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**Email Only**

## **UCU Cymru Response to Draft Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2023**

### **Abstract**

*In our response, UCU Cymru identifies a process whereby single parent families have become increasingly distant from well-paid, fair work and education. Briefly exploring the relationship between poverty and trauma, we explain how the current qualification system reproduces poverty by inculcating a ‘lifelong dread of learning’ in many of the disproportionately poorest children who do not achieve a ‘C Grade’ at level 2. Adopting a family approach model, we then use Welsh Government’s current policy suite to explore a range of remedies which can simultaneously reengage parent and child in a beneficial learning experience whilst also tackling the systemic failures which contribute to withdrawal from educational opportunity.*

### **Opening Notes – Addressing Consultation Question 17**

The University and College Union (UCU Cymru) represents almost 7,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, IT staff, librarians, and postgraduates in universities, colleges, adult education and training organisations across Wales. UCU Cymru is a politically autonomous but integral part of UCU, the largest post-school union in the world.

In lieu of a foreword, we understand that education alone cannot eradicate poverty. Concurring with OECD educator, Pasi Sahlberg, “[the most equitable education systems are supported by wider social and economic policy](#)”. That said, where education is properly scaffolded, its transformative power is undeniable.

Similarly, UCU Cymru notes the near consensus amongst progressive think tanks and those directly engaged in tackling child poverty – all of which suggests that cash benefits provide the cleanest and most effective solution.

Departing from the gloomy assumption that funding will remain finite in immediate future, we make a needs-based case for targeting resources towards single parents

(ostensibly mothers). Nonetheless, we also note that many of our recommendations will bring universal relief to all children suffering poverty in Wales.

### **Single Parents – Distant from Education and Fair Work**

In Wales, [86% of single parents are mothers](#). Between 2017 and 2020, almost half ([46%](#)) of single-parent households in Wales were in poverty, twice as high as the overall poverty rate in the rest of the UK.

Single mothers and their children face elevated poverty and other wellbeing risks, all of which can contribute to [lower educational attainment](#) and psychological impairment in adulthood (Amato, 2000; Bradshaw et al., 2012; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Poverty risks and other adverse outcomes can be particularly prominent among single mothers with lower levels of education. These mothers are often doubly disadvantaged in the labour market, as their employment situation is restricted not only by the absence of qualifications, but also the challenges of combining (frequently poorly paid and exhausting) paid work with family responsibilities

The combination of absent qualifications and single parenthood often leads to very high poverty risks (Härkönen, 2017) and will, at the aggregate level, translate into larger single-mother poverty gaps across different levels of educational attainment.

Similarly, Single parents living in rural communities face further challenges from the cost of living premium incurred by higher costs for transport, fuel and food, and lower pay and more precarious work (Bevan Foundation 2023), disadvantaging children in rural areas (ap Gruffud et al 2017).

### **Unfair work Doesn't Pay – Recent Data**

The IFS's [annual report](#) into living standards, poverty and inequality, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (July 2022), found that in the year prior to the pandemic, nearly half (49%) of children in lone-parent families were in relative poverty – defined as having an income of less than 60% of median incomes adjusted for household size. This is almost double the rate among children living in two-parent families (25%).

More recently, in '[Sharing the benefits - Can Britain secure broadly shared prosperity](#)', the Resolution Foundation found that the low paid had become increasingly divorced from the dividends of any potential increase in productivity. This was principally attributable to the way in which benefits are linked to prices as opposed to increases in wages – a significant factor in as far as the incomes of the low paid are frequently subsidized by state benefits. Survailling the aggregate thrust

of the two largest UK political parties, both economic and anti-poverty policy (as far as it exists) depend upon boosting growth and increasing productivity.

The flatlining of absolute poverty and rise in relative poverty for children of lone parents reflect reductions in the real value of state benefits in the years from 2011 to 2019, as shown by [Bourquin, Joyce and Norris Keiller \(2020\)](#). Lone parents on low incomes are particularly reliant on income from benefits. These cuts to benefits have offset rises in employment incomes in recent years, which have been large for lone parents. The fraction of children living in a lone-parent family where their parent was working rose from 50% in 2007–08 to 54% in 2013–14 and reached 62% in 2019–20. It should also be noted that the ‘Benefit Cap’ [disproportionately penalises](#) single parents with larger families.

