



**WALES
CYMRU**

**RESPONSE TO:
The Finance Committee of the National
Assembly for Wales call for information on
the Welsh Government draft budget
proposals for 2016-17**

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The University and College Union (UCU Wales) represents more than 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.

UCU was formed on the 1st June 2006 by the amalgamation of two strong partners – the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) – who shared a long history of defending and advancing educators’ employment and professional interests.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the call for information on the Welsh Government draft budget proposals for 2016-17.

The impact of the Welsh Government’s 2015-16 budget was devastating for the Further Education sector in Wales. It resulted in the closure of many part-time adult courses and rendered the remainder too expensive for many adults to access; in addition it necessitated an excess of 800 redundancies across the twelve further education colleges. Consequently the remaining, protected provision for full time students under the age of 20 has been adversely affected, as resources dwindle, class sizes increase and expertise is lost. When set against the backdrop of “efficiency gains” that have had to be made in the preceding years, it has left the sector in a position that sees it having to focus on “innovative” ways to generate income instead of being able to focus on the core business of providing education and training to the local communities. We believe this to be a short term response that will have a long term detrimental impact on the communities and the economy of Wales.

With regard to wider Welsh Government aims, it is our opinion that previous decisions to reduce funding to the FE sector, have been counterproductive. Further education for adults and investment in lifelong learning opportunities can improve life chances and assist in the eradication of child poverty; can promote equality and social cohesion; can help to break down barriers of prejudice and intolerance and improve mental and physical health. The sector also has a huge role to play in the provision of quality apprenticeships and in the reduction of those not in education or training, but only if provided with the appropriate levels of funding needed to support such aims. We are pleased to note that the Welsh Government acknowledges that the post 16 sector has “...limited ability to absorb future cuts...”

Whilst we welcome the announcement that post-16 budgets will be protected from cash reductions, we are concerned that this will still leave the sector facing a real terms cut. We also welcome the announcement that there will be £5m allocated to the sector for 2,500 apprenticeships, but are cautious as to whom it will benefit. We would like to see some assurance, that this sum of money will benefit public rather than private services, and that there will be checks and safeguards to ensure that

apprenticeship schemes benefiting from such funding, will provide high quality training and education, leading to appropriately paid and relevant employment.

We are also pleased with the announcement of the FE childcare pilot to help those with caring responsibilities to access education without the worry of childcare costs; however we have concerns that as courses become unavailable due to lack of funding, it will not be possible to access them, regardless of the level of childcare support.

We understand that difficult decisions have had to be made, but are concerned that however well intended, they have had a hugely adverse effect on an integral part of Welsh education. Current policies focus mainly on the education of young people, which have resulted in the neglect of post 19 education; the importance of which has been overlooked and underestimated. As a way of trying to rectify this situation, we would like to suggest that the sector could be considered as a vehicle for supporting some of the early intervention programmes implemented in schools. For example, providing educational services to engage wider family members will help to promote the benefits of education to all and thus develop a community wide understanding of the advantages learning. There is evidence to suggest that early intervention programmes receiving support from the wider community, have greater long term benefits than those that don't. Therefore, in terms of returns on investment, it would be prudent to ensure that further education colleges receive adequate funding to provide services for people of all ages, sending a clear message that education is for everyone and not just for children. Currently adults who did not achieve at school and may have disengaged, are finding themselves unable to access educational opportunities, compounding the belief that education is "not for the likes of me"; a message that is then likely to be passed to their children. With the inclusion of adult education as part of the remit of early intervention programmes now, it could help to reduce the need for costly intervention programmes in future. It is important that gains made at school are not lost at home.

In addition, we are concerned that the Higher Education sector will be expected to deal with a substantial cut in funding, through the 32% budget reduction to HEFCW. Whilst we welcome the Welsh Government commitment to protect students from accruing huge debts, a consequence of the current system is that there is less funding available to the universities to provide for part-time and undergraduate students. It is likely that such cuts will have a disproportionate effect on the provision of part-time students, as we are likely to see support for part-time students removed. Again this will impact mainly on adults who wish to pursue higher education later in their lives; the removal of support for part-time students will, if implemented, affect needier students from poorer communities most.

In respect of the long term detrimental impact, account needs to be taken of the benefits in maintaining continuity of provision for students, to enable them to complete their educational programmes. Mature students can encounter severe problems when they are carers of children or older members of the family. They cannot transfer from full time to part time status because of the financial implications,

but find themselves trapped because their family commitments do not allow them to have sufficient time to continue their studies on a full time basis.

Further, this cut will impact on the ability for universities in Wales to continue with the levels of research that they are currently engaged in and will reduce the capacity to fulfil the widening access agenda. UCU would prefer to see a system of strong sustainable public funding for higher education as opposed to a system of student debt.

The higher education budget in Wales has already been reduced disproportionately between 2010/11 and 2015/16; the solution offered to Welsh universities will likely be to plug the gap by recruiting more students. It is not that simple however, in what is already a very volatile and highly competitive market. UCU recently commissioned London Economics to provide an independent assessment of levels of public funding allocated to learners undertaking higher and further education across the United Kingdom.¹ Although FE in Wales is not covered by the report, the analysis illustrates a number of key funding differences across Home Nations, which may offer useful insights into developing a way forward with regard to HE funding and finance in Wales.

With regard to preventative spending and tackling poverty, as already stated, we see post 16 education, in particular the education of adults, as having a vital role to play. It can improve lifelong opportunities to help lift families from poverty and promote social mobility and community cohesion; important factors in improving the health and wellbeing of the people of Wales. With the projection that a quarter of the Welsh population will be over the age of 65 within 20 years; many of whom will still be working; we see an increased need for adult education in order for the workforce to remain flexible. Likewise access to courses in retirement would help to keep Welsh citizens mentally and physically active and could play an important role in helping to combat isolation and dementia. Adult further and higher education is an important factor in helping people to maintain control over their lives.

Again, we welcome the decision to protect the post 16 budget from cash reductions and see this as a positive sign, but would like to see a more equitable distribution of public funding across all education sectors to facilitate the realisation of the Welsh Government vision for a more equal and prosperous Wales.

¹ http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/6/1/londoneconomics_mindth_____egap-publicfundinginheandfe_fullreport_nov15.pdf