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RESPONSE TO:
Consultation on HEFCW's Well-being and health in higher education policy statement

Contact Details:

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1. 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.

2. UCU Wales is a politically autonomous but integral part of UCU, the largest post-school union in the world. It 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.

Question 1: does the Statement clearly set out what HEFCW's policy position? If not what more could be done to be clearer?

UCU Wales welcomes this (draft) policy statement from HEFCW on what is such an important and pressing issue within higher education. Well-being and health is a much needed area that requires urgent attention, especially given the increasing prevalence of these issues among staff and students within higher education. We also very much welcome the opportunity to submit our views on this draft document and inform its final content.

The document does set out (in line with its stated purpose) HEFCW's own policy position on well-being and health in higher education with an explicit focus upon outlining its strategic intentions and providing high level actions. It locates its own statement within the wider legislative and policy context making reference to relevant legal, policy, strategic and other frameworks as well as what it regards as being 'best practice' initiatives. While UCU Wales understands the rationale for taking this approach, in particular to minimise duplication and to encourage its partners to create strategic change at an institutional level, we do feel that on balance the 'statement' would benefit from providing a greater level of detail, direction and guidance to secure the implementation of the actions required in order to fulfil its stated aim of strengthening and supporting well-being and health in higher education in Wales.

Question 2: are there any gaps or omissions in the Statement that should be addressed? Please explain what these are and how they should be addressed.

The statement would benefit from providing definitions of the concepts of 'well-being' and 'health'. These concepts can be defined in a range of ways and are complex and contested concepts[1]. More specifically, research has suggested that conflating mental health and well-being can be damaging leading to universities replacing mental health services with well-being services, introducing more unproven and often cheaper interventions and reducing the number of counsellors', particularly trained counsellors, available[2]. Providing clear definitions of these concepts would provide clarity about the remit and scope of the statement and assist in overcoming any confusion over their meaning as well as encourage a consistent approach.

The section on the Legislative and policy context has omitted reference to the Welsh Language Act 2011 & HEFCW's Welsh Language Standards Implementation Plan 2018.

The policy statement could benefit from greater consideration being given to measuring, monitoring and evaluating health and well-being in HE. While the policy statement does make reference to measuring well-being it does not state explicitly how this will be done. It is also important to note that there already exist a number of national data collection methods to measure health and well-being among applicants, students and graduates although there do not currently exist any national measure of staff well-being within universities. While there is a place for measuring health and well-being this must not be on top of or duplicate other existing national data collection and measurement tools. It is important to be clear about the purpose of collecting the data and how it will be used.

With specific regards to students the policy statement could benefit from teasing out the distinction between applicants, students and graduates. Young people's experience of HE involves key transitions – moving from home to University and later leaving University to enter employment – which is likely to impact on the types of health and well-being issues they may face and the HE sector has a critical role in this process and promoting health and well-being.

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[1] O'Brien & Guiney (2018). Staff Wellbeing in Higher Education. London: Education Support Partnership

[2] Liz Lightfoot, *Universities outsource mental health services despite soaring demand,* 2018, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/jul/17/universitiesoutsource-mental-health-services-despite-soaringdemand

We welcome the emphasis placed upon the position of students in the policy statement which does, to a large extent, reflect the content of WG remit letter. However we believe that the statement should give greater consideration to the health and well-being of staff. Research conducted by Douglas[3] revealed that HE's are not giving sufficient priority to addressing staff health and well-being with less than 11 per cent of the 136 universities that responded having an explicit policy to support staff well-being. The reports' author concluded that there is a need for HE to take a more strategic approach to staff well-being, with staff being involved in shaping their working contexts, and are valued and seen as both essential and capable of building flourishing communities in higher education. UCU Wales support the view put forward by others[4] that it is a false economy if an improved student environment comes at the expense of staff health and well-being.

