Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru
Older People's Commissioner for Wales

Inquiry into the general principles of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill by the Children, Young People and Education Committee.

December 2021

Introduction

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to your enquiry regarding the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill and the general principles under which the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research will be established.

There are 866,006 people over the age of 60 living in Wales. It is estimated that this number will rise to 956,000, or 30% of the population, by 2026, and to 1,015,000 or 31%, by 2031[i]. There is a need to ensure that older people have opportunities to learn, access training and re-training and develop new skills which will enable them to engage fully both in their work and in their communities.

Prior to Covid-19, it was estimated that people aged 65+ contributed over £2.19bn to the Welsh economy every year[ii], whilst those over 50 made up over a third of the workforce[iii]. Older people must not be excluded as Wales rebuilds its economy, and it is vital that they are recognised as being essential key participants in Wales' economic recovery from the pandemic.

Promoting life-long learning

The Commissioner particularly welcomes the focus in Part 1 of the Act on the promotion of life-long learning. It is imperative, as identified in the Commissioner's previous consultation responses[iv], that the new Commission, once established, delivers improved outcomes for older people.

Work needs to be urgently undertaken to identify the specific needs of older people in education and training settings, develop ways to encourage older people to seek out those opportunities, and ensure that they have equality of access.

The traditional retirement model is no longer relevant for many older people, and an increasing number want, or need to, work for longer particularly in light of the rise in State Pension Age. To do this, access to appropriate learning and training opportunities is crucial. The impact of Covid-19 on employment amongst older workers is projected to be

significant[v] and many will be faced with the challenge of dealing with the emotional effects of losing their jobs, as well as the devastating impact it will have on their financial and physical well-being.

It is important to ensure that the opportunities for older learners, jobseekers and trainees are not unfairly affected by the pandemic and older people are given equal access to help and support services in order to boost learning and employment prospects.

Older jobseekers face a number of barriers when trying to re-enter the workforce which can include age discrimination, workplaces that do not support age-diverse and multi-generational workforces, working practices that do not provide flexibility for the needs of unpaid carers as well as being confronted by the myths and misconceptions often held about older workers.

Promoting equality of opportunity

In the Commissioner's response to the consultation 'Adult Learning in Wales – Consultation on the funding and delivery structure of adult learning in Wales' [vi], it was highlighted that older people need access to learning for a range of different reasons. Whilst for some, learning is about gaining new skillsets and qualifications in order to remain in or return to the workplace, for others, particularly those in retirement, learning is about mental stimulation, new challenges and maintaining social interaction.

Funding for adult community learning has been significantly reduced over recent years and has hindered the development of a curriculum for later life, preventing older people from receiving key information and new skills, such as managing finances or learning to use digital technologies with confidence, an issue that came very much to the fore during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The new Commission must improve the diversity of opportunities on offer to older people to engage with learning in both formal and informal settings and across different sectors as well as demonstrating a genuine commitment to an all-age approach.

The closure and reduced provision of 'lifeline' community services, including reduced access to lifelong and adult community learning, has had a serious impact on the health and wellbeing of some older people, limiting their opportunity for social interaction in a community setting. For others, it has affected their employment prospects by limiting their ability to gain new skills, build up their confidence enough to explore alternative routes back into the workforce such as via all-age apprenticeships or venturing into self-employment.

Promoting a civic mission

During the pandemic, we have witnessed the strength and positive potential of our communities, drawing together across the generations to support and protect the most vulnerable. We cannot afford to lose that common sense of purpose and belonging. Adult community learning plays an integral part in the weave of community life.

In ‘Leave no-one behind – Action for an age-friendly recovery’[vii], the Commissioner called for initiatives that strengthen communities to be an essential part of our recovery and for lifelong learning to be established as a right so as to enable people of all ages to access education and training opportunities.

