

National Assembly for Wales
Children, Young People and Education Committee

HEB 13

Higher Education (Wales) Bill – Stage 1

Evidence from : Older People’s Commissioner for Wales

About the Commissioner

The Older People’s Commissioner for Wales is an independent voice and champion for older people across Wales, standing up and speaking out on their behalf. She works to ensure that those who are vulnerable and at risk are kept safe and ensures that all older people have a voice that is heard, that they have choice and control, that they don’t feel isolated or discriminated against and that they receive the support and services they need. The Commissioner's work is driven by what older people say matters most to them and their voices are at the heart of all that she does. The Commissioner works to make Wales a good place to grow older - not just for some but for everyone.

The Older People’s Commissioner:

- Promotes awareness of the rights and interests of older people in Wales.
- Challenges discrimination against older people in Wales.
- Encourages best practice in the treatment of older people in Wales.
- Reviews the law affecting the interests of older people in Wales.

Inquiry into the Higher Education (Wales) Bill

1. As the Older People's Commissioner for Wales I welcome the opportunity to respond to the National Assembly for Wales' Children, Young People and Education Committee Inquiry into the Higher Education (Wales) Bill¹.
2. Rather than respond to the questions as outlined in the consultation document, I will provide some broader comments on certain aspects of the Bill.
3. I particularly welcome the Bill's emphasis on maintaining a strong focus on fair access to higher education. Older people should have the same opportunities to access higher education as everyone else. Achieving this by requiring all higher education providers whose courses are automatically designated for statutory student support to commit to activity in support of equality of access to higher education is therefore very much welcomed. It builds on the Equality Act 2010², providing older people who are seeking access to higher education with further protection from discrimination.
4. There are almost 800,000 people aged 60 and over in Wales, over a quarter of the population. In the next twenty years this is expected to exceed 1m people. Older people have a wealth of knowledge and experience and, provided with sufficient support and an adequate infrastructure that includes access to education and lifelong learning, can contribute significantly to society and to the economy.
5. Access to education is essential for older people for a number of reasons. With an increasing number of older people unable to afford retirement and needing to work for longer, both higher and further education opportunities are crucial to up-skill or re-skill older people to remain in or re-enter the labour market and enhance their employability. The need to keep up-to-date with

¹ <http://www.senedd.assemblywales.org/mgConsultationDisplay.aspx?id=133&RPID=1003804253&cp=yes>

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

modern technologies, access information and advice through digital learning and modernise working practices is vital.

6. For other older people, access to education is key to their health, independence and wellbeing in later life. As I outlined in my report on 'The Importance and Impact of Community Services within Wales'³, learning not only increases the efficiency of older people as workers or volunteers, but also promotes full economic and societal participation, support creativity, innovation and fulfilment, and combats loneliness, isolation and depression. Learning classes, whether held in universities or other venues, provide older people with confidence, purpose and pleasure and, as I have often heard in my discussions with older people across Wales, is something that they look forward to.

7. Learning for both employment and wellbeing are incredibly important for older people and, as an 'under-represented group' as outlined in the Bill, I welcome all efforts to encourage older people to enrol on university courses as mature students and maximise opportunities through the Open University. Older people can contribute greatly to universities both inside and outside the classroom, and can inspire, advise and work with younger students. Through their considerable wealth of knowledge and work and life experience, the value of older students in universities should not be underestimated.

8. Taking forward the Bill, I encourage Higher Education Institutions in Wales to target prospective older students, to encourage them to undertake university courses through information and incentives, and to promote the achievements of older learners as much as possible⁴. With students over 60 years old representing only 1.8% of all enrolments in 2012/13⁵, every effort must be made to increase the numbers of older students attending Welsh HEIs.

³ http://www.olderpeoplewales.com/Libraries/Uploads/The_Importance_and_Impact_of_Community_Services_within_Wales.sflb.ashx

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/mar/11/older-learners-studying-university-david-willetts>

⁵ <https://stats.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Higher-Education/Students/Enrolments-at-Welsh-HEIs/HEEnrolmentsAtWelshHEIs-by-Gender-Age-Level-Mode>

9. With the perceived cost of studying seen as a potential barrier to learning, older learners over 60 years old require access to accurate and reliable information on how to secure a loan for tuition fees and apply for a special support grant⁶. Older learners should be encouraged to take full advantage of the financial support afforded to students in Wales, a supporting structure which does well compared with the rest of the UK⁷.

Basic Skills Package

10. I recently met with the Deputy Minister for Skills and Technology and stressed the importance of a Basic Skills Package that addresses the increasing number of older people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs), and require learning opportunities to acquire new skills or strengthen existing skillsets to remain in employment or re-enter the labour market.
11. It is estimated that there are three times as many 'NEETs' aged over 50 as there are aged under 25 and ten times as many as those aged under 19. Higher education has a key role to play in reducing the number of older 'NEETs' and the development of a Basic Skills Package for older people in Wales must fully involve all Higher Education Institutions.

Closing remarks

12. There is huge value in lifelong learning and I emphasise that you are never too old to learn: learning should be truly lifelong. Higher education is not the sole preserve of young people and I wholeheartedly support the Bill's objective of widening access to all, particularly older people. At a time when funding for adult learning in Wales is a cause of real concern⁸, changing working and educational patterns need to be flexible, adaptable and fully consider the particular needs of older learners.

⁶ <http://www.nus.org.uk/en/advice/money-and-funding/im-a-mature-student--what-extra-higher-education-funding-can-i-get/>

⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/apr/29/welsh-university-students-financial-support>

⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-25755799>

13. The fact that Wales has an ageing population should be seen as something positive and provided with sufficient support and opportunities, older people can contribute so much more to our communities and the wider economy. Having been viewed as a neglected minority in the past, future systems will need to better understand the needs of older people in adult education and skills.

14. I look forward to the publication of the Inquiry report and will continue to work with the Welsh Government and other key players to ensure that the Bill and accompanying legislation, policy drivers and strategies provide older people with equal access to all types of full and part-time lifelong learning opportunities, including higher education.