

Learning for life - in lockdown and beyond:

Highlights from our panel discussion with the Open University in Wales

22nd May 2020

We were delighted to host a webinar with our partner The Open University in Wales during #LearningatWork week 2020 to explore how lockdown has changed the way we think about learning and how organisations are providing opportunities to learn.

During our panel discussion, we addressed the inherent value of learning at work, the impact of learning on life outcomes such as poverty and health, the changing nature of the Welsh economy and the important topic of digital inclusion. We've summarised the key questions and responses below.

Victoria Winckler: Even before the current outbreak of the coronavirus, 1 in 4 people in Wales were living in poverty. Who knows what will happen to the figures after the crisis?

What is the role of learning in ending poverty and how can we give more people a better start to their learning journey?

Louise Casella: There's no doubt about it: learning is absolutely vital to ending poverty. It gives people pathways to new opportunities and I think in Wales therefore we need quite a fresh view about where, how, with whom learning happens, and look beyond the schooling, the formal university environment and think how we reach into every community and household in Wales and create flexibility in learning. We talk a lot about school curriculum and what happens in schools, but one of the really important things in addressing poverty and opportunity is what happens after that period and how we create the maximum opportunity for individuals to embrace their potential. That's what the OU was founded on.

Jane Roberts: I wholeheartedly agree. I'm very proud to work for the Open University, super proud to be heading up the OpenLearn offering. We know there a lot of people out there who don't have opportunity, and resources like the ones we have on OpenLearn give people a second chance at something that they may not have got earlier on in life. We have courses for all age ranges on OpenLearn and I think it's fantastic that we have this resource to give people the opportunity to learn and boost their confidence and improve their life chances.

Victoria Winckler: Louise, what prompted you to start studying with The Open University?

Louise Wilford: I had my daughter when I was 19. Just before she turned one, I wanted to give her a better opportunity in life. I wanted to show her that no matter where you come from, because I am

from a poverty-stricken area, you can achieve really good things in your life and go far and get qualifications like a degree.

Victoria Winckler: We published a report yesterday that looked at the possible impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the Welsh economy, and the outlook is not particularly good.

No one knows what the shape of the economy is going to be going forward. But assuming we have a number of businesses still active and there's some form of recovery, Milly what do you think are kinds of skills challenges that your sector and business face?

Milly Blenkin: Go Co Group is a proud Welsh business. We started in Newport South Wales in 2006, still going strong. We are 5 tech businesses that make up the group, so it's no surprise when I say there's a gaping skills gap in technology whether you look at software engineering, data, security. Wales is a hot bed of financial services companies and yet every meeting we circle back to the skills gaps we are facing in tech. We just can't keep up. On the skills challenge, it's getting more females into STEM subjects. A lot of people argue this comes down to a lack of role models to an extent, so part of my role is to work with academic partners to really showcase that 1) you can always retrain – We

Louise Casella: Keeping those opportunities open and building that flexibility in to switch, to change, to learn alongside current earning is part of it as well. It's quite hard to make that shift when you're supporting a family and you've got ongoing responsibilities. To then take on learning and retraining alongside that is a challenge. If we want people to do that, and we recognise the need to meet the skills gaps, then we're going to have to provide learning in different ways – we're going to have to be flexible and allow people to hop on and hop off. It's a real challenge to the providers amongst us, but bringing people in at different stages of life is going to be important to us all.

Victoria Winckler: **I understand in the current crisis that participation in your free online learning platform has increased four-fold. What does that say about how we view learning and how can we retain that level of participation?**

Jane Roberts: It has been quite incredible and completely took us by surprise. In one day, visitor numbers jumped from around 40K a day to over 200K. There are a lot of people impacted by the current situation – people who have been furloughed or completely lost their jobs who are looking for opportunities to improve their chances for their future. We're seeing quite a lot of younger visitors – students who have had their GCSEs and A-Levels whipped from under them. We've been involved with a big project with the government to provide specific skills courses for the Skills Toolkit – they've identified digital skills and literacy skills as the subjects people are looking for most. But there's much wider demand – they're looking at employability skills, soft skills, things like Resilience and Communication and we're seeing a real uptake in these courses.