The fact that in the year prior to the pandemic, nearly half (49%) of children in lone-parent families were in relative poverty, merely illustrates that work alone no longer constitutes a reliable escalator out of poverty.

Consequently, if we conclude that well paid, fair work constitutes the best route out of poverty, we must ensure that we equip both parent and child with the requisite skill, competencies and habits of mind necessary to supporting a fair work economy.

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### **Poverty, Trauma and the ‘Lifelong Dread of Learning’**

We also [know](#) that families experiencing poverty and trauma in childhood can affect the ability – and opportunities – to learn. Crucially, UCU Cymru apposes this to the recognised [benefits](#) accruing to children in families where one or more parent is engaged in meaningful [adult education](#) (usefully [summarised](#) in a 2012 Parliamentary Review).

Recent work [published](#) by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network explored the relationship between poverty and trauma. The report concluded that families exposed to urban poverty face a disproportionate risk of exposure to trauma and of becoming [‘trauma-organized systems’](#). Factors associated with urban poverty such as low neighbourhood safety, daily hassles, and racial discrimination have been shown to increase the risk that trauma will negatively impact family functioning.

The erosion in family functioning jeopardizes the ability to support learning. Consequently, both compulsory, PCET and adult educators must be supported towards developing pedagogies which are sensitized to the traumatic context of urban and rural poverty.

Furthermore, evidence (usefully summarized in this [article](#)) suggests that, whilst girls and boys, enter early years feeling equally capable, by age six girls already tend to consider themselves less talented. Driven by external socialisation, girls of all socio-

economic backgrounds tend to assign 'failure' to ability. This is in contrast to boys who are more likely to cite external factors outside of their control. Whereas UCU Cymru hopes that the new curriculum will address this issue, it is clear that young women are currently at greater risk of internalising notions of traumatic failure.

Sadly, the current qualification regime is more likely to reproduce patterns of poverty and trauma. ASCEL's [Forgotten Third](#) stresses how GCSE's necessarily fail a third of the disproportionately most disadvantaged children. Similarly, the National Education Union's [New Era Report](#) focuses on the process by which the UK fetish for examinations and memory testing not only penalises the poorest children but also curtails teacher creativity and opportunities for learner group work.

This is significant given that the academic consensus (Fulham, Hargreaves, Sahlberg, Quinn, etc) indicates that collaborative learning or 'deep learning' provides the best opportunity for closing the attainment gap.

In '[Deep Learning](#)' the authors utilise over 60 case-studies to illustrate how collaborative pedagogies rooted in socially relevant projects can excite agency and promote equity. Whilst many of these case studies are remarkable in their own right, the most significant finding is worth reproducing in full;

*"In implementing deep learning in scores of settings, we began to see that under the right conditions immersive learning reaches everyone. It was this realisation that led us to the 'equity hypothesis' referred to above: Deep learning is good for all but is especially effective for those most disconnected from schooling"*

Put differently, it would be equally fair to say that the acquired individual benefits of enhanced social capital (such as private tuition and access to knowledge networks) can become collectively advantageous in a collaborative setting. This should come as no surprise – as Pasi Sahlberg points out, "A child's learning is a function more of the characteristics of his classmate than of those of the teacher." (Bristol Teacher Fest, 2022)

Whereas the immediate consequences of not achieving a 'C Grade' will dramatically curtail progression in education and employment, the longer-term consequences can be best characterised as a 'lifelong dread of learning' – a very powerful form of trauma in its own right.

Seen from this perspective, it is easy to understand how a working mum, whose life circumstances and negative experience of formal schooling dissuades her from reengaging with education, will remain trapped in poorly paid work. What's more, her small family will also experience poverty in a domestic setting where attitudes towards education are mixed at best. Consequently, having lost the habit of learning, she will be ill equipped to support her children's progression even while their daily exposure to the reality of poverty makes them that much more vulnerable to the same traumatic processes which set them on their painful journey.

