

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales  
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and  
Education Committee

Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg |  
Priorities for the Children, Young People and Education Committee

**CYPE 85**

Ymateb gan : Undeb Cenedlaethol y Myfyrwyr (UCM Cymru)

Response from : National Union of Students (NUS)

## **1. NUS Wales**

1.1. National Union of Students in Wales is the largest democratic organisation in Wales, representing learners in a wide variety of settings including higher education and further education, adult community learning and apprenticeships.

## **2. General Comments**

2.1. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation on what the priorities should be for the new Children, Young People and Education Committee.

2.2. The education sectors, and opportunities for children and young people, are now at a crucial juncture in the story of Welsh devolution. The last Welsh Government commissioned two reviews (the Hazelkorn and the Diamond Review) that have carried on past the end of the last Assembly (one is yet to be responded to by the Welsh Government, and the other is expected to report imminently). It is still not clear what impact the vote to leave the European Union will have upon Wales, and the Welsh budget is facing another difficult year.

2.3. It is therefore absolutely vital that the priorities for lines of enquiry are developed now. The Fifth Assembly is also anticipating a challenging legislative timetable, so the time of Members has to be used effectively. We have outlined priorities that have been of significant concern for the student movement over the past few years, and now need addressing as a matter of urgency.

2.4. These priorities include addressing the outcomes of the Diamond Review, as well as the impact that HE and FE reforms developing in England are likely to have on the Welsh sectors. These include the recommendations of the BIS White Paper, "Success as a Knowledge Economy", and the area reviews that English FE providers are undergoing. We have also addressed concerns about access to education for vulnerable groups, particularly disabled students and

those with experience of care (both as care leavers and those with caring responsibilities).

2.5. A number of the priorities we address informed the development of the NUS Wales manifesto. This has been included as an Annex for the Committee to consider.

2.6. We look forward to working with the Committee on these areas in the months to come, and welcome any opportunity to meet with Members.

**3. Question 1:** *Within the remit set out above: what do you consider to be the priorities or issues that the Children, Young People and Education Committee should consider during the Fifth Assembly?*

3.1. **Long-term views.** The priority campaign for NUS Wales over the coming months will focus around an inclusive education. There are still attainment gaps at every level of education in Wales, ranging from socio-economic barriers in financial backgrounds to attainment gaps between pupils of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. There is also a concerning lack of engagement from political institutions with young people, a fear that often becomes alarmingly realised during years where there are no major national elections.

3.2. Action therefore also needs to be taken to ensure that teaching and learning, assessment methods and learning environments become more inclusive and accessible. NUS Wales has repeatedly stressed that the existing quality assurance framework does not focus enough on enhancement. Quality of teaching and learning must be improved across the board, and we recommend that the Committee considers quality of provision throughout any focussed consultations.

3.3. NUS Wales will therefore be concentrating on engaging politicians and stakeholders in the following areas: putting stronger plans in place to tackle the attainment gaps in every area of the Welsh education system; not only delivering on the promise to embed votes at 16 for the next Assembly Elections in 2021, but to work to effectively register and engage young people in the years prior and; to develop an inclusive and comprehensive Sex and Relationship Education curriculum from Key Stage 2 and above.

3.4. This will also require a unified system of political education for young people, developed and implemented far in advance of the election cycle and perhaps alongside the recommendations of the Donaldson Review. NUS Wales has supported the Donaldson Review throughout, and we would suggest the Committee closely follows the progress of the Pioneer Schools Network during its implementation.

3.5. SRE is becoming increasingly vital. The Violence Against Women's Act came into being on the back of an increase in reporting of gender-based violence and abusive relationships. There has also been a rise in LGBT+ students suffering from mental ill-health due to a lack of understanding around relationships. It is essential that a comprehensive and supportive system is introduced to raise awareness around this issue.

3.6. This inclusive education campaign is one that requires societal change, and will likely take the full life of the current Assembly to address. We would strongly encourage the committee to consider its long-term legacy throughout its work, and would suggest an inquiry into determining where Wales wants to see its education system by 2021, starting in January 2017.

3.7. **Short-term views.** There are also pressing areas that need to be addressed by the Committee in the very near future. We have highlighted some of the pertinent areas below:

3.8. *The Diamond Review.* The Independent Review into Higher Education Funding and Student Support Arrangements is due to report at the end of September 2016. The Welsh Government was widely criticised in 2013 when the Review was announced, due to the original aim to report after the elections to the National Assembly in May 2016. NUS Wales was particularly concerned that political parties would not clearly outline their vision for the HE sector, and would therefore not be held to account during the Fifth Assembly.

3.9. We would therefore like to place on record our gratitude to the Review for publishing an interim evidence report in December 2015, and to the political parties who outlined their higher education priorities in their manifestos.

3.10. That being said, the Review is due to report this autumn. The Welsh Government is also yet to respond to the Hazelkorn Review, but is widely expected to do so in the near future. Both of these announcements will also occur during the tight timeframe for the implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework in England, as well as the creation of the Office for Students as a single regulatory and oversight body.

3.11. We are concerned that the National Assembly will not be able to fully scrutinise all of these reports, reviews and considerations due to the short period for implementation. We suggest that the Committee pursues an inquiry into all of these changes, to ascertain what exactly the English systems will mean for Wales and whether or not the proposals emanating from the Diamond and Hazelkorn Reviews are indeed the best options for both Welsh students and students in Wales.

