The Open University
Y Brifysgol Agored
Wales Cymru

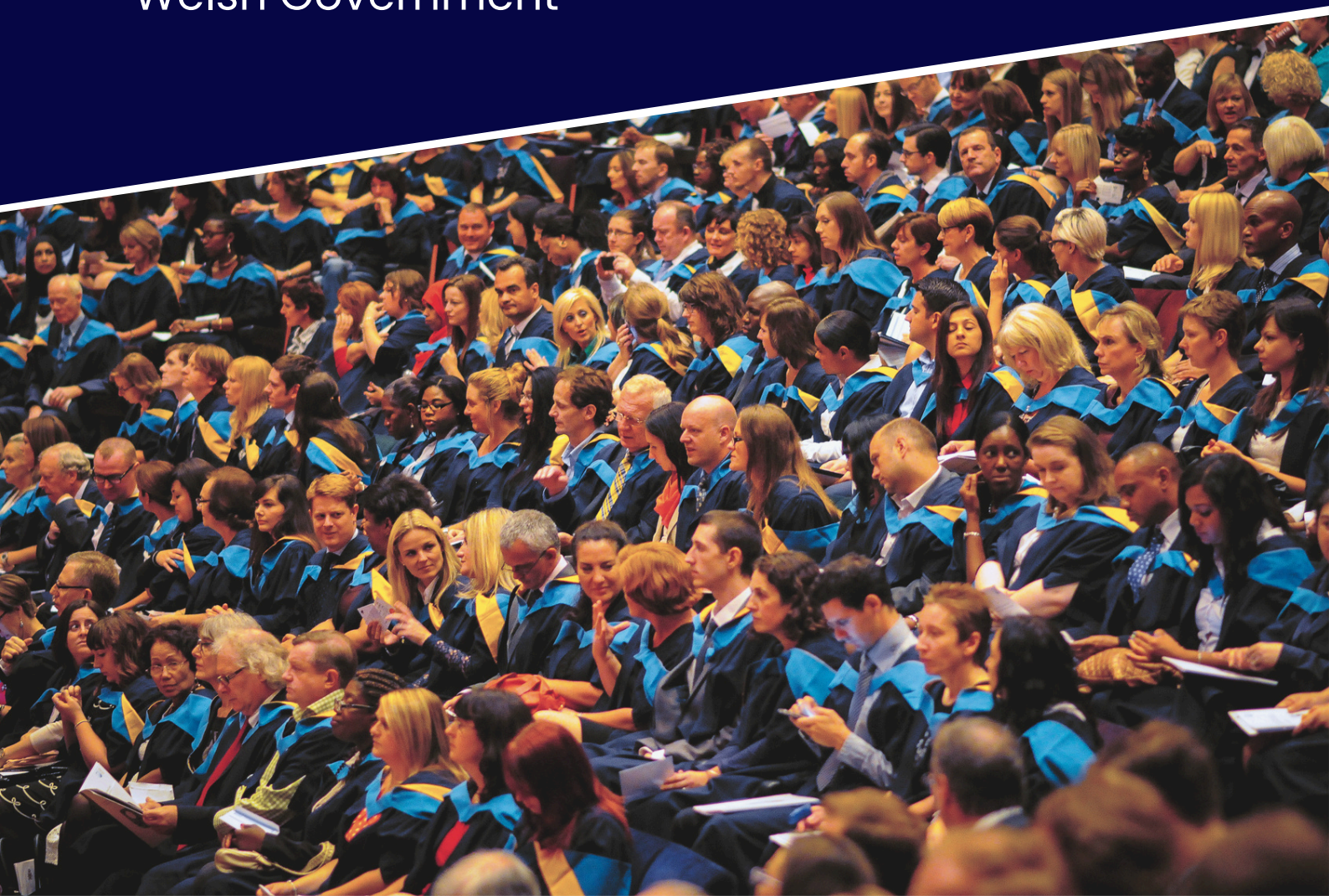
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Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg

Unlocking Wales' potential

A prosperous economy, thriving communities, and secure futures

Our priorities for the next Welsh Government



The Open University in Wales

We now have **over 16,000 students** all across Wales. We have students in **every single Senedd constituency.**

Almost half (48%) of our students live in Wales' most **underprivileged areas** - and we've seen a 168% growth in these students since 2017/18.





