

UCU Cymru Manifesto

Banking on a Better Future

INTRODUCTION

Whether seen through the lens of Covid, burgeoning inflation or fiscal famine, our members and learners have all too often experienced the past decade as a ceaseless emergency. UCU Cymru recalls the early optimism which accompanied our exit from the pandemic. Surveying a terrain since scarred by job losses, course closures and student hardship, we might justifiably yearn for the earlier promise of an 'equality led recovery'.

During periods such as this, decision-makers sometimes mistake helplessness for pragmatism. The subsequent language of 'difficult decisions' can mask a logic which enforces a politically imposed reality of winners and losers.

Believing in the transformative power of education, UCU Cymru asks all political parties to reject this zero-sum game and embrace an altogether more ambitious programme.

Pointing to two starkly different paths, down the first, we find an alienated workforce, lacking the foundational and advanced skills to engage with new technologies. In this scenario an amplification in inequalities of wealth, power and opportunity are all but inevitable.

Thankfully, there is another outcome – one that leads to a more just, dynamic, sustainable economy in which alacrity and innovation serve the purposes of wellbeing and broader prosperity.

Higher and further education already transform life chances, strengthening social cohesion and underwriting the crucial conditions for economic success. Learning benefits people of all ages in terms of employability, wellbeing and self-confidence.

This is why UCU Cymru campaigns for greater public investment in the post-16 education sector, as well as fair pay and manageable workloads for our members.





Welcoming the foundation of Medr, UCU Cymru recognises that the great advantage of a tertiary system lies in its potential to enable learners from diverse backgrounds to arrive at the same destination via a variety of different routes. Consequently, and with the right mix of content and assessment, there is absolutely no reason why a 14-year-old young apprentice who was previously disaffected by school, shouldn't be able to progress right up to level 6.

Similarly, we propose an exciting new programme whereby the Welsh Government and Medr fund universities to develop specific collaborations in primary secondary and further education settings. Whilst individual institutions can arrive at a focus which best serves their strengths, we envisage a national network of online lectures, study visits, mentoring schemes and other opportunities for independent and guided inquiry.

With so few Welsh young people going to university, we believe that this work demands a resource commensurate to the scale of the problem. After all, whilst government can legislate and trade unions, collectively bargain, the fruits will be uncertain for as long as the workforce lacks the knowledge, essential dispositions and transferable competencies to thrive in near-future industries.

Indeed, the very shape of the Welsh economy is determined by the skills of the people who our members teach. Whether in terms of hydrogen or offshore energy generation, bottlenecks and skill shortages curtail projects and limit possibilities. To that end, we do not exaggerate when we claim that the road to fair work and increased productivity ultimately runs through Welsh colleges and universities.

However, this pathway can only be secured through social partnership, social contract and robust governance which serves solid long-term ambitions as opposed to momentary gain.

At its very best, education is a liberator of minds, the provider of life chances and a pioneer of valuable knowledge and novel ideas. A new definition is needed which reaches beyond the statistics on a spreadsheet towards a wider recognition of the personal and collective advancement that learning brings.

Borrowing from the everyday experiences of both learners and our members, UCU Cymru has identified seven practical solutions designed to preserve all that is good whilst delivering necessary change.





Pledge 1: Higher Education – Restoring the Foundations

Around 30% of Welsh young people attend a university anywhere in the UK. This compares to 40% in Northern Ireland and just under 50% in Greater London. Given that the Welsh economy currently comprises a 51% graduate workforce, it is clear that we are confronting a skills deficit which threatens to exacerbate regional inequalities and arrest the development of the Welsh ‘missing middle’ – socially rooted medium-sized SME’s.

Against this background, some universities seek to raise their tariffs and climb the rankings to attract a greater share of ‘the international market’. UCU Cymru welcomes the massive cultural and intellectual contribution made by international students. Not only do they bring new wisdom to our campuses but also enrich Welsh communities.

At the same time, we can never accept a business model which disinvests in Welsh learners to lever a greater share of an inherently unstable market which is subject to currency fluctuations, geopolitical fall out and domestic political headwinds.

Our universities deserve firmer foundations and must be properly funded to work with schools and colleges to the extent whereby any Welsh child can realistically aspire to a university education if they so choose.

We ask all parties to work with with Medr to equalise learner HE participation with Northern Ireland by the end of the 7th Senedd.

This can be achieved by repurposing Seren, simplifying pathways to encourage HE vocational learner recruitment, reforming student support to incentivise study at Welsh universities and funding institutions to collaborate more closely with schools and colleges.

Pledge 2: Further Education – Freeing Teachers to Teach

Collaborating with schools, business and universities, our colleges constitute the backbone for essential and intermediate skill provision throughout Wales. However, a succession of difficult budget settlements has cut back on professional services with lecturers picking up the burden of additional work.

Combined with extra challenges posed by the introduction of the ALN Act and longitudinal learner behavior issues emanating from the Pandemic, many college lecturers are unable to recoup, recover or reflect.

Practitioners are already working to the bone and supporting strained public services. Pastoral duties frequently include mental health and wellbeing interventions, income maximisation and other complex work that was traditionally undertaken by counsellors and social workers. The time has come to lift some of the load and restore teachers to a position in which they can actually teach.

