

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 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. Through its flexible distance learning model, the University has a long pedigree in providing support for students across the four nations of the UK with work-based learning which includes higher education study. Three quarters of our students (76%) work full or part-time whilst studying with us and 88% of FTSE 100 companies have sponsored their staff on OU courses.
5. The OU has a strong history of delivering undergraduate and postgraduate level education and of the development of programmes in collaboration with employers. The OU began its Foundation Degree programme in 2009 and since then has been working with large employers to deliver Foundation Degrees as an integral element of Higher Apprenticeships. The University's employer partners include Telefonica, Unilever and Visa Europe.
6. The OU continues to invest in its apprenticeship programme. In 2016 the University launched three degree apprenticeships, covering Healthcare, Management and Technology, to be followed by five new degree apprenticeships as part of an ongoing commitment to work in partnership with employers to deliver high quality work-based higher education.

Responses to inquiry questions

The role of key players: the Regional Skills Partnerships; the Wales Employment and Skills Board (WESB); and Sector Skills Councils.

7. We support regional approaches as they have greater insight into local need and we support that they are employer led. However, we are also keen that the apprenticeship education providers are represented, and that this includes provider HEIs.

The accessibility of independent careers advice on Apprenticeships and other vocational options.

8. The availability of high quality careers advice is vital in ensuring people consider apprenticeship options, but the non-availability of university accredited 'Degree Apprenticeships' in Wales is resulting in a failure to address vocational vs academic parity for young people and their parents and older learners who may wish to access them. We would hope this is addressed as a priority.

How can better parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes be achieved?

9. To make sure that apprenticeships provision is not imbalanced and industry needs are fully addressed, there are alternative ways to motivate provision of a greater number, and proportion, of higher level apprenticeships in Wales, including for example:
 - a. Degree Apprenticeships: the active use of the term 'Degree Apprenticeship' will help bridge the divide between vocational and academic pathways, with younger learners and their parents in particular being made aware that the qualifications are of high standing as they are underpinned by universities. This is opposed to using simply 'High Level Apprenticeship' to describe these options.
 - b. Earlier and better information, advice and guidance in schools – starting in Year 6, with a comprehensive programme of information, advice and guidance that is linked to good work placements and involves maximum engagement with employers. Careers advice for 16-19 year-olds, including those who would previously have only considered FE or HE, needs particular attention so that vocational education and training and apprenticeships are flagged appropriately.
 - c. In-school learning – enabling students at school to engage with apprenticeships through taster learning, along the lines of the OU in Wales [Seren Programme](#).
 - d. Targets – within the 100,000 apprenticeship target, specific higher level and degree apprenticeship quotas/targets are needed. These should be assessed independently of both government and employers on an annual basis.
 - e. Flexible lifelong learning as the norm: it is important that opportunities to move between different pathways – apprenticeships, academic study, and professional training and development – should be maximised throughout a working life and considered the norm.

The main barriers to taking up Apprenticeships.

10. There continue to be widespread concerns about the quality of careers advice to young people. Starting in Year 6, there should be a comprehensive programme of information, advice and guidance for students, linked to good work placements and involving maximum engagement with employers.
11. In particular, the full range of options must be communicated to 16-19 year olds, including vocational education and training and apprenticeships. Linked to this, new

apprenticeships need to attract 16-19 year olds who would previously have considered only FE or HE options.

12. Improving careers advice for this age group is expected to be very important in the early years of implementation of the government's new apprenticeships policy when major challenges will be low awareness of the apprenticeship option for 16-19 year olds and misconceptions about its attractiveness.
13. Delivery of some initial learning while at school would also attract learners into the apprenticeship route and help strengthen learner journeys. As mentioned under question 4, this could be along similar lines to the OU Seren Programme in Welsh schools that helps bridge the gap between school and full-time university by offering a chance to study a range of university level modules in school alongside other studies.
14. As well as new entrants, to address industry's skills gap there needs to be sufficient attention given to the existing workforce. A recent study¹ indicated that 90% of the current UK workforce has the potential to remain active in the labour market 10 years from now, meaning that skills gained from initial education alone are not sufficient; continuous skills development is essential if workforce knowledge and skills are to keep pace with changing industry needs.
15. A more holistic lifelong learning approach is required. Apprenticeships have an important role to play in continuous development and retraining of all employees to meet the evolving skills and knowledge needs of employers. Lifelong learning is particularly important in addressing employers' growing demand for higher level skills. Alongside this, the shortcomings already mentioned in respect of careers advice and guidance for young people are equally prevalent for the adult population. There is an absence of all-age learning and career information, advice and guidance in Wales that must be addressed in order to enable skills deficits and apprenticeship targets to be met.

How can people from the lowest income families be supported to take-up Apprenticeships?

