

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar [Flaenoriaethau'r Chweched Senedd](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) consultation on [Sixth Senedd Priorities](#)

CYPE SP 40

Ymateb gan: Undeb Cenedlaethol Myfyrwyr Cymru

Response from: National Union of Students Wales (NUS Wales)

Beth yn eich barn chi yw'r prif flaenoriaethau neu'r materion y dylai'r Pwyllgor eu hystyried yn ystod y Chweched Senedd? Os oes modd, nodwch eich barn o ran sut y gallai'r Pwyllgor fynd i'r afael â hyn.

What do you consider to be the main priorities or issues that the Committee should consider during the Sixth Senedd? Where possible, please set out your view about how the Committee could address them.

Thema 1: Addysg oedran ysgol | Theme 1: School-age education

N/A

Thema 2: Addysg bellach ac addysg uwch | Theme 2: Further and higher education

Student Housing: The NUS Wales priority campaign in 2021/22 will be to make improving student housing a priority of the Welsh Government. We want to empower students to take action on their housing and raise the public profile of poor student housing as an issue that affects every aspect of a student's life. We are working in partnership with Shelter Cymru to get an accurate, up-to-date picture on student housing in Wales. A joint NUS Wales-Shelter Cymru survey in May-June 2021 found that more than half of students have experienced damp or mould in their accommodation, while 46 per cent reported disrepair in their housing. The link between housing and wellbeing is clear, with 65 per cent of respondents saying issues with their accommodation had affected their mental health and wellbeing. In addition, 35 per cent said accommodation issues affected their physical health.



The pandemic has exacerbated issues with student housing - students had to complete more of their course remotely. This meant they spent more time in their accommodation and were therefore more likely to be exposed to health risks that are prevalent in student housing such as damp or mould. Many students also had to pay hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds in rent for accommodation they could not use during lockdowns. Students who lived in university-owned accommodation received rent rebates for this period, but those in the private rented sector had no recourse to access refunds. Fixed-term student housing contracts are inflexible and mean the tenant has no right to exit their contract early. The pandemic has merely exposed the gaps that already existing in student renters' rights, and we urge the Committee to support our work to close these gaps.

We encourage the Committee to work with the Local Government and Housing Committee on this issue as this is an area of clear crossover. We believe there should be a one-day inquiry into student housing early in the sixth Senedd term, followed by a report with recommendations to Welsh Government on how to improve the situation for students.

Tertiary Education Reform: NUS Wales supports the overall aim of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill but believes the draft Bill as written does not grasp the opportunity to embed student voice across the sector. NUS Wales is calling for the Bill to include provisions that would guarantee that every student in the tertiary education sector receives a minimum standard of student voice provision from their institution. We encourage the Committee to consider the extent to which the Bill will benefit students in its legislative scrutiny.

Currently, students in FE and apprentices do not have the same level of access to representation and advocacy as their peers in HE. This is despite 16- and 17-year-olds now being able to vote in Senedd elections and the fact that the majority of FE students in Wales are aged 18 or over. FE students in Wales are full and engaged citizens and deserve a strong voice in their education. Student voice provision in FE institutions currently depends on the will of staff at those institutions to make it happen. NUS Wales believes the Bill presents an opportunity to put student voice structures on a legal footing and embed social partnership within all aspects of tertiary education.

Exams: The Committee should consider the future of assessment methods for students. NUS Wales believes exams are an outdated form of assessment and should be replaced by a more holistic system that more accurately measures a student's knowledge, abilities and talents. The A level results debacle of 2020 and subsequent



issues with grade inflation demonstrates that the current system is not fit for purpose and is unfairly weighted against people from more deprived areas of Wales. NUS Wales is concerned that the attainment gap has widened for black or poorer pupils during the pandemic on a UK-wide basis and would encourage the Committee to consider intersectionality and how the system impacts on people from marginalised backgrounds.

Student Finance: Student hardship rose significantly during the pandemic, with applications to institutional hardship funds and other support schemes rising across Wales. Welsh Government allocated more than £40 million in funding to top up hardship funds to ensure students who were struggling had access to funding. In response to the most recent NUS survey on the impact of the pandemic, 62 per cent of students in Wales said Covid-19 had impacted their income, while 50 per cent said the pandemic had impacted the income of someone who supports them financially. 75 per cent are concerned about their ability to manage financially beyond the pandemic and nine per cent have turned to food banks for lack of money.