3.12. We are anxious for the Welsh Government to respond soon to the Hazelkorn Review, to give certainty to the sector during this time of upheaval. NUS Wales has long supported the concept of a singular post-16 education sector, where Higher and Further education are considered alongside one another. This will be vital for collaboration, and will ideally lead to an improvement in quality.

3.13. *The vote to leave the European Union.* During the Fourth Assembly, each committee had responsibility for looking at how the work of the European Union Parliament would impact upon their respective areas of concern. This system was effective, and appears to have carried over to the work of the Fifth Assembly.

3.14. We would therefore anticipate that each Committee will be considering the implications of the “Brexit” vote in their respective areas. However, the Welsh Higher Education sector is particularly reliant on funding from the Horizon2020 programme and also benefits from funding from programmes sponsored by the EU Structural Fund. It is also worth considering the impact on the loss of this funding for Communities First areas, and how this will negatively affect potential students from those authorities.

3.15. Naturally, until Article 50 is triggered, it is still unclear what the overall effect of leaving the EU will be upon Wales. We would suggest that the Committee attempts to consider the potential impact during any inquiry. The Welsh Government has created a HE Working Group for these discussions, and we would hope that the Committee and the Group will be able to keep each other abreast of their own developments.

3.16. *Further education funding and provision.* NUS Wales has, alongside a number of other organisations, been particularly vocal about cuts to the Further Education budget during the last National Assembly. It is no secret that FE provision in Wales is struggling, while staff morale has been pejoratively affected. We would again urge the Committee to scrutinise any proposed policy which will remove funding from these providers.

3.17. *Adult and Community Learning.* Similar to the above paragraph, adult and community learning has been largely wiped out by funding cuts during the past few budgets. The Open University, Carers Trust Wales, WEA Cymru, Learning and Work Institute (formerly known as NIACE Cymru), and NUS Wales prepared a briefing (attached as an Annex) for all of the political parties to highlight just how heavily ACL has been cut and the impact this has had upon communities. We believe that this lack of provision needs to be urgently addressed.

3.18. *Carers.* We would again draw the attention of the Committee to the work of Carers Trust Wales. Too often the political focus on carers is on those who receive care, and not those who provide it for friends and families. A substantial number of the latter group are students, who often struggle to make ends meet and face a burdensome social stigma. We believe that more work has to be done to identify the difficulties faced by both care leavers and those who provide care, and would urge the Committee to consider this in great detail.

3.19. Wales has over 12,000 carers under the age of 18. This is the highest proportion in the UK, and the Welsh Government needs to do more to support the young carers that are not captured by this data.

3.20. *Welsh Language.* The Committee will naturally be aware of the latest Welsh Language Measures. NUS Wales has concerns that Welsh-medium provision at colleges and universities is under threat, giving the lack of certainty over an extension of funding to the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. We acknowledge, and welcome, that Welsh-medium provision is a firm priority for the Welsh Government but we would also urge the Committee to explore ways in which this funding can not only be protected, but enhanced (alongside quality).

3.21. *Mental health.* Students at all levels face mental health barriers during their education, not least because of a lack of financial support that is not linked to debt. This goes for both Welsh students supported by the Welsh Government, and non-Welsh students who chose to study at a Welsh institution and are supported elsewhere. One of the concerns that has been repeatedly raised with NUS Wales is that mental health services rarely exist on campus and, those that do, rarely have the ability to address concerns in Welsh. We believe that the Committee needs to consider mental health for young people and students as a matter of urgency, perhaps alongside the Health and Welsh Language Committees.

3.22. *Gender Identity Clinics.* During the Fourth Assembly, consideration was given in an Assembly debate to exploring the potential to create a Gender Identity Clinic in Wales. With more people than ever before feeling able to publicly declare themselves as trans, it is essential that a service exists in Wales to work with them.

3.23. We have outlined a number of priorities for the Committee during the Fifth Assembly, split between long and short term aims. These will naturally be developed further during the coming months, and we would urge every member of the Committee to meet with NUS Wales to discuss these priorities (and others) in a more in-depth fashion.

**4. Question 2:** *From the list of priorities or issues you have identified, what do you consider to be the key areas that should be considered during the next 12 months (please identify up to three areas or issues)? Please outline why these should be considered as key priorities.*

4.1. The Committee, from early next year, must urgently consider how the people of Wales want their education and society to look by 2021. The Wales Bill is expected to devolve voting arrangements, and virtually every party in the National Assembly has committed to lowering the voting age to 16. Attainment gaps are at risk of growing, and the impact of the Violence Against Women's Act will be more measurable. These are substantial areas that must be considered, and we would urge the Committee to consider an ongoing inquiry into the future of education and society in Wales.

4.2. The outcomes of the Diamond Review, as well as the impact of Hazelkorn and English reforms, will have to be scrutinised and debated as a matter of urgency. We would recommend that the English reforms considerations begin virtually immediately, particularly if the Welsh HE sector is committed to the first year of TEF. The scrutiny of the Diamond Review should also begin following Welsh Government announcements to the recommendations.

4.3. We also believe that immediate work has to be done to identify students who provide care, and how they can be truly aided.

4.4. We look forward to working with the Committee in the future, and will provide further evidence to each of these priorities upon request.