Almost **two-thirds** (64%) of our students **work** either full- or part-time alongside their studies - on top of all their other commitments.

15% of our students have told us they're **carers**. **29%** have told us they have a **disability**. **16%** have told us they have a **mental health condition**.





Because of our open access model, **42%** of our students join us **without having traditional entry qualifications.**

More than **two thirds** (68%) of our students are **women.** The **average age** of our students is **30 -** younger than many expect.



Our priorities

Maintain equitable maintenance support for part-time students
Keep maintenance support fair and sustainable so part-time higher education remains accessible to all, regardless of background or circumstance.

Improve funding for part-time higher education
Place part-time provision on an equal footing with full-time to expand access, grow provision, and boost Wales' economy.

Take a strategic approach to grant funding
Provide sustainable, multi-year block grant funding through Medr to enable long-term planning and collaboration across the sector.

Deliver an uplift to the part-time fee loan cap
Raise the fee loan cap in line with inflation to secure provision without adding extra financial pressure on students.

Maximise opportunities through national skills programmes
Embed flexible higher education into Wales' skills programmes to widen participation and strengthen the national skills base.

Expand access to higher-level and innovative skills provision
Fund degree apprenticeships, short courses, and modular study to meet future economic needs with flexible, responsive provision.

Increase access to flexible routes into public service careers
Invest in flexible pathways into teaching, nursing, social work and care to tackle workforce shortages and widen entry routes.

Recognise the social and economic value of lifelong learning
Support continuous learning at every stage of life to build confidence, improve wellbeing, and strengthen communities and the economy.

Foreword

Wales faces a critical moment for higher education. Funding for part-time and flexible study – the backbone of opportunity for thousands of learners – has failed to keep pace with inflation for more than a decade.

As a result, despite growing demand, provision across the sector has fallen. Many universities have reduced or withdrawn part-time courses altogether, leaving people with fewer choices and fewer ways to develop the skills they, their communities, and the economy need.

At the same time, the world of work is changing faster than ever. New jobs, new technologies, and evolving industries demand new skills and new ways of learning. Yet our current system remains focused on traditional, full-time study.

The consequences are real: communities that are already disadvantaged risk being left further behind, and Wales risks losing out on the economic and social benefits that a skilled, adaptable population can bring.

The Open University in Wales has grown against this backdrop, from around 7,000 students a decade ago to over 16,000 today. Many joined us from Wales' most disadvantage communities and without prior qualifications.

This shows the appetite for flexible learning and its transformative potential. But growth alone is not enough; without sustainable funding and strategic support, this kind of provision will be at increasing risk.

This manifesto sets out a clear set of priorities for the next Welsh Government. We are asking for equitable maintenance support for part-time students, improved and sustainable funding, and a commitment to embedding flexible higher education in our national skills programmes.

These actions are not just policy choices — they are an investment in the people, communities, and economy of Wales. By acting decisively, the next Welsh Government can safeguard opportunity, harness talent, and ensure that higher education works for everyone in Wales.



Ben Lewis
Director, The Open University in Wales

Sustainable funding for flexible higher education

In 2014/15, annual funding for part-time higher education stood at £30.4 million. Had this have increased in line with inflation, it would have reached £40.8 million by 2024/25.

But in fact, it was more than £6 million (or 17%) short, at £34.6 million. Funding per student has also fallen in real terms during the same period.

Meanwhile, The Open University in Wales has responded to the Welsh Government's priority of expanding access to flexible study, growing its student numbers from around 7,000 in 2014/15 to around 16,000 today.

Many of these students come from some of Wales' most underprivileged communities and joined us without prior qualifications.

During the same period, the number of part-time students at all institutions across Wales has reduced by 620.

In 2016, the Diamond Review recommended annual funding of £61 million for part-time provision – that should be £82.5 million in 2025. Funding remains stubbornly and significantly short of this level.

The higher education funding system makes part-time provision unaffordable to deliver. That is why many other providers have either completely withdrawn or significantly reduced their part-time offer. It just doesn't make financial sense.

Even for The Open University, where part-time provision is our bread and butter, this situation is not sustainable.

If we continue on this track, part-time provision across Wales will continue to shrink, and fewer people will be able to access the transformative opportunity of a flexible higher education.