Louise Casella: One of the issues is how robust is the infrastructure for people to get there and find them. The internet is something we're all relying on at the moment, but we know in Wales that our broadband connections are not fantastic across the whole of Wales. We know that a lot of the

poverty sits in rural areas as well. We need to see that infrastructure strengthened to make sure people can connect to this flexible online learning reliably if they are going to base their future on it.

Victoria Winckler: How would the panel challenge those employers who have always considered training to be a low priority, and they're likely to continue to do so post Covid-19? Funding for training and release for employees is always an issue.

Milly Blenkin: I'm very lucky to work for an employer who sees training and development as an investment, not a nice to have. I think individuals and employers have seen learning and development as a nice to have because we are incredibly time poor as a society and that's what's come out of people being furloughed and losing their jobs. People have had this moment of reflection and I think it's lovely that they're looking to education. The advice I'd give would be: make use of the free resources – so many providers are taking their offerings online. Traditional L&D used to be one size fits all, but the nature of e-learning is that no matter where you sit in the business you can go and do it for yourself. It's frustrating that employers don't see the value add, that you're more likely to stay with them longer, you'll be happier in your role and more likely to get involved in the wider business.

Louise Casella: We may be a provider but we're an employer as well, and investing in training and developing our staff at all levels is hugely important to us. We make good use of the resources that have been available in Wales, the NVQ support for example, we've given people time to do some of that learning. That's made a huge difference to people's satisfaction and productivity. So as an employer, I'd really encourage other employers to do that for their workforce. It builds loyalty, builds productivity, it really engages staff and keeps them with you.

Victoria Winckler: How do you think the face of education will be changed post Covid-19? Do you think more people will turn to online learning or practical opportunities than traditional routes?

Jane Roberts: Talking as a parent as much as an employee of the OU there will be people feeling anxious about people going back to learning in September. Cambridge University are planning to go fully online with their lectures, and one of the things we did quite quickly was to support other organisations in taking their learning online. So I think there will be a big increase, but it's not just a case of recording and sharing a lecture online. There's so much more to it. I think what's happening right now is going to impact on all our lives in many ways, whether that's how teaching happens, or our work happens. I think there's a lot of change coming.

Victoria Winckler: Louise, has learning online generated interest among your friends and peers?

Louise Wilford: Yes – I've got a 'studygram' account on Instagram and I've had lots of messages. A couple of people have applied to the OU after answering their questions.

Louise Casella: There's a lot of thought goes into what makes a university experience, and a crisis like this forces some rethinking. I think there's going to be more blended experiences.

Victoria Winckler: One comment we've had is that many teachers in schools have suddenly found themselves in at the deep end, having to teach, monitor and assess their students' progress online.

Do you see a role for the OU in teaching the teachers to develop their skills?

Louise Casella: There's some OpenLearn provision that we've been promoting to help people who have had to pivot really quickly. We've also tried to be as open as possible with our expertise and support the community. We've run some webinars for staff, in partnership with Cardiff County Council, to support teachers in the Cardiff area and we'll do more of that. We will respond to that demand as we move on. We are the experts in online distance learning. We've always been open in every sense and we need to work with others to help upskill people as they adapt to the new situation.

Jane Roberts: We have some world class colleagues whose expertise is in open educational resources and that's not just for individuals, it's for other organisations too, so it's great we're being able to share the knowledge in an open way. Being able to provide resources for teachers and parents to access has been a big thing for us. We have a number of hubs and we're in the process of developing some specific hubs aimed at teaching younger age groups, particularly secondary school children.

Victoria Winckler: Another question from the audience: **What can companies and education providers learn from the Covid situation to better support people in the future?**

Louise Casella: As an organisation we've had to make decisions quickly around a number of things. There's something about a crisis that makes you face up to some sacred cows that you thought could never be sacrificed, and actually when you take them apart and examine what you really need to do, with a few key principles in place about the integrity of learning and flexibility for your learners, you can make some quick decisions and move forward. We will reflect on what we've learnt through this about how we structure some of our assessment, or the way our expectations on students are expressed and structured. Also, in terms of the way we've acted as an employer: what do we value out of what's happening now that we want to retain, and what are we missing about the way we were working before that we want to return to, and how can we blend those to make the best working environment for our staff. I don't think there's an employer I've spoken to out there who's not thinking that way at the moment.