16. The availability of hardship funding or bursaries for those from disadvantaged backgrounds could address immediate barriers around purchasing equipment, clothing and travel. Programmes similar to the new [GO Wales programme](#) could provide intensive support to learners and their families to engage with apprenticeships. A similar approach could support learners with disabilities and those with other under-represented characteristics.

What good practice exists and what more can be done to address gender stereotyping?

17. As outlined earlier in our response around careers advice, early positive gender interventions in Year 6 (or earlier) to address gender stereotypes are very important. Work by [Chwarae Teg](#) in Wales has looked at early interventions around gender stereotyping as have organisation like e-Skills with 'Computer Clubs for Girls' in the primary school phase.

The development of higher level Apprenticeships, with the support of further and higher education institutions.

¹ UKCES Employer Skills Survey 2015

18. The government should bring forward new ways to motivate provision and increase uptake of higher level apprenticeships and introduce Degree Apprenticeships, including for example, enhanced careers advice in schools, employer incentives, and specific quotas or targets for higher level apprenticeships that are independently reviewed on an annual basis. Again, information, advice and guidance for school-leavers and adults will be crucial here.
19. Whilst the provision of apprenticeships is expected to provide opportunities for progression from lower to higher levels, particular support is needed for those wanting to move on to higher/degree level apprenticeships. There is a significant shift in expectations in the transition from task-oriented and vocational skills development, at the lower levels of apprenticeships, to more intensive academic learning at the higher levels, where learning is more reflective and self-directed. Supporting current lower level apprentices to gain these learning skills is important.
20. The OU has a unique perspective on the value of such support – as part of our mission to be ‘open to people’, most of our undergraduate courses have no formal entry requirements. Our extensive experience of students with no or low qualifications on entry has shown us that students who are given support in preparing for academic study exhibit lower withdrawal/drop-out rates than those not given this support. Two important mechanisms for delivering support are Access modules and Open Educational Resources.
21. The OU’s [Access modules](#) are designed so that learners with little or no knowledge or experience of studying, can develop study skills and build confidence. Students who study them and who then progress to further study on introductory (undergraduate) modules perform strongly, with an average 74% pass rate in 2013/14. By contrast, in 2013/14 students with the same educational profile as Access module entrants, but who studied introductory modules directly, had an overall pass rates of 52%².
22. The provision of ‘bridging’ courses does not need to be limited to traditional academic study. By means of an Open Pathways to Apprenticeships model, much like the OU’s [Open Pathways to HE model](#), the Welsh Government could make available additional funding for employers to support apprentices who have the ability and potential to progress onto higher/degree level apprenticeships. This support would be used to help the apprentices prepare for higher level study and equip them with the skills required to succeed.
23. There is also a place for informal study through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The MOOC platform [FutureLearn](#) offers free non-credit bearing courses in a wide range of engaging subjects that are accessible to learners with no prior experience of HE. Such courses could be used to prepare apprentices for higher level study, either through informal study or supported learning.
24. It is important to provide flexible pathways for continuous training, development and progression of employees throughout their careers. Lifelong learning in the UK fell by 21% between 2007 and 2014 but across the EU as a whole increased by 15% over the same period³. A strong emphasis on ‘lifelong learning’ would provide benefits to individual employees and, for employers, facilitate the continuous upskilling and development of their workforce. These pathways should allow an

² Internal analysis of OU student data

³ Eurostat Database, extracted 19 January 2016

employee, with support from their employer, to transition between apprenticeships, professional training and development and academic study as they progress through their career.

25. A mechanism along the lines of the OU's credit-based model could facilitate such multi-exit/entry pathways and credit transfer.

How effective is progression between other work-based learning and Apprenticeships and between Levels 2, 3, 4 and above Apprenticeships?

26. As well as tackling provision and uptake, improved methods for progress from lower to higher level apprenticeships are needed as is a greater focus on the existing workforce. Government should ensure additional funding to support apprentices who have the ability to progress on to higher/degree level apprenticeships. OU experience shows that students who are given support in preparing for higher level learning are less likely to drop out.

How can employer engagement with Apprenticeships be improved?

27. Communication is key as employers need to better understand the options available to them. Supported distance learning offers significant benefits to both employers and learners: It can offer enhanced value for money compared with more traditional, off-site, face-to-face modes of study; it is cheaper to develop and deliver than traditional face-to-face learning; it eliminates the time apprentices would be away from their place of work; and it gives them flexibility to study alongside their work.
28. In addition, supported distance learning offers specific benefits to larger employers who need consistently high quality learning for a workforce that is geographically dispersed across the UK, an example here is the OU's provision for [Babcock International](#). Removing the need for day release away from the workplace also benefits SMEs.
29. Anecdotally a small number of apprenticeships and providers have failed to reach the high standards expected by employers and learners. This must be addressed to maintain the strength of the apprenticeship brand and attractiveness to employers.