

Open University Students Association (Wales)

Response to the Finance Committee's call for information:

Welsh Government draft Budget proposals for 2016-17



About the Open University Students Association

1. The Open University Students Association is a registered charity wholly funded by the Open University. It is a students' union within the meaning of the Education Act 1994 and is devoted to the educational interests and welfare of its Members.
2. Within Wales there are currently more than 7,000 students studying with the Open University. Each individual student is automatically a member of the association which is run by students for students. The Open University Students Association differs from the unions of other Universities in that there are no paid sabbatical officers. Elected representatives will be studying and many also work as well as undertaking various duties as part of their representative role.
3. The Open University is the largest provider of part-time higher education within Wales. Approximately 17 per cent of the undergraduate Open University student body in Wales is disabled. Many students studying with the Open University in Wales are doing so because other forms of higher education study are not a viable option for them.
4. The Open University Students Association represents the views of Open University students and should be regarded as a significant voice for part-time students and distance learning students more generally. The student voice is represented throughout the Open University to the highest level, this offers students a considerable amount of added value to their studies and experience that benefits their future employability thus impacting upon the economy in the longer term.

The Welsh Government draft budget proposals for 2016-17

5. Our comments on the committee's call for information paper are restricted to question 2: *"Looking at the draft budget allocations for 2016-17, do you have any concerns from a strategic, overarching perspective, or about any specific areas?"*
6. The proposed cut to the *Higher Education* budget line within the Welsh Government's draft budget and the possible impact of a £41 million cut is of great concern to the Open University Students Association. A decrease of 32 per cent when compared to the 2015-16 allocation to this budget line, which represents the money allocated to the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), is likely to significantly impact part-time education funding in Wales.
7. We are very concerned that the impact upon part-time students will be disproportionate as a result of this draft budget. The Welsh Government's full-time tuition fee grant, paid to all

full-time undergraduate students domiciled in Wales and non-means tested, has been protected and the cut in the HE budget line may therefore fall disproportionately on part-time students.

8. Any funds taken from the part-time sector will result in a negative impact upon students who may already have fewer life advantages and almost certainly fewer options to study than their contemporaries in full-time higher education. The system is becoming further skewed to supporting full-time higher education and increasingly part-time students are becoming a marginalised group despite the transformative impact that learning and achievement of qualifications can have on the individual. Students' reasons for studying part-time are complex and embedded in their unique personal circumstances that often include overcoming ill health and caring responsibilities among other barriers. The combination of circumstances faced by this group of students makes part-time study the best mode of study for them. Recent research published by the Higher Education Academy highlights the sometimes unheard voice of part-time students and their reasons for studying in the way that they do¹.
9. The Welsh Audit Office's 2013 report into higher education finances has already drawn attention to a reduction in the funding allocated via HEFCW for part-time HE² in order for the funding body to keep within its allocated budget. This represents a transfer of funds from part-time to full-time provision that has already happened as a result of past funding changes. The Open University Students Association remains concerned that further cuts will impact part-time undergraduate provision to such an extent that the only option for the Open University in Wales (and other providers) will be to increase the fees paid by students.
10. The Open University Students Association is also concerned that any fee increase will result in a reduction in the number of students who are able to study part-time. This could include students who have left school without qualifications, disabled students, students studying to change careers while still at work or studying to support a return to employment. For many of these students' study with the Open University is the only realistic option for them and we would not want to see this opportunity cut off.
11. It remains unclear how, with an expected 32 per cent budget cut, HEFCW would not have to reduce the funding it allocates to its institutional learning and teaching grant funding for part-time undergraduate provision. The Open University in Wales will no longer be able to offer the accessible and affordable modes of study in its current format without this support. Students will have to bear the impact through increased fees and the reduction of provision and it is very likely that some adults who would have pursued part-time study will no longer have the opportunity to do so because of the additional pressure.
12. Higher fees for this group of students is particularly detrimental as they are less likely to consider taking on ever growing debts, as well as the rising hidden costs of study and we would be seriously concerned that their route into higher education is blocked. Higher fees

¹ The Higher Education Academy, Shoe-horned and side-lined? Challenges for part-time learners in the new HE landscape (2015), pp.21-23. Available at

<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Challenges%20for%20part-time%20learners.pdf>

² Wales Audit Office, Higher Education Finances (2013), p.12. Available at

http://www.wao.gov.uk/system/files/publications/HE_Finances_English_2013.pdf

for part-time students in England has seriously reduced numbers and we do not want to see this happen in Wales.

13. This draft budget proposal also raises questions about equality of opportunity. Younger full-time learners are set to benefit while part-time (generally older) learners will be disadvantaged. The Open University Students Association cannot see how, given that funding for full-time undergraduate provision is being maintained, a reduction in funding for part-time provision represents equality of opportunity on the grounds of age and in also possibly in respect of disability.
14. The Open University has widening access and social inclusion at the very core of its mission and is responsible for considerable social mobility. To put this in jeopardy in Wales does not seem to make economic sense. Surely it is economically important to encourage people on low incomes to study in order for them to reskill and upskill with the goal of improving their own futures and that of their families.
15. The Open University Students Association asks that the Finance Committee pays critical and due attention to likely serious impact of this draft budget on the opportunity for adults to study part-time at a higher education level in Wales.
16. As a part of this important scrutiny process of the draft budget proposals we would be happy to provide any further information to the committee as required.

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Contact: Claire Smith, OUSA Student Association Representative Wales

Email: ousa-sar-wales@open.ac.uk