There is a growing body of research evidence highlighting the health and well-being needs of staff in higher education. A recent report[5] reveals an escalation of poor mental health among university staff in the period 2009 to 2016. Based on data gathered from 59 universities on referrals to counselling and occupational health services the study revealed that there has been a 316% increase in access to counselling services at the University of Warwick, a 292% increase at Kent, 172% at Brunel, 126% at Newcastle and 88% at Bristol. While there were some cases of rates of referrals going down, at Bath and Manchester for example, overall referrals of staff to occupational health services showed a similar upward trajectory, up 424% at the University of Kent which saw the number of referrals rise from just over 70 to a little under 400. At Cambridge, referrals went up 179%, at Essex 159% and at 142% at Bristol. In Wales our concerns for the health and well-being of HE staff has been heightened by the tragic death by suicide last year of Malcolm Anderson at Cardiff University. Reports indicate that Mr Anderson had attributed his distress to excessive workload (when he was dealing with >600 students and marking >400 exam papers), and management failure to respond to his objections. This is not the first time such an incident had taken place and been attributed to a working environment which appeared to condone excessive pressures on academic staff. The death of Stefan Grimm of Imperial

[3] Douglas.V (2019). Improving staff mental health and well-being is crucial, yet less than 11% of universities have a specific well-being policy. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute

[4] Anthony Seldon and Alan Martin, *The Positive and Mindful University*, 2017, p.4

[5] Morrish.L (2019). Pressure Vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute.

College, London, in 2014 was thought to have been precipitated by pressure from his manager to increase his research grant funding.

Of particular note is the expectation for staff to support students with their health and well-being which can be positive for the student and their relationship with staff but can also have negative implications for the staff who can struggle under the burden of supporting students with health problems, especially where they have not received appropriate training to do so[6]. Greater consideration could be given to the impact this has upon the staff and their own health and well-being as well as the possible implications for any HEI that allows untrained staff to provide support and advice to students in this way. Proper mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that staff have the skills and time to fulfil this role and proper training should be provided. More specifically steps must be taken to secure appropriately trained and qualified professional services, employing registered professionals.

Other research has found that the take up of services (such as counselling or occupational health) to support staff well-being in the sector is variable. In some cases, universities indicated that this information was not routinely recorded or available. One research study revealed that staff said they would actively choose not to use in-house processes and procedures to deal with their own wellbeing/mental health issues at a time when trust had been eroded. They felt it could result in labelling which could be detrimental to them. Further discussions are required to understand the factors behind these figures[7].

UCU Wales would recommend that HEFCW revisit its policy statement to ensure that the position of both students *and* staff within HE are given equal consideration.

Question 3: should more be done to improve the Statement not already identified in the responses given to the questions above? If more should be done, please explain the improvements that might be helpful and why.

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[6] Poppy Brown, *The invisible problem? Improving students' mental health,* 2018

[7] Douglas.V (2019). Improving staff mental health and well-being is crucial, yet less than 11% of universities have a specific well-being policy. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute

N/A – see our responses to Q 1, 2 & 4

Question 4: is there any other information that it would be helpful for HEFCW to consider in developing the Statement further?

UCU Wales would like to take this opportunity to emphasise the importance of addressing the root causes of many of the current health and well-being issues currently experienced by students and staff within the HE sector. These are structural (not individual) issues and we believe HEFCW have a key role in seeking to address these and which would have a positive impact upon the health and well-being off all those involved with or who contribute to higher education in Wales. The main areas of concern are:

- Marketisation of HE: UCU has observed a move within HEIs within Wales (albeit to a lesser extent that in England presently) to adopt private sector business models. This trend is having a detrimental impact upon the values and principles underpinning HE with move away from a collegiate body, whose aim is to create knowledge and wisdom and pass that on to future generations, towards commercialism whereby universities are viewed as competing corporations with their wider social function defined predominantly in terms of their role in servicing an economic business agenda. The marketisation of education is having a huge impact on students' mental health. The value of education has moved away from societal value to 'value for money' and the emphasis on students competing against each other is causing isolation, stress and anxiety. It has also forced institutions to compete aggressively against each other and put more money into advertising initiatives than student support services[8] **.**
- Increasing emphasis upon performance management: this in interlinked with the marketization of HE with emphasis upon outcome-based performance measures, efficiency and effectiveness, benchmarking, targets and internal and external accountability. This fosters a competitive, target and outcomes driven environment, replacing a culture and ethos that fostered staff input, a collective approach, collegiality and a caring and

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[8] O'Brien & Guiney (2018). *Staff Wellbeing in Higher Education*. London: Education Support Partnership

trusting environment[9]. The focus on performance management in universities is linked to short-term outcomes and expectations which are often unrealistic for many.

