

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. Around 8,000 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 parttime 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. As a pan-Wales provider the OU in Wales engages with all three Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) albeit in different ways in each region. The OU in Wales is a member of the North Wales RSO, a member of the Learning and Skills Provider Group in the South West and Mid-Wales RSP, and we feed into the Cardiff Capital Region RSP via a higher education representative (from the University of South Wales).

Response to consultation questions

Is the data and evidence being used by the Regional Skills Partnerships timely, valid and reliable? Have there been any issues?

5. From our experiences of engaging with the RSPs more could be done to improve the reliability, consistency and validity of the data that is collated and used by the partnerships. Much of what we have submitted to date has been soft data and there is a

lack of clarity over exactly what is required from us and what might be most useful to the RSPs' work. Some data can come with a significant time lag and it is therefore difficult to assess whether it is the most accurate picture; likewise, data from employers can be restricted to those who submit data to the RSPs and therefore not present a full picture from across the region. If the role of RSPs is to continue – and we believe there is value in this – and to develop then the partnerships need to be sufficiently resourced to collate the data that they need. There also needs to be an incentive for employers and partners to engage more with the RSPs around data collection.

How well do the partnerships engage with and take into account the views of those who do not sit on the partnership boards, and how well do they account for the views of the skills providers themselves?

6. There are some examples of good practice in terms of RSP representatives engaging with their stakeholders and ensuring a two-way flow of information but this is not always the case. From our own experience of working with the three RSPs there is a distinct difference between our level of engagement with the RSP on which we are directly represented and the two where we are not. We would certainly welcome more opportunity to engage with the two partnerships on which we are not formally represented. It also seems that smaller skills and education providers do not have much of a voice on the RSPs and we believe that more could be done by each RSP to reach beyond the formal membership and that this activity needs to be sufficiently resourced. RSP activity is also often driven too much by existing Government priorities and although the partnerships should engage with these priorities they should also be encouraged and supported to explore other priority areas as required by the region.

7. It is also worth considering how universities and colleges represented on the RSPs, who are large employers in their own right and often act as anchor organisations, can feed information on their own skills and growth needs into the RSPs.

How do the key City and Growth Deal roles of the Regional Skills Partnerships influence their Welsh Government remit?

8. The City and Growth Deal areas and RSP areas are not all co-terminus and we are not aware of a consistent approach across the three regions in terms of how the RSPs are engaging with the Deals. From our engagement to date it is difficult to assess, based on the information we have, how the RSPs are balancing their work between the drivers from Welsh Government and the drivers from the Deals. It is essential that RSPs are resourced and supported to engage with the priorities of Welsh Government and the Growth Deals but that these priorities are clearly articulated to the RSPs. However, the role of the partnerships in response to these priorities also needs to be clear as does the relationship between the bodies. The RSPs must also be free to undertake research and activity based on the priorities identified for their area by their stakeholders.

Are the Regional Skills Partnerships able to actually reflect current and future skills demands within their regions? What about very specialised skills for which there may be low volumes of demand?

9. In order to be able to fully assess the current and future skills demands in a region the RSPs need more robust data collection and to be able to engage with a larger number of stakeholders from across different sectors. This seems to be slowly gathering pace but visibility of the RSPs is limited to it is hard for employers to engage. With limited resources and capacity there is a risk that the RSPs may focus on the priorities identified solely by those around the table or by Welsh Government agendas. In areas where the RSPs struggle to secure broad and deep representation or where expertise and significant activity lies outside the breadth of the RSP then the Welsh Government should ensure that it supplements the advice received from the RSP with a wider range of voices.

Do the Regional Skills partnerships have sufficient knowledge and understanding of:

- a) the foundational economy and the needs of those employed within it; and
- b) the demand for skills provision through the medium of Welsh?

10. Foundational economy sectors are often left behind and there is insufficient knowledge and understanding of the needs of people employed in this area. Due to funding cycles and the way budgets operate there is often a mismatch between sustainability of the longer-term workforce and the current needs of employers and employees.

11. Welsh Language provision is patchy across the different RSPs and probably an area where more could be done. There is a challenge to match the skills required with Welsh Language targets and to take account of the fact that some learners may not want one language provision but a mix. More could need to be done to assess the demand in terms of levels and proficiency in Welsh of those looking to upskill and reskill. Likewise, we would like to see the RSPs take a role in assessing skills need and encouraging uptake of modern foreign languages.

Are the Regional Skills Partnerships adequately resourced to fulfil their growing role?

12. No. There is an increasing level of expectation regarding what RSPs are for and what they can deliver which is incompatible with their existing resources. There is certainly a need for the intelligence and information that RSPs are designed to collect and more that they could be doing, but expansion of their roles would need to be matched with not only resourcing but greater clarity and rigour in their ways of working and relationships with Welsh Government and the Growth Deals.

13. RSPs are regional but there is no consistency across the three and it is not clear who is responsible for pulling together the information, data and learning from across the RSPs which must have value at a national level. It is also not clear how they link in with wider providers /or bodies such as Public Service Boards, Enterprise Zones, and the Social Services Regional

Partnerships Boards. At present it is hard to find out what the RSPs are doing and who is represented on them and that makes it more difficult for us to engage as a nation-wide provider. There should also be clarity over their exact role which could cover influencing, data collection, stakeholder engagement, decision making, information sharing, advice and guidance. Once this is agreed and clarified it needs to be well communicated to all stakeholders and RSPs need to be resourced to undertake the role effectively.

Is there an appropriate balance between the work of the RSPs and wider views on skills demand?

14. At present we do not feel that there is sufficient input into the RSPs from a wide enough range of employers and stakeholders, in particular in relation to the foundational economy and the needs of those furthest from the labour market. More also needs to be done to take account of the needs to adult learners.

Is the level of operational detail set out by Welsh Government for skills provision in higher/further education and work-based learning providers appropriate?

15. We do not have any comment to make in response to this question.

If there are any, how are tensions between learner demand / learner progression reconciled with Regional Skills Partnership conclusions and the Welsh Government preference for funding higher level skills?

16. In our experience Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), careers advice and progression routes through education and within the workplace are not sufficiently supported or prioritised. It is not clear how RSPs are feeding into the development of the Degree Apprenticeship (DA) agenda but the limited number of DAs available in Wales limits the options for both employers and employees in areas where skills are in demand. There is a need to broaden the DA frameworks available in Wales as soon as possible. The OU has a key role to play in the delivery of work-based flexible learning as well as work readiness and employability skills and we would welcome a chance to

engage more constructively with all three RSPs around this agenda.

Have the Regional Skills Partnerships and Welsh Government been able to stimulate changes in skills provision 'on the ground' to reflect demand?

17. We do not have a comment to make in response to this question.

What, in general, is working well and what evidence of success and impact is there?

Are there any aspects of the policy that are not working well, have there been any unintended consequences, and what improvements can be made?

18. The RSPs are a positive development and there is potential for them to make a more significant contribution to Welsh Government policy direction and skills provision in Wales. In order to be able to do this more effectively they need more resource and capacity and need to reach out to more employers, education providers and stakeholders. There is merit in considering increasing their remit, but this should not be done without further resource and clarity over the structure, relationship with Welsh Government, relationship with other key bodies and a clearer sense of accountability. Consideration also needs to be given as to how national providers and stakeholders can engage with the RSPs and how learning and data from each partnership can be used for the benefit of everyone with an interest in the skills agenda.