**When confronted with such a wicked paradox, the policy objective must be clear. Government, providers and educators must enable and motivate mum to access education in 1: away that signals clear advantage & hope and, 2: a form which is both trauma informed and synchs with her busy life. Similarly, we must also address the systemic failures which endanger her children so that future generations are not forced to confront the same disadvantage. Above all, we must try to get the family learning together.**

With these objectives in mind, UCU Cymru recommends:

**1: ‘Wales - an Anti-Poverty Nation’:** child poverty is driven by economic and social process but experienced through family relations. It thus follows that the solution will address the needs of parent and child. We believe that equity and social justice are essential features in any education system. More broadly, extrapolating [OECD ‘Equity in Education – Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility’](#), the synergies must cross Welsh Government Departments and Ministerial Portfolios. As Pasi Sahlberg observes, “the most equitable education systems are scaffolded by wider social and economic policy”. Where we see developments around fair work, social partnership, health or (particularly public) transport, government must ensure that these agendas speak to the central purpose of eradicating poverty. Being cognisant of the very real limitations posed by limited competencies and resource, UCU Wales notes how Wales has navigated similar challenges (justice, policing, employment law, etc all remain retained) to propose a method by which anti-racism can be achieved in a relatively short period. **To that end, we invite Welsh Government to embrace the same courage and co-productive approach adopted in the Anti-Racist Plan.**

**2: Coherent Pathways and Exciting Progression Opportunities:** if government wishes to deliver upon its ambition of a Welsh ‘second chance nation’, proper funding will be key. Welsh Adult Education is yet to recover from the eviscerating cuts imposed in 2012/13. That said, some of the debate which currently surround the new Commission (for Tertiary Education and Research) risks missing several key points.

**A parent experiencing poverty should be absolutely clear about the progression opportunities which follow on from a micro-module or basic skills course.**

**Moreover, whether their pathway is vocational or academic, there must be a clear map plotting destinations from level 1 all the way through to level 6.** UCU adult educators describe the confidence and near addictive quality which can accompany late learning – particularly where the student has overcome objective barriers and previous negative experience. **To harness this verve, Government needs to fund progression to at least level 3 and ensure that wider policy, whether in relation to childcare, EMA or Welsh Benefits support a parent-learner to access education in a way which synchs with the rhythm of their own lives.**

As a case in point, Recently, UCU Cymru's attention has been drawn to the high attrition rates in some pre-registration nursing courses, often after 1 or 2 years of study: students attribute this to the impossibility of finding affordable childcare. Most nursing students are recruited locally, from economically deprived areas. All nursing courses are struggling to recruit suitable candidates. **Both recruitment and retention to healthcare courses would be facilitated by childcare provision, particularly for those with depleted social capital.**

Whilst UCU Cymru believes in the positive power of universal education, it is clear that finite resources might favour hypothecating funding toward those learners with children. **Consideration should also be given to supported apprenticeships tailored to the needs of single parents.**

**3: Learner Profiles:** similarly, discussions surrounding provision can all too often get lost in the abstract. If our ambition is to remain learner centred then it is vital that government, providers and practitioners remain focused on the lived experience of parents and children confronting poverty. **Advocating for a social model of education which adapts to lives as they are actually lived, UCU Cymru strongly recommends that stakeholders collaborate with practitioners to distil and collate a series of 'silhouettes' or profiles designed to capture these experiences.** Whether in terms of proofing or design, these can then be employed across government & providers as a practical tool for assessing the positive or negative impact of strategic decisions.

**4: Community Schools & Learning Families:** [research demonstrates](#) that child attainment is massively augmented where one or more parent is also engaged in learning. **Community schools potentiate a range of exciting opportunities – not only as a point of access for parent adult education but also a safe setting in which help can be sought and found.** As a strong aside, UCU Cymru strongly recommends that these spaces remain separate from any hint of conditionality. The experiences of several NGO's demonstrated the devastating trust impact on Community First Hubs when they became destinations for UK DWP mandates and instruction.

Unsurprisingly, parents seek to avoid settings which they associate with the sanctioned withdrawal of basic life-support.

More positively, whether through taster courses or extended project qualifications (see below) there are opportunities for engagement with FE and HE institutions as well as socially responsible business along with health and social care providers. Ideally, the aim will be to deliver a coherent community curriculum which benefits parent and child alike. **Other policy options might embrace individual family tuition and/or offering learning support to women pre and post maternity.** Where done sensitively, there is strong evidence to suggest that this might promote secure

attachment and bonding. **Occupational Therapists (with their focus on enabling people to develop skills that help them to engage with activities that are meaningful and useful to them) would be well placed to work with providers and lead on developing this community curriculum. Similarly, other peri-natal health professionals midwives and family visitors can also usefully support this work.** Finally, children and parents with disabilities require innovative, specialist services to deliver both health and social care. Whilst falling beyond the scope of this consultation, UCU Cymru recognises how an integrated national care service can facilitate these needs.