Older people must not be excluded as Wales rebuilds its economy, and it is vital that they are recognised as being essential key participants in Wales’ economic, social, environmental, and cultural well-being as we build back and recover from the pandemic

Apprenticeships

Extending eligibility criteria of Apprenticeships and Workplace Learning schemes to people of all ages in 2016 was an important step forward by the Welsh Government. However, as highlighted in the Commissioner’s report ‘State of the Nation’[viii], only 510 older people participated in such schemes during 2019-20 – just 1% of the total number of participants. Many older people may not consider themselves as the intended participants for apprenticeships, despite them being branded as ‘all-age’. National and local communications and advertising of apprenticeships should therefore review the language and imagery used and ensure that older people are visible in publicity campaigns.

Further conversations are needed with older people to understand the barriers they face in accessing apprenticeships, as well as identifying if apprenticeship opportunities are being promoted to older people, how employers are attracting apprentices and what more should be done to help older workers retrain should they wish or need to as demand for skills changes. The new Commission should play a central role in gathering data and evidence on this, ensuing the data is age-disaggregated appropriately across all ages and other protected characteristics.

As mentioned above, many older workers want or need to continue in employment for longer, and demographic changes, alongside changes to State Pension Age and the removal of mandatory retirement ages will increase the number of older workers further. This increase is to be welcomed as the population of Wales ages, but it is important that policy development recognises and reflects this change and uses language that is inclusive of all ages and avoids using language that could be seen as ageist.

Conclusion

Whilst the Commissioner welcomes the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill and the general principles under which the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research will be established, the Commissioner also sees this as an opportunity to remove the barriers that older people currently face in accessing life-long learning, training, re-training and development opportunities, It could also serve as a way of tackling ageism and ensuring that there is equality of access and opportunities for all older people in Wales.

The new Commission will have a pivotal role to play in the delivery of those initiatives and could provide an overarching vision of a truly lifelong approach to learning and by drawing on good practice from around the world, it could improve learning and training opportunities

for people of all ages in Wales and become a leading exemplar of tertiary education. It is crucial that the voices of older people are heard and used to drive forward the adult learning agenda in Wales and the delivery of adult learning must also consider synergies with wider issues, such as access to public transport and accessible venues.

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[i] Welsh Government (2021) National level population estimates by year, age and UK country https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Population-and-Migration/Population/Estimates/nationallevelpopulationestimates-by-year-age-ukcountry

[ii] Edwards, R. T et al. (2018) Living well for longer: The economic argument for investing in the health and wellbeing of older people in Wales. Available at: https://bit.ly/3lm3ueM

[iii] Welsh Government. (2020). Coronavirus and employment: analysis of protected characteristics. Available at https://bit.ly/2IrF4lF

[iv] Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2020) Draft Tertiary Education and Research Bill. Available at https://bit.ly/3I60i2M

[v] Institute of Fiscal Studies (2020) The coronavirus and older workers. Available at https://bit.ly/31GVLDd

[vi] Older People's Commissioner for Wales. (2018) Adult Learning in Wales. Available at: https://bit.ly/3pfpMB8

[vii] Older People's Commissioner for Wales. (2020). Leave No-One Behind: Action for an Age-Friendly Recovery. Available at: https://bit.ly/34ZIc0K

[viii] Older People's Commissioner for Wales (2021) State of the Nation 2021 State_of_the_Nation_Report_2021.sflb.ashx (olderpeoplewales.com)

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales

The Older People's Commissioner for Wales protects and promotes the rights of older people throughout Wales, scrutinising and influencing a wide range of policy and practice to improve their lives. She provides help and support directly to older people through her casework team and works to empower older people and ensure that their voices are heard and acted upon. The Commissioner's role is underpinned by a set of unique legal powers to support her in reviewing the work of public bodies and holding them to account when necessary.

The Commissioner is taking action to protect and promote older people's rights, end ageism and age discrimination, stop the abuse of older people and enable everyone to age well.

The Commissioner wants Wales to be the best place in the world to grow older.

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