We are concerned that the economic impacts of the pandemic will mean students will continue to face increased financial insecurity and hardship due to lower income and a lack of employment opportunities. While restrictions are lifting and many students will be able to resume part-time jobs, it is vital that institutions, Welsh Government, and the Senedd - including the Committee - continue to assess levels of student hardship and make changes to student support systems as necessary.

We are also concerned that costs have spiralled for non-EU international students, who already pay a premium to access higher education in Wales. Coronavirus restrictions meant many international students enrolled at Welsh institutions have not even been able to step foot in Wales, never mind a classroom at their institution. We recommend that the Committee considers the experience of international students in any work it undertakes on the impact of the pandemic, and continues to monitor the costs that international students have to bear in accessing their education.

Student Mobility: NUS Wales has consistently stated that students and young people must not lose out on outward-facing educational opportunities as a result of Brexit. We welcome the Welsh Government's announcement of a new International Learning Exchange programme and look forward to contributing to its development as a member of the programme's advisory board. It is vital that the programme fills all the gaps left by Erasmus+ and replicates what students would be able to access under the 2021-2027 iteration of the programme.



Blended Learning: The pandemic has fundamentally changed the landscape of education and how students access their learning. Higher education institutions in Wales are continuing with a policy of blended learning for at least the first term of the 2021/22 academic year. Some UK institutions, including the University of Manchester, have said remote/online learning will become a permanent part of a blended learning approach. While we recognise that there are benefits to blended learning, including increased flexibility and autonomy for students, it is important that a strong in-person learning offer remains a part of the higher education experience in Wales, as well truly accessible remote learning.

The move to remote learning necessitated by the pandemic meant that some students, especially disabled students, struggled to access their education in an engaging and meaningful way. It is important that education providers can offer a range of options to ensure the education offer works for them. We hope the Committee will work to consider how blended learning can be successfully implemented in the long term in a way that benefits students from all backgrounds.

Thema 3: Iechyd a lles, gan gynnwys gofal cymdeithasol (i'r graddau y maent yn ymwneud â phlant a phobl ifanc) | Theme 3: Health and well-being, including social care (as they relate to children and young people)

Mental Health and Wellbeing: Student mental health is in decline and has been since before the pandemic. Covid has only made the student mental health crisis in Wales worse; responding to an NUS survey in August 2021, 51 per cent of students in Wales said their mental health was worse than before the pandemic. Despite students facing a unique mix of academic, social and financial pressures on their mental health, they are not specifically mentioned in the Welsh Government's Mental Health Delivery Plan 2019-22. We are calling for a specific mental health strategy covering all students in the tertiary education sector. We would encourage the Committee to consider looking more closely at mental health in post-16 settings, and to continue to monitor to impact of the recommendations of the Mind Over Matter report produced by the fifth Senedd's committee.

NUS Wales is part of a cross-sector working group developing a policy proposal for a post-16 student mental health strategy for Wales. This would be the first of its kind in the UK and will identify and address the gaps in provision that students consistently fall through when accessing support for their mental health and wellbeing. The working group hopes to present its recommendations to Welsh Government and Members of the Senedd by winter 2021. The group is made up of student representatives, relevant further and higher education stakeholders and mental



health charities. We would welcome engagement with the Committee on the development and implementation of this strategy which is being co-created by the sector with students at its heart.

Welsh Government announced £10 million to support university students throughout the pandemic by funding mental health services in their institutions. It is vital that this funding is retained and built upon to ensure services in universities, colleges and students' unions are resilient and able to cope with students' mental health needs. We encourage the Committee to ensure Welsh Government properly funds student mental health services.

Trans Young People: We are concerned about the lack of services available to trans young people in Wales, who face long waiting times for appointments - often 18 months to two years - and still have to travel to England to receive treatment. We urge the Committee to specifically consider the experience of trans young people in Wales in all of its work during this Senedd term. We support calls for specialist healthcare services for trans children and young people in Wales and for increased funding for the Welsh Gender Service to ensure it can cater for and provider services to all trans people in Wales.

Thema 4: Plant a phobl Ifanc | Theme 4: Children and young people

N/A