- <u>Audit and metrics: these</u> dominate the working lives of academics. These are driven by the need to comply with external nationwide audits, such as the Research Excellence Framework, the NSS and the Teaching Excellence Framework, but they have also been repurposed as instruments of performance management.
- <u>Excessive workloads and workload models:</u> staff workloads are increasing with an expectation that they undertake additional tasks. A 2016 UCU Workload Survey revealed that two thirds of staff reported their workload unmanageable at least half of the time[10]. Workloads models have been criticised for being not fit for purpose including that they underestimate the time necessary for fulfilling tasks, and many tasks prove invisible to the workload assessors[11].
- <u>Casualisation & precarious employment</u>: Many academics exist on a succession of precarious contracts which do not allow for career planning or advancement which has been found to have a detrimental impact upon their health and well-being. A recent report by UCU revealed that 71% of university staff say that insecure contracts have damaged their mental health and more than two-fifths said it had impacted on their physical health[12]
- <u>Resource issues:</u> (i) tuition fee and student loan debt have been found to be major contributors to the rise in students accessing well-being and mental health support services. (ii) As university fees have risen in England and Wales, the pressure to satisfy increasing student expectations has fallen on staff. Managers have increased their demands on the academic workforce over concern about university rankings and league tables. (iii) under-investment in health and well-being initiatives (note: evidence shows that short term investment actual generates long term gains and savings e.g. In 2008, the Government Office for Science estimated that over £1 billion could be saved each year by extending NICE-recommended treatments to all those with depression; a figure that vastly outweighs the treatment costs.

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[9] Monica Franco-Santos and Noeleen Doherty, 'Performance management and well-being: a close look at the changing nature of the UK higher education workplace', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 28(16), 2017, pp.2319-2350

[10] University and College Union (2016). UCU Workload Survey. London: UCU

[11] Morrish.L (2019). Pressure Vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute.

[12] University and College Union (2019). Casualisation in Higher Education. London. UCU.

These inter-related structural issues have a significant detrimental effect upon the health and well-being of students and staff in HE. Addressing these underlying issues, in conjunction the actions contained in the HEFCW policy statement, provides a valuable means of promoting health and well-being for all in HE. It could result in enhancing staff performance, student achievement and overall organisational productivity and helping create a society characterised by social justice and individual corporate citizenship. However in order to realise this potential leadership, strategic direction and adequate resourcing will be essential[13].

Question 5: Does the Statement have any positive or negative impacts or unintended consequences in terms of equality and diversity and the Well-being of Future Generation (Wales) Act's sustainable development principle6, seven wellbeing goals7, and five ways of working8?;

Research conducted by UCU highlight the significant inequalities that persist in HE, for instance, the persistence of the gender pay gap with a UCU report[14] revealing that it will take 40 years to close the academic gender pay gap; race inequality continues with nine out of ten (90%) black staff members report having faced barriers to promotion in colleges and universities[15]; negative behaviour towards learners based on their sexual orientation or gender identity appears to be commonplace[16]. Our own evidence indicates that there remains a long way to go to fulfil the equality duty requirements within HE. Saying that we welcome much of the proposals that have and continue to be made and implemented to address these inequalities and are very supportive of the aims and objective of the Future Generations Act, which is unique to Wales.

If a whole systems approach is adopted (which also seeks to address the underlying issues that we have highlighted in our response) and properly resources we believe there is potential for the statement to have positive impacts in terms of equality and diversity and the Well-being of Future Generation (Wales) Act's sustainable development principle, seven wellbeing goals, and five ways of working.

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[13] Cawood.J, Dooris.M & Powell.S (2010). Healthy Universities: Shaping the future. London:

[14] University and College Union (2017). Academic Gender Pay Gap will take 40 years to close. London: UCU

[15] University and College Union (2016). The Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic staff in further and higher education. London: UCU.

[16] University and College Union (2016). Pride and Prejudice in Education. London: UCU

Question 6: What positive or adverse effects will the proposals have on:
• opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language?; and
• treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?

The policy statement could give greater recognition to Welsh Language legislation and policy (see comments in Q 2).
If a whole systems approach is adopted (which also seeks to address the underlying issues that we have highlighted in our response) and properly resources we believe there is potential for the statement to have positive effects on opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language and treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language.

Question 7: Could the proposals be changed to increase positive effects, or decrease adverse effects on:
• opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language?; and
• treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?

See response to Q 6