CYPE(6)-21-22- Paper 3

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) i [gymorth iechyd meddwl mewn addysg uwch](#)
This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) inquiry into [Mental Health support in Higher Education](#)

MHHE 13

Ymateb gan: Undeb Prifysgolion a Cholegau

Response from: University and College Union

The University and College Union (UCU Wales) represents almost 7,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians, and postgraduates in universities, colleges, adult education and training organisations across Wales. UCU Wales is a politically autonomous but integral part of UCU, the largest post-school union in the world. We welcome this opportunity to provide evidence to the CPYE Committees investigation into student mental health (higher education).

To support our oral evidence, UCU Wales has prepared the following brief and recommendations for committee members;

1: Any effective strategy to improve student mental health and wellbeing must take account of staff mental health and wellbeing. Notwithstanding the position of matriculating post graduate researchers (who count both as students and staff – see below), many academic staff currently confront a workload crisis. Recognizing this relationship, NUS Wales President, Orla Tarn, cited the [UCU 2021 Academic Workload Survey](#) whilst giving evidence to this committee (October 6th). Orla set out how academic staff work on average 51.3 hours per week with many precarious staff working more than three times their contractual hours. Characterising higher education as a "mentally unhealthy sector", Orla elaborated to say that some frontline academics simply do not have the "time or mental capacity" to instil a positive mental health message in the classroom. Describing how it is "impossible to pour from an empty cup", Orla recommended that work must be undertaken at an institutional level. UCU Wales supports the evidence offered by NUS Wales and considers it essential that the administration monitoring of the new registration wellbeing condition (Commission for Tertiary Education & Research) covers staff as well as students.

2: Confronting similar challenges in further education, UCU Wales is currently working in social partnership with Welsh Government and Colegau Cymru to take forward a funded wellbeing and professional learning project – 'Digging in'. Digging

in follows on from a previous funded piece of work ('Well Aware') undertaken between 2021/2022. The attached project report lists several specific challenges arising in college settings which are usefully summarised in the executive summary. Ranging between excessive workload, work intensification, culture, values and relationships, the action research project sought to identify solutions by embedding a cadre of trained wellbeing representatives. Having co-created a model that works, UCU Wales recommends that government apply these lessons and considers extending a similar social partnership scheme in Welsh higher education institutions.

3: An effective institutional approach must rest on sound intersectional foundations. In the view of UCU Wales, it is vital that the sector approach mental health and wellbeing through the prism of the Welsh Anti Racist Plan and LGBTQ+ Action Plan as well as taking account of further developments in other equality areas (such as the First Ministers Disability Task Force). Questions such as equality of access, staff recruitment and cultural competency will be vital if institutions are to look like the communities which they serve.

4: UCU Wales acknowledges the mental toll of loneliness and isolation suffered by many students throughout the pandemic. Additionally, we appreciate the very real danger that many students might now be 'priced out' of social activity because of growing inequality pursuant to a 12-year cost of living crisis. Whilst appreciating that budgets are tight, both government and institutions must ensure that assistance is in place to address the long-known relationship between poverty and negative wellbeing.

5: UCU Wales also cites the similarly accepted relationship between poor physical and mental health. Throughout the pandemic, government, institutions and campus unions (including NUS) worked in social partnership to successfully mitigate the threat of illness and death. However, in recent months, we have seen an alarming relaxation of protections. In one case, a major university now seeks to downscale mechanical ventilation during a period in which Welsh Government projects a steep rise in Covid infection and other pathogens. The attitude which determines that we can accept 'Fresher's Flu' as just another feature of campus life is not fit for the Covid age. For instance, only recently we saw [reports](#) detailing Long Covid's capacity to maim the most vulnerable. Institutions must accept that sound mental health and wellbeing begins with effective health & safety.

6: With respect to mental health crisis, at an institutional level NUS Wales identify issues around consistency and equity. With support differing from place to place, students who are judged as being too 'poorly' for university services but not sufficiently ill for Wales NHS risk falling through the gaps. University mental health liaison officers have proven key to helping this cohort who would otherwise be

passed from pillar to post. Funding for these posts needs to continue and, in some cases, be intensified.

7: Finally, In May 2022, UCU published a [report](#) which presented the findings of a survey into the experiences and needs of 955 postgraduate researchers (PGR's) in UK higher education (including Welsh institutions). Issues highlighted by respondents can be grouped into three categories:

1. Insufficient income and/or funding and the associated workload and time costs
2. Insufficient specificity in training and the formal requirements of the PhD for career development
3. Insufficient interpersonal support and integration of PGRs within universities Low pay and/or the ability to meet the costs of the PhD was the biggest issue for the majority of PGRs.

It was noted that this would likely have a knock-on effect on issues of health and wellbeing, concerns about workload and worries about career progression. Extra casualised work outside of the PhD was not considered to be an effective solution, with survey comments often describing significant underpayment and unfair workloads where adequate work opportunities could be accessed.

Committee Members can read more about the position of PGR's in the UCU Wales [response](#) to Welsh Governments Draft Innovation Strategy (page 10). However, it is worth considering how, given that post graduate research work acts as a gateway to academia, poor expectations and negative experiences of mental health can be solidified during early career.