We are helping people in every community across Wales to gain new skills and knowledge, transform their lives, and strengthen their communities through the power of flexible learning

The next Welsh Government should:

Maintain equitable maintenance support for part-time students
The introduction of maintenance support for part-time students following the Diamond Review was transformational. It helped pave the way for thousands more students to consider entering higher education who otherwise would not have been able to do so.

Equitable maintenance support for students on part-time and flexible programmes must be maintained in real terms. This will ensure that part-time higher education remains open to as many people as possible, regardless of background or circumstances.

Improve funding for part-time higher education
The next Welsh Government should approach part-time and flexible provision as a key contributor to cohesive communities and economic growth. It should therefore deliver a strategy which enables more people to learn throughout their lives. Part-time provision should be placed on an equitable footing with full-time, helping to grow provision across the country and enabling more people to improve their employment prospects and change their lives.

Take a strategic approach to grant funding
Funding should be sustainable and consistent. The Welsh Government should enable Medr to deliver its statutory duties of promoting lifelong learning and equal opportunity and encouraging participation in tertiary education by providing a sufficient block grant. Grant funding provided by Medr to providers should then be set out over multiple years to enable them to forward-plan and to work collaboratively on a long-term, strategic approach to delivery.

Deliver an uplift to the part-time fee loan cap
Part-time and flexible learning should be funded in a way that accounts for inflation and enables providers and the Welsh Government to plan on a long-term basis, and gain the maximum benefit for individuals and the nation from this type of learning.

Some progress has been made, but fee income from part-time provision is significantly short of full-time levels and continues to fall in real terms. We want to avoid charging fees that are above what students can borrow because we recognise the impact this would have on our students and on access to our high-quality provision more broadly.

The part-time fee loan cap should be uplifted significantly to allow for future increases that ensure we receive enough funding to deliver our learning and teaching without placing an additional burden on students.

Chloe’s story

When Chloe from Cwmbran signed up to study with The Open University in Wales, she had no idea just how much it would change her life. She managed to study through pregnancy, illness, and the pandemic - and came out the other side with a degree, a new career, and a sense of pride in what she’d achieved.

“I’d tried traditional university in the past,” Chloe says, “but it didn’t suit my lifestyle. I was trying to study full time, work two jobs to support living on my own and having excruciating migraines daily. It became overwhelming so I dropped out after second year.”

After leaving university, Chloe found herself in a job where she got a taste of marketing, and loved it. But to move forward, she needed a degree. That’s when she discovered The Open University, which offers flexible, distance learning designed to fit around people’s lives.

“I applied in March 2019, and found out I was pregnant the next month,” she says. What followed was a challenging few years: pregnancy complications, lockdowns, and raising an autistic child. But Chloe persevered.

The OU’s flexible approach made all the difference. She could study from home, at her own pace, and still be there for her son. “It worked around my life,” she says. “The tutors were brilliant and always available when I needed help.”

Financial support from Student Finance Wales also helped. Chloe received a part-time tuition fee loan and maintenance funding, which meant she could afford childcare and a laptop; two things that made studying possible.

During her final year, Chloe landed an internship through the OU, which led to a full-time marketing job. Within that company, she’s had two promotions, travelled to Europe for work, and started her own photography business on the side.

After Chloe graduated with her son on the stage by her side, she returned to the first job that introduced her to the world of marketing. “It’s felt like a full circle moment discovering a career aspiration, moving away to develop professionally, and returning to put my new skills into practice,” she says.

“Studying with the OU helped me to understand what I really wanted for myself and my career,” she says. “And I got to spend time with my son, watching him grow up while studying. I couldn’t have done that at a traditional university.”

Chloe’s story shows how flexible learning can open doors, not just for individuals, but for families and communities too.

“I studied during one of the hardest times of my life,” she says. “But I came out stronger, with a degree, a job I enjoy, and a future I’m excited about.”



Chloe Jackson-Nott, BA (Hons) Business Management (Marketing)

Use flexible higher education as an economic tool

In Wales and across the world, the economy is changing at lightning speed. The jobs that are available, the way we work, and the skills we need are changing too, but our skills infrastructure isn't keeping up.

This risks leaving thousands of people across Wales without the ability to get the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in the new economy.

Significant effort has been put into lower-level skills provision, although even this work needs to accelerate. At the other end of the spectrum, the reformed student finance system supports people to enter traditional higher education provision. But what is available in the middle?