**5: Qualifications and Assessment – Rooting out Failure:** In our submission to Welsh Government’s Draft Innovation Strategy Consultation, UCU Cymru explored the relationship between inequality, qualifications and assessment in some depth. For the purposes of this consultation it is enough to say that, despite some promising signals from the qualification regulator, our reliance on cliff edge examinations will continue to reproduce the forgotten third of learners who are most likely to experience poverty in later life. Outside the UK, no other jurisdiction subjects 16 years olds to high-stakes examinations. **Government should thus be clear about the wider purpose of GCSE’s and consider how they can be adapted to a European norm which finds young people in education to at least 18.**

Looking more widely, the OECD, have consistently [identified](#) lifelong learning as a crucial lever in equipping workers with the diverse skills, competencies and capabilities necessary to thrive in a transitional economy. Moreover, the availability of staff skilled in areas such as complex problem solving, critical thinking and emotional intelligence (p42 DL) will prove integral to the development of socially rooted SME’s.

Sometimes (if improperly!) described as ‘non-cognitive skills’, [competencies](#) such as **creativity and critical reflection are highly transferrable and provide the equipment for independent learning. Given the almost insurmountable challenges in predicting future skills needs, it would be sensible to afford equal value to transferrable skills alongside knowledge, numeracy, literacy and ICT skills as agile components in future proofing as well as preparation for lifelong learning.**

Sadly, outside the vocational sector, our education system does not privilege qualities such as collaboration, grit and independent learning – all of which will equip workers to bargain for fair work in tomorrow’s economy. Rather, attainment is too often measured as an ability to regurgitate drilled knowledge at short order – much to the chagrin of PCET educators and business alike. Responding to this failure, the [Rethinking Assessment](#) movement carry a wealth of resources including a concise [Blueprint for Change](#).

Either way, noting the pace of Welsh qualification reform, **both government and Qualifications Wales need to give due consideration to the socio-economic impact of their decisions.** UCU Cymru does not oppose the judicious use of examinations as a balanced component amongst a wider suite of multi-modal assessment. However, for as long as our qualification and assessment system remains so heavily wedded to memory testing, teachers will have no option but to teach to that test. Putting aside the vandalism that this will do to the new curriculum, there is no good reason to believe that children from disproportionately poorer backgrounds will not continue to be failed!

**6: Extended Project Qualifications – Doing Deep Learning:** Addressing the question of what an equitable qualification system might look like, we stress the need to embed deep learning, collaborative work and the habit of independent research.

Happily, in our [response](#) to Qualifications Wales ‘Full Offer’, we identified an existing novel qualification which, in addition to offering a template, addresses many of these challenges.

Emerging from England, the Extended Project Qualification embeds the learning dispositions favoured by UCU Cymru whilst also offering a truly game changing opportunity for civic engagement/co-creation with HEI’s, business and a range of stakeholders. Borrowing from what is good in Singapore, there is an obvious advantage in engaging institutions and employers whose trust and confidence will ultimately underwrite the value of most qualifications. Moreover, aside from providing the PCET sector with a valuable occasion to perform its civic mission/strategic duty to achieve curricula coherency, the EPQ and associated School Citizen Assemblies compliments the movement towards community schools.

Quoting directly from the Edge Foundation, the benefits are summarised as:

- Develop university, FE and schools as hubs which can engage with local organisations and communities to make a real difference through education and social action.
- Tackle problems of environmental sustainability and climate change by bringing together schools, climate change experts, young people and communities to enact change within their local communities as well as forging links in isolated rural and semi-rural settings
- Encourage greater agency, creativity, inclusivity and empathy of different stakeholder perspectives through approaches such as challenge led learning and other innovative pedagogies and practices.
- Promote equity, equality and diversity by creating spaces for different voices and perspectives around social justice issues and climate change.



- Embed greater levels of knowledge, skills, higher order thinking, empathy, collaboration, creativity and real-life problem solving into curriculum design and pedagogies within schools and universities.
- Develop templates, toolkits, platforms and prototypes that can be scaled up nationally (and internationally) to support and empower change and encourage processes of civic and community engagement, learning, collaboration.

