

**Better education.
Better society.**



Foreword

Since the last elections in 2011, Wales has grown as a country. It has sought and is gaining new powers, taken greater responsibility for its own destiny and has started to craft its own, unique vision for the society it wants to create.



Students and students' unions have played a powerful role in shaping what society should look like – and the values that should be at the heart of that vision.

We have been partners in the devolution journey and part of the national debate on how education can best benefit Welsh society – and NUS Wales has sought to be a strong voice for all learners in Wales in that process.

Investment in education and in students themselves has self-evident benefits for Wales as a whole. It encourages economic growth and induces wider social benefits that cannot be underestimated.

But as we enter the period approaching the next National Assembly elections – and as we go through fundamental reviews of higher and further education – we are also at a crossroads.

With shrinking budgets, competing priorities and a backdrop of uncertainty, the future for education is one that is – let's face it – up for debate.

NUS Wales, as the voice for more than a quarter of a million students, believes the case for investment in education is a moral one, as well as economic. A society that invests in all students is a society that invests in its own future.

We have an opportunity to fundamentally change how education is delivered. Imagining a post-16 education system that is accessible, flexible, engaged and embedded in our communities and represents the fruits of true partnerships between educators, students and students' unions.

Our election priorities are borne from a need to recognise the valuable roles all forms of education play and seek to achieve a balance of the needs of all learners.

They also represent a message to political parties – now is the time to create a balanced, sustainable, high-quality system with the needs of students at its heart.

NUS Wales has sought to form a vision for the future of education – and we call on all parties to seize the opportunity to do the same.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Beth Button". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter 'B' being particularly large and stylized.

Beth Button,
NUS Wales President

What is NUS Wales?

National Union of Students in Wales is the largest democratic organisation in Wales, representing learners in a wide variety of settings including higher and further education, adult community learning and apprenticeships.

We do this through supporting our member students' unions to promote, extend and defend the rights of students across Wales and act on their behalf to promote students' priorities and influence education policy - working with government, political parties, regulators and employers to strengthen support for students and make studying in Wales affordable.

nus wales
national union of **students**

Our priorities

We believe that every student in Wales - regardless of family background, gender, ethnic background, sexuality or disability – should have the opportunity to access a high quality educational experience which is affordable at the point of use. To make this happen, the next Welsh Government should act in the following areas:

- **Access for all students to a balanced funding system**
- **Quality housing for students**
- **Student access to services**
- **Preparing students for work**
- **Students in an equal society**

Introduction

Students play a massive part in Welsh life – making up more than a quarter of a million people living in, working in and contributing to communities all across Wales.

But while students contribute huge amounts to the Welsh economy – amounting to around 2.6% of Welsh Gross Value Added (GVA) (more than the Welsh agriculture sector) through spending power alone and supporting around 35,000 jobs – the path to being a student is more difficult than ever.

Many students struggle on the breadline while completing their studies