In the same way the economy is changing, the way people want to learn is changing too. The traditional degree course will always be popular, but there is a growing proportion of people who want something different.

More and more people want to learn in chunks, to go and apply their knowledge and come back to learning later, and to combine study with practice.

But currently, there remains only very limited support available for those who are seeking to update their knowledge, gain new skills, and learn in a different way.

Our system pushes people into traditional provision that no longer meets all our economic needs and again, risks further entrenching the poverty that blights so many communities.

Through our flexible and innovative provision, we are helping to strengthen local, regional, and national economies, helping people to gain high level skills and fulfilling new careers

The next Welsh Government should:

Maximise opportunities to access flexible study through national skills programmes and initiatives
Flexible higher education should be included in programmes such as Personal Learning Accounts, Flexible Skills Programme, and the Wales Union Learning Fund. These kinds of programmes are currently limited to lower levels and/or to provision delivered in colleges. We believe this misses a big opportunity to increase Wales' skill base and improve people's economic prospects.

These programmes, and any others that are introduced, should include flexible higher study by default, and should encourage collaboration – not competition – between providers across the tertiary education sector.

Expand access to higher-level and innovative skills provision
Wales' degree apprenticeship offer remains limited and the administration of the programme continues to cause challenges for providers. To meet the needs of the future economy, providers should be better supported to deliver degree apprenticeships in a wider range of areas and with sustainable funding.

There is also a breadth of learning and skills opportunities that could be explored if only there were sufficient funding available. These include individual or standalone modules and other kinds of short courses that could provide quick skills boosts to meet economic and industrial need. Funding should be made available to providers and learners to enable the expansion of these kinds of provision.

Increase access to flexible routes into public service careers
Wales faces significant challenges with recruitment and retention in some of our key public services, like teaching, nursing, social work, and social care.

Our experience of delivering these kinds of programmes suggests that flexibility is crucial. When sufficient funding is combined with agile and flexible policy, more people from a wider range of backgrounds are able to consider a career in these sectors, without having to leave their own communities.

Currently, traditional routes are still the priority. We would like to see a commitment to expanding flexible routes into these careers.

Recognise the social and economic value of lifelong learning
When people learn, their confidence grows, their well-being improves, and they gain skills and knowledge which the economy needs. More broadly, communities become more cohesive, prosperous, and healthy. The next Welsh Government should work with the lifelong learning sector to provide a breadth of opportunities, with sufficient funding for providers and for learners, which encourages and enables continuous learning throughout life.

Mark’s story

For Mark from Penarth, studying with The Open University in Wales gave him a second chance, and it’s completely changed the direction of his life. From working as a care assistant to becoming a qualified nurse, and now studying for a master’s degree, Mark’s journey shows just how powerful flexible learning can be.

“I didn’t do well in school,” Mark says. “I didn’t get the grades for traditional university. But the OU helped me realise that your past doesn’t define your future.”

Mark first heard about the OU while working in a residential home. A conversation with an ambulance driver sparked his interest, and he soon applied for a support worker role with Cardiff and Vale University Health Board. From there, he continued to speak to his Practice Development Nurse about study opportunities and eventually secured a place on the OU’s adult nursing degree.

He studied while working, thanks to a flexible route supported by the health board and Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW).

“The course took four years, but it felt like four seconds,” Mark says. “I loved every minute of it.”

The OU’s flexible approach meant Mark could learn at his own pace, in his own environment, while still earning a salary.

“You don’t have to give up work to study,” he explains. “You’re supported financially, and in return, you give two years of service as a nurse in Wales. It’s a win-win for you and for the NHS.”

Since graduating, Mark has secured a Band 6 role as a specialist nurse, gaining valuable project management experience in clinical trials. He’s now building on that by studying for a master’s degree with the OU to prepare for the next stage of his career.

He’s also taken on a leadership role as vice-chair of the Royal College of Nursing in Wales, representing nursing professionals across the country.

“The OU helped me find out who I really am,” he says. “I’ve discovered I love learning, and now I’m building a future I’m proud of.”

Mark’s story shows how alternative routes into professions like nursing can open doors for individuals and help strengthen the workforce in Wales.

“If someone’s thinking about studying with the OU, I’d say go for it,” he says. “It gave me a second chance—and it could do the same for so many others.”



Mark Crothers, BSc (Hons) Nursing

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