Victoria Winckler: **Milly, has it had any impact on Go Co's learning and training position? Are you rethinking in anyway?**

Milly Blenkin: My first key piece of advice would be invest in your tech infrastructure, make sure everyone has a VPN, they know how to use it, they've got laptops – that's the operational side. On the learning and development side, I miss the osmosis of learning from my colleagues. I learn so much sitting with the team. Communication is really important: make sure people know how to contact the HR people, that leaders are putting in regular stand-ups, check in on people, that they're well.

Victoria Winckler: There's a couple of questions that have come in about digital inclusion. What they're saying is that for some of us who have the kit, connectivity and skills there's a world out there we can explore and it's really exciting. **But for people who don't have the infrastructure or can't afford a decent computer or the broadband connection, or don't have the skills to know where to begin, how do you get that pipeline of students from the most excluded groups of people?**

Louise Casella: I think it's an absolutely key question for the future. There's so much we can each do as providers and employers, but there's a much broader question for government and local authorities etc. I'm aware Cardiff Council have been making devices, and dongles available to those learners who didn't have them in schools; I'm aware of one primary school that has had to put out around 120 tablets in order to enable them to continue to be able to engage with all their learners, and that's one school of many. Digital inclusion has to be a huge part of our future agenda; that goes from devices to the the infrastructure – how good is our fast broadband around Wales? We need to make that something that is the norm, like your electricity or water supply. We need to look at how we make that a reality quickly because this situation has really highlighted differences.

Victoria Winckler: I've certainly seen where I live that there are some businesses who haven't needed a website presence before, but have very quickly set one up, but others who are relying on phoning Craig, and you can see the more internet, digitally-savvy ones are going to do better now and going forward. **Milly, do you see opportunities for businesses to make more and get more people online?**

Milly Blenkin: Absolutely. It's something that's been on our agenda for some time. I've signed us up to Digital Inclusion Wales and I was really shocked at the stats of how many people are digitally excluded in Wales. They've set up a scheme called Devices.now to get devices out to the most vulnerable people in our society.

Victoria Winckler: **If we could get libraries open again safely, maybe they could be equipped to give access to learners?**

Louise Casella: The library is the default option for people who don't have good connection at home and, yes, it's part of the answer. But for the long term it needs to be about the flexibility of people being able to access wherever, whenever they need to and in their home. Milly highlighted the number of services many people now need to access online and digitally, but it does exclude people who are not digitally-savvy, it disproportionately excludes the elderly. And I think one of the things we need to think about is how we can connect these things, both services and learning, and create access for people in a very inclusive way.

Milly Blenkin: Absolutely. For those who are self-isolating, they're still excluded, so the question remains how we get the tech into their households.

Victoria Winckler: I'm going to ask each panellist to identify one lesson from the current crisis that they'd like to stick and take forward, so that maybe in a year's time that thing that was new to us is now the norm.

Jane Roberts: I think for me, the highlighting of the inequalities in terms of digital capabilities and being online. We're seeing masses of people coming to our sites. How many more people would like to do that but they don't have the opportunity? A good internet broadband service should be just as accessible as your electricity, as your water supply. That's something that has hit home with me - not just people coming to the OU, but children needing to be taught at home. That inequality is not going to change for those people until that service is considered an essential service.

Milly Blenkin: This whole thing has made me realise we all make excuses when it comes to learning and it's often viewed as a nice to have, and I think what we're hearing is that now people have had time for reflecting they're investing their time into learning and I'd like to see that continue throughout society – not just to progress in your career, but on the soft skills or wellbeing side. So, really falling back in love with learning and not just a tick in the box.

Louise Wilford: Honestly, nothing has really changed for me. I have realised I've taken the face to face tutorials for granted and I probably will consider doing some more of them in the future, after this.

Louise Casella: For me, the things I really hope we take forward are the flexible attitudes and, I hope, the sense of kindness, a valuing of kindness to each other. I think it's important because it actually shapes the way we think and comes onto the issue of fairness. I hope we don't rush back to where we were before and forget about issues of fairness and inclusion that we need to address if we're going to help people out of poverty and support people through learning and really build that society that we want.

Victoria Winckler: A fairer future is exactly what the Bevan Foundation is about and it's exactly what the Open University is about. Thank you everyone.