

FOA: Committee Chair

Email Only

26 November 2020

Submission: A call for information – Welsh Government Draft Budget proposals for 2021-22

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 respond to the Ministers call for inspiration and fresh thought.

The Covid-19 crisis poses a double challenge. Beyond the public health emergency, the necessary immediate response has been an unprecedented economic shutdown. Yet that is only the beginning. When the medical emergency passes, we will re-emerge into a shattered economic landscape. The challenge will be to restart a severely stressed economy, with the risk being that the inequalities of wealth, power and opportunity we struggled with beforehand have been newly amplified.

These threats are made worse by UK Governments continuing refusal to provide details of the successor Shared Prosperity Fund or give assurances that Wales will receive the same amount of funding as would have been that expected had the UK remained within the EU. Beyond that, Covid, Brexit and the uncertain impact of the Internal Market Bill threaten additional strains on Welsh Government resources.

We commend Welsh Government for the positive action taken throughout this crisis. In an approach which contrasts to what has been seen in England, the post-16 sector has been stabilised absent from ideological constraints and the distraction of ‘culture wars’. Instead, we now prepare for a recovery and reform process in which the value of education and the needs of the community take centre stage.

With both eyes to the future, UCU is committed to harnessing the diverse expertise of its members in delivering Welsh Governments economic, social and environmental ambitions. We

believe that the substance of social partnership must stretch beyond the phrase. It is in this spirit that we make our brief submission.

1: Stabilising Further Education

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an almost unimaginable impact across all UK nations. For the higher education sector in Wales, the pandemic continues to threaten financial consequences. Welsh universities have already suffered significant revenue losses in respect of accommodation, conferences, and events activity. Optimistically, assuming that a vaccine is available in early 2021, it is still possible that institutions will require further stabilisation in the short to medium term.

2: Digital Investment & Workload

The response to Covid 19 has also seen unprecedented workforce collaboration. Acknowledging that much of the knowledge and expertise sits with our members, the necessity of adapting to new techniques of digital and blended learning will require time and investment. As physical distance is replaced with digital proximity, Wales is presented with opportunities to lead on innovation. Moreover, doing so will become all the more crucial as our economy changes in response to Brexit and accelerated automation. Institutions can be at the forefront of this revolution if staff are afforded the time to develop their own practise through collaboration and continuing professional development.

However, this need to adapt existing practise has also brought a substantial increase in workload. Pressures which were already unsustainable are now judged as impossible in many cases.

Whether it is provided via the Education or Skills Budget, substantial investment will be required to guarantee the success of Welsh Governments Digital 2030 strategy. In FE or Adult Community Learning, time must be put aside to enable teachers to develop practice and embrace new methods of delivery. Referencing money invested in Hwb (Welsh Governments school digital counterpart) it is vital the 2021 Budget MEG reflects these needs, as staff cannot be expected to subsidise transition through the contribution of their unpaid work. Nor do wish encounter a situation where funding is diverted from other essential streams in order to meet these costs.

3: Adult Community Education

UCU believes that adult community learning (ACL) can make a decisive contribution to the coordinated programme of re-skilling and retraining which must follow the end of the medical emergency. We can no longer depend upon localised centres of prosperity to pull-up surrounding communities. There is now general recognition that place based and accessible provision provides by far the best way of meeting the needs of underrepresented groups who would otherwise be left behind. Consequently, Adult Community Learning is crucial to achieving a more prosperous Wales and equality led recovery.

However, in recent years ACL has suffered significant cutbacks beneath the impact of austerity. Provision has contracted across Wales, becoming severely eroded in some areas.

UCU Wales is committed to ensuring that ACL is properly and adequately funded and that the planning and delivery issues are overcome in order to secure fair and equitable provision of ACL throughout Wales. Adult community learning can make real differences to people's lives by providing a platform for progression into further learning, training, community engagement and employment. As an immediate comparator, following an extensive conversation with stakeholders and providers, the Republic of Ireland recently allocated an additional €8 million on top of an annual €20 million budget. This decision recognised the contribution that ACL makes both to poverty alleviation and regional development. In our view, it is imperative funding is invested into this vitally important service.

We hope you find these reflections useful and would be delighted to offer any further evidence.

Yours sincerely,

Jamie Insole – Wales Policy Officer