

## Open University in Wales - Response to Welsh Government Consultation on support for doctoral study



### About The Open University in Wales

1. The Open University (OU) was established in 1969, with its first students enrolling in 1971. Operating across all four nations of the UK, 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. The OU's world-leading innovative research and development ranks in the top third of UK universities. We have over 900 registered postgraduate students and work with 23 Affiliated Research Centres, worldwide.

### Response to consultation questions

5. The OU in Wales welcomes the Welsh Government's intention to provide support for doctoral study. We welcome the proposals outlined in the consultation paper and in particular the fact that support will be provided for those who choose to study part-time including through distance learning. This is an essential aspect of ensuring that this opportunity is made available to as many people as possible.

### *Age restriction*

6. Although we understand that the proposed age restriction (fifty-nine years and younger on the first day of the first academic year of study) mirrors the system currently in operation in England we believe that there should be no age limit in place. The OU's mission is to promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all. To discriminate against postgraduate research applicants on the basis of age would be contrary to the OU's mission and is not something that we would endorse.
7. The link between age and the likelihood of entering into repayment is assumed and may not in fact be true. Older students are likely to be already in employment and therefore over the income threshold to trigger repayment. The real risk is adding an

ever increasing debt burden to younger people who are very likely to already have been in receipt of loans for undergraduate tuition fees and maintenance costs.

8. The adoption of the age eligibility restriction may also be counterproductive. As the age at which people can retire increases, the workforce increasingly includes older people who may well be able to put to productive use the knowledge and skills acquired by carrying out doctoral research. This is a growing trend. Those who are already in employment are likely to be earning more than a younger graduate and are therefore more likely to meet the repayment thresholds; they could take on a part time research degree and be paying back the loan at the same time.
9. Older students make a valuable contribution to the research culture of any university especially in terms of previous life and career experiences.
10. For all of the reasons outlined above, the risk (such that it exists) should not be mitigated by discriminating against any group on the basis that their protected characteristic may impact on their ability to repay the loan.

### ***Repayment threshold***

11. We support the intention for the repayment threshold to be in line with that of undergraduate and Master's loans. We note that this threshold is due to change to £25,000 in April 2018 and assume this will be the threshold for repayments of doctoral loans until such time as any further changes are made.

### ***Limiting access***

12. The OU in Wales believes that there should be no subject restriction for eligibility for a doctoral loan. Research endows people with a range of transferable employability skills and adds value regardless of disciplinary specialism. Different disciplines may provide skills additional to those that are specific to the subject area. These too are often transferable. Arguably there is a great benefit to any organisation in having issues addressed from the variety of perspectives that an interdisciplinary workforce can bring. Limiting access runs the risk of limiting opportunities for those who may already find it harder to access funding for doctoral study. This scheme should widen access to doctoral study in the broadest sense possible.
13. We also believe that in line with the broader recommendations of the Diamond Review there should be no eligibility restriction for those who have an existing qualification of the same level.

### ***Timescale***

14. We welcome the introduction of this scheme for AY 18/19 but are slightly concerned about the timescale for implementation. To achieve an AY 18/19 start, confirmation and final details of the new scheme will need to be provided very quickly in order to enable Student Finance Wales and individual institutions to deliver and promote the new scheme.

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