

Report by the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Higher Education Bill

The Committee considered the Higher Education Bill on Wednesday 28 January 2004. Don Touhig MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Wales, explained the key provisions of the Bill, which received its First Reading in the House of Commons on 8 January 2004 and its Second Reading on 27 January 2004.

Members were given a paper ELL(2)-02-04(p.5) giving background information and setting out the key provisions of the Bill. The paper included a summary of the Wales-specific clauses (Annex A) and an overview of the new student support package (Annex B).

Members welcomed Parts 1 and 2 and noted Parts 3, 4 and 5. Concerns were raised by some Members on the following issues:

- Student Debt; some Members felt that the perceived level of debt incurred by students under the new proposals would deter many students from entering higher education;
- Repayment Threshold; the proposed threshold to trigger repayment of loans would be £15,000: Members considered that this threshold should be linked to inflation;
- Cross-Border Inequalities; there was some concern that variable fees could create cross-border inequalities in supply and demand between England and Wales and also between England and Scotland; and
- Collaboration with Business and Industry; Members felt it was important to consider ways in which business and local industry could contribute to the higher education sector.

Jane Davidson AM, Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, informed the Committee that she had commissioned an independent group chaired by Professor Teresa Rees, to review the issue of variable fees and the use of devolved powers for student support. The Minister stated that any future decision on the introduction of variable fees in Wales would be based on the basis of sound evidence and independent advice. The Minister undertook to keep the Committee informed and confirmed that the Committee would have an opportunity to scrutinise relevant secondary legislation.

The Committee welcomed the opportunity to discuss the provisions of the Bill and did not propose any amendments.

Peter Black AM
Committee Chair