*, as well as a wide range of courses in business studies and management. The university's Centre for Professional Learning and Development develops short on-line vocational skills courses, and the university's Corporate Employer Services arm works with large employers to deliver bespoke education and training for the workforce. Examples of large-scale employers for whom we have worked in delivering (or developing) work-based learning are Airbus, Asquith Nurseries and Water UK.

** *VentureNavigator* is a web-based resource for those wishing to start their own business. It was launched in November 2007, and has been developed by the Open University in partnership with five English HEIs, the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship

and other organisations. Users enter the website and answer questions using an assessment tool, which then produces a report constituting a benchmarked analysis of the individual business's situation and points the user towards resources, both web-based or physical that can offer solutions. It is aimed at aspiring entrepreneurs and those seeking to improve an existing business. More broadly, it seeks to contribute to the development of a culture of entrepreneurship.**

The Open University works with Swansea University in providing UK's first specifically designed programme for leaders of knowledge-based SMEs. The Masters in Business and Law course was developed through Knowledge Exploitation Fund (KEF) supported collaboration and welcomed its first 34 students in 2007. The course addresses the need to support entrepreneurs' early acquisition of legal and business knowledge and expertise.

Another innovative programme which the Open University co-ordinates across Wales with other providers is *Teach Again*. This programme is designed for qualified primary and secondary teachers who may have been out of the profession for some time and who wish to begin - or return to - teaching at secondary school level. The course is designed to update skills and subject knowledge, build confidence and offers tutor support and experience at a local secondary school, putting valuable experience back into Wales' classrooms.

The Open University works closely with trades unions and other bodies to promote and develop learning and skills. Partnership agreements to improve individuals' access to educational and career development opportunities and to map career pathways have been developed with the Wales TUC, the Youth Justice Board for Wales and the Royal College of Nursing. The University collaborates on a number of Wales Union Learning Fund initiatives in the healthcare sector, and partnership work with UNISON to support healthcare workers across Wales includes 100 enrolments a year on the '*Understanding Health and Social Care*' module. Via membership of a trades union, nearly 20 per cent of adults in Wales can benefit from the discounts, opportunities and specialist advice and guidance arising from the partnership between Wales TUC and the Open University in Wales.

The Open University in Wales has recently received additional investment from HEFCW arising from the recommendations of the Graham Review. A significant proportion of this investment is being allocated to work with employers, and in particular will focus on working with Sector Skills Councils. This work is at a very early stage of development.

The Open University is a partner in the successful Metrix consortium that will develop and run the Defence Training Academy at St Athan. The university is working collaboratively to turn the Ministry of Defence's vision into the reality of a military training centre of excellence which engages with HE and FE providers in Wales, and at the same time boosts employment and skills within the Vale of Glamorgan and beyond.

Work with employers, employer bodies and trades unions in the area of work-based learning also contributes to the area of widening access to higher education. In addition to the work described above, the Open University in Wales undertakes targeted work with groups and communities where patterns of participation in HE are low. Equality and diversity has been at the heart of what the Open University does from its inception. The university's expertise in delivering flexible learning enables it to make HE learning accessible to individuals in groups outside a typical teaching environment.

In particular, the combination of flexibility and highly-developed support structures makes Open University study an ideal option for both the 8% of our students who have a declared disability (around 480 individuals) and for Wales' many carers. There are 350,000 carers in Wales and for the majority access to conventional skills development and HE study is difficult, and in some cases impossible. The dedication and determination that many demonstrate mean that they can potentially make a valuable contribution on return to the work force. There are many success stories that show how Open University study has helped carers return to work, helped them to develop their career, or enabled them to contribute to their communities or to volunteering activity.

OU study can also support prisoners to update their skills and demonstrate their skills to potential employers on release. Approximately 30 people each year in Welsh prisons (mainly Usk) study with the Open University in Wales. The majority undertake science, technology, maths or business studies courses.

Over the past eight years, nearly 2,500 individuals in Wales have taken part in our *Openings* programmes which bridge the divide between FE and HE and address barriers to educational and economic activity. These courses are designed to engage learners for whom undergraduate study may not yet be an option but for whom learning at the 'return to learning' stage or in relation to vocational skills development is important. The time and money invested by students for these courses is designed to be low, but they significantly raise individuals' confidence and levels of attainment. The courses are delivered either through normal Open University distance learning routes or in some instances through face-to-face classes delivered through collaboration with the Workers Education Association. A new development in the *Openings* portfolio is an online introductory course in 'Exploring Sport' which is intended to provide an attractive course for (amongst others) younger adult males.

3 The wider economic, social and cultural benefits which derive from the work of the Open University in Wales

The Open University brings to the Welsh HE sector benefits which derive from its role as a UK-wide institution and global provider. Chief among these, perhaps, are the cutting edge developments in the area of educational technology and web-based teaching and learning.

The Open University has been a market leader in e-learning and the pedagogic use of technology for many years and current Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) developments are at the heart of our e-learning provision. £5million has been invested in this in less than 3 years and already Welsh students and businesses are reaping the benefits of remote access to world class educational activities and materials.