In tandem with Medr, Welsh Government must lead on tackling workload.





We ask all parties to commit to a program of investment in support services while avoiding staff reductions for lecturers. Moreover, to restore certainty and stability, we also ask you to commit to a five-year funding settlement within variable margins.

Time saved must be ringfenced to support genuine professional learning, with investment in communities of practice and action research.

Pledge 3: Social Partnership – Innovation and Liberating Skills from Below

The ‘Welsh Way’ of social partnership is now firmly embedded both in the priorities of government and Medr’s Strategic plan.

UCU Cymru’s joint social partnership projects for instance in Coleg Cambria demonstrate the success of partnership. Solution focused relationships not only mitigate against the risk of strife but also provide the conditions for innovation.

We ask all parties to commit to pursuing and developing the social partnership agenda in the tertiary sector, with every college and university enjoying an opportunity to enter into genuine partnership in the 7th Senedd.

Similarly, the funding crisis in Welsh higher education has shone a light on both the best and the worst of HE governance. Whilst some institutions have opened their books and worked with trade unions as creative partners, others have fallen back on managerial diktat in pursuit of untested plans.

The past decades reveal a pattern of boom and bust in Welsh HE. Moreover, when institutions have miscalculated, all too often it is learners and staff who have been left to carry the cost. UCU Cymru believes that this cycle can only be broken through the democratization of university governance.

In addition to promoting medium-to-long term planning, democratic governance can tap expertise from below and act to stabilize the sector.

We ask all parties to commit to a Senedd Commission with the remit to explore the current state of university governance. Examining UK and International comparators, the Commission will report both to the Cabinet secretary and Medr during the first two years of the new Senedd.

Pledge 4: Pay Parity – the Backbone of Industrial Peace

Since its inception in 2005, pay parity between Welsh school teachers and college lecturers has delivered 20 years of industrial peace in our colleges.

This is vital considering the disproportionately greater role which our colleges play in delivering vocational qualifications and apprenticeships as well as the majority of A-Level examinations undertaken in Wales.

Referencing frequent strikes in the English sector, UCU Cymru asks all parties to commit to maintaining pay parity in Wales.





Pledge 5: Novel Technologies – Engaging at the Point of Design

The development of novel technologies opens the way to substantial opportunities both in the areas of pedagogy and relieving administrative burdens. However, the accelerating pace of transformation carries risks as well as dividends.

It is notable how one of the most fertile periods of collaboration and partnership emerged from the necessity of keeping education open during the Pandemic. Whether viewed from an educational or ethical perspective, it is clear practitioners and their trade unions are perfectly positioned to weed out what is unworkable whilst augmenting positive change.

Rather than imposing top-down changes, UCU believes that the best solutions are achieved when practitioners, management and providers work together as creative partners.

When embarking upon novel projects, we ask your party to commit to engaging staff and their representative unions at the point of design.

This can easily be achieved if either Welsh Government or Medr expose bidders to the tradition of social partnership at the point of tender by requiring a draft sketch in relation to sector engagement in relation to digital contracts in excess of £100,000. Similarly, the Welsh Government's Social Partnership Directorate must be tasked with providing a day's orientation training to the successful bidder.

Pledge 6: Funding Legislation – Ensuring that the Resource is there

Whilst UCU Cymru welcomed the introduction of the ALN Act as a necessary progressive reform, it has since become clear that sufficient resources were not put aside to support operational implementation. Similarly, poorly drafted minimum qualifications Regulations in FE have unsettled lecturers and college management by disqualifying PGCE qualifications from reputable UK universities.

UCU Cymru notes how existing consultations already carry equality impact and cost assessments. However, there is an urgent need to assess and guarantee the necessary resources beyond immediate implementation.

UCU Cymru asks your party to engage all areas of the sector in a proper costing & impact assessment exercise and only legislate when it is confident that the long-term funding is present to cover the cost.

Pledge 7: Family Learning

Responding to Welsh Governments Draft Child Poverty Strategy in 2023, UCU Cymru identified a process whereby single parent families (ostensibly led by mum) had become increasingly distant from well-paid, fair work and education. Briefly exploring the relationship between poverty and trauma, we explained how the current qualification system reproduced poverty by inculcating a 'lifelong dread of learning' in many of the disproportionately poorest children who do not achieve a 'C Grade' at level GCSE.





Adopting a whole family approach model, we explored a range of remedies which can simultaneously re-engage parent and child in a beneficial learning experience whilst also tackling the systemic failures which stymie participation and contribute to withdrawal from educational opportunity.

Since then, the Cardiff Council Family Learning Service has demonstrated what can be achieved when a provider adopts a systematic approach which is tailored to the rhythm of parents lives as they are actually lived. The truth is that learning can often prove contagious. With rising confidence comes a self-belief in future possibility, with some learners going all the way through to apprenticeship or university. There is ample evidence to demonstrate the subsequent beneficial impact for the child.

Acknowledging the urgent need to address intergenerational poverty, we believe that Community Schools will be uniquely placed to offer a cost-effective family learning programme.

We ask your party to commit to a Senedd Commission on adult education with a special focus on family learning. In addition to the development of a Welsh Adult Learning Strategy, the investigation must consider how devolved incomes can best benefit the hardest to reach.



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