Recognising the qualifications transformational potential in a community school setting, **UCU Cymru strongly recommends that Welsh Government work with the qualification regulator and participating schools/institutions to pilot a Welsh EPQ, taking care to monitor comparative attainment outcomes.**

**7: Scaffolding Change – Trust the Teacher:** Delivering deep learning across a range of future proofed qualifications will require educators to develop innovative approaches and pedagogies. Similarly, supporting deep learning through creative and socially grounded assessment necessarily entails moving away from standardized techniques (such as ‘teaching to the test’) towards a greater emphasis on collaborative learning between staff as well as learners.

**Whether understood as ‘communities of practice’ or ‘whole school approaches’, the international evidence indicates that professional autonomy, when combined with freedom from the onerous burden of misdirected external assessment, tends to deliver both improved and more equitable learner outcomes.**

In Finland – an OECD superstar, the basic assumption is that education is a collaborative process and that it is cooperation and networking between professionals which raise the quality of education. Government works with the profession to establish a clear but flexible national framework for locally based curriculum planning. Sharing some similarities with new Welsh school curriculum, institutions are encouraged to innovate teaching around widely defined national goals and arrive at personalised learning opportunities.

Crucially, a commitment to equity lies at the heart of this work. The Wales Program of government seeks to foster a more equal nation by emphasizing that all children should have equal prospects for educational success. In contrast, competitive models necessarily tolerate a high degree of inequality, betting on market forces and performance management to punish ‘failure’ thus raise ‘standards’.

This is significant in as far as it speaks to a central question; if we invest in professional learning to move towards a more collaborative system of education, how can we be sure that teaching will improve?

Referring to the current academic debate, the simple answer is 'trust the teacher'. Remarkably, there is little evidence to support the claim that enforcing external school evaluation systems and standardised testing promotes better learning or outcomes. Rather, the assumption that all learners should be educated by rote to the same paper targets not only stifles pedagogy but also serves to de-professionalise teachers by reducing their craft to a series 'measurable' actions.

**High functioning, innovative societies empower teachers and invest in professional learning precisely because this delivers better outcomes. The innovative strength of professional learning communities is also evidenced by their greater agility in adapting to new challenges. Most recently, this was demonstrated by Finnish, German and Dutch education settings rapid adjustment to digital delivery under conditions of Pandemic shock.**

The research of Pasi Sahlberg and Andy Hargreaves demonstrates the advantages of building a culture of responsibility and trust within the profession. Such a culture will necessarily value teacher professionalism and judgement in determining what is best for schools. **Drawing on these lessons, UCU Cymru focuses on the benefits of collaborative professional learning and can already point to promising findings from our Welsh Government funded professional learning project.**

**There is a crucial need to ensure that time and space is created in educators' workload to enable collaboration. Sahlberg cites OECD figures ([Finnish Lessons 3.0 p.113](#)) to demonstrate that there is no correlation between net instruction time in primary/lower secondary school and net performance, when measured via PISA test results.** Indeed, several jurisdictions are shown to perform better with around 40% less formal teaching time. Although Sahlberg characterizes this paradox as 'Test less – learn more', (p114), all the sources agree that deep learning, in common with collaborative professional learning which scaffolds effective pedagogies adds value to time spent teaching.

We contrast this with the practice of 'over teaching' or using past papers to drill model responses across an increasingly broad range of material.

**Consequently, UCU Cymru recommend that Estyn is funded to deliver an extensive thematic review of collaborative practise in compulsory and post compulsory settings. Depending upon the outcome, we also strongly recommend that Estyn incorporate positive opportunities for teacher collaboration and action research/professional enquiry into its inspection protocol.**

### **Summary - Dramatic but Incremental**

In summary, UCU Cymru believes that the right education can provide one of the best protections against poverty in a fair work economy. Consequently, by engaging

families in learning and supporting them into well paid work, we not only improve their income but boost their overall wellbeing.

In terms of how we get there, funding needs to embrace a social model of provision which is sensitised to life patterns as well as past and present trauma. Similarly, government must also ensure that equity is front and centre of education (and wider social/economic) policy; particularly in sphere of qualification reform as it is the experience of internalised 'failure' which all too often reproduces deep and persistent poverty through a life- long dread of learning.

Finally, if these recommendations are to have their full effect the profession need to be scaffolded through a period dramatic albeit, incremental change. Reform at an organic level cannot be left to diktat or mediated solely through external agencies.

**Above all, in the same way that an effective broader strategy will engage with and learn from experiences of those who suffer or seek to mitigate child poverty, a truly equitable education system cannot be built without listening very closely to teachers and educators.**