The VLE facilitates collaborative learning using social software such as blogs, wikis and forums. Students, tutors and course teams are able to contribute as and when it is convenient. For students and tutors this means they can fit their study/OU work in with family, caring and/or work responsibilities.

The VLE includes a specialised library search that, unlike Google, searches for and returns quality assured information. This is an invaluable resource particularly for students in Wales who do not have ready access to an academic library.

OpenLearn is the University's Open Content initiative, making educational resources freely available on the Internet, with state of the art learning support and collaboration tools to

connect learners and educators. In its first year, over 3,700 hours of content were added and the volume of material available online continues to grow. *OpenLearn* is also designed to attract new learners, who may choose to go on to more formal accredited study.

It was stated at the outset of this paper that the Open University in Wales is funded by HEFCW for its delivery of teaching and learning, and not for research activity. Nonetheless, the UK-wide research activity of the university includes research and collaborations within Wales, or of strong relevance to Wales, to which brief reference is made below.

A notable recent success is the completion of the Mars-Beagle project and the Cassini Huygens mission (the collaboration here is with Aberystwyth University, amongst others). The translation of the technical sensing capability of these exploratory projects into devices which have functionality give benefits to health and well-being – a recent example would be the further development of the Beagle sensor as a new tool for detecting TB with substantive strategic funding from the Wellcome Trust. These same devices have application as remote sensors for environmental monitoring (e.g. water quality) and aspects of mainland security (e.g. drug testing).

The Open University is currently developing a major new facility, the Pervasive Healthcare Laboratory. By building on its world class research in Design, Computing and Education Technology, the University is particularly well placed to play a key role in the development of Pervasive Healthcare and support the health agendas across the UK in the areas of independence, well-being and choice, and addressing 'high-tech' sustainable learning and other life-improving solutions in a variety of settings. The distinctive expertise of the Open University lies in the application and implementation of new technologies for people-centred care, informed by excellence in design and innovation. Hence, the focus of the Laboratory will not be on the medical treatment of patients but on how mobile, wireless and other new technologies can be used to improve people's well-being (e.g. lifestyle management) through empowerment and engagement. The Open University will develop these projects through its links with Computing at Swansea University. The broader contribution of this signature new development to Welsh ICT skills progression, the enhancement of provision to rural communities and technology enhanced economic competitiveness should also be noted.

The OU's Centre for Higher Education Research and Innovation (CHERI) has recently completed, or is currently working on, research and development projects which can inform directly the work of the Enterprise and Learning Committee of the National Assembly. These include:

- *Regional Perspectives on the role of HEIs in Social Transformation* (ESRC funded)
- *The Role of Employer Engagement in Course Development* (DES funded)
- *Higher Education in Europe Beyond 2010: Resolving Conflicting Social and Economic Expectations* (funded by the European Science Foundation, in partnership with HEIs in Netherlands, France, Germany & Finland)
- *The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society* (funded by the EU Framework 6 programme, in partnership with HEIs in fourteen other countries)

The Open University is mindful of the penultimate section of the terms of reference of the Committee's Inquiry, namely to consider 'the wider contributions of universities to their localities, including community work, cultural contributions and student and graduate

mobility and markets'. It will be clear from the preceding paragraphs that the Open University does not have a local or regional physical 'footprint' in the way other HEIs have in Wales. It is an 'all-Wales' institution whose footprint exists via broadcast media and the internet, and through its community of students, alumni and staff, dispersed right across the country. Over and above this, the cultural contribution of the Open University is a significant one however, achieved most notably through its *OpenLearn* initiative (described above) and via its co-productions with the BBC.

OU and the BBC have a strategic partnership through which the Open University co-produces and co-funds 20-25 TV and radio projects every year. The major series *Life in Cold Blood* by Sir David Attenborough and *Coast* are perhaps the best known recent productions, but *The Money Programme* is also an Open University co-production, and the university has recently agreed to work with BBC Radio 4 on its *Thinking Aloud* programme. A new co-production with BBC4 (TV) is a history of European religious music, *Sacred Music*. Programmes such as *Coast* and *Life in Cold Blood* are accompanied by outreach activities to engage and inform individuals, and the *Nature in Britain* series had specific opt-out segments produced by BBC Wales.

The global reach of the Open University as an educational provider is enhanced by many of these productions. In addition, the Open University in Wales is embarking on the development of curriculum materials which focus on Wales, but which, will be on offer world-wide. This includes a course on 'Beginners Welsh' to be launched in Autumn 2008 and a new course on 'Heritage Studies' with significant Welsh components and case studies. The Open University in Wales is also developing a new course on Welsh History for 2009 ('Small Country, Big History'), which will include the development of a bespoke web-based resource on Welsh history, and accompanying free days schools that will be open to the public as well as students registered on the course.

The Open University in Wales has a successful track record of contributing to the economic, social and cultural development of the nation, and widening access to HE. The opportunity to enhance its contribution is provided by the move to funding via HEFCW. The additional investment following the Graham Review (to include new work in employer engagement and with SSCs, in widening access, and a greater focus on collaborative activity) will further enhance the status and range of activities of the university, which, along with the rest of the sector, is a vital asset of, and resource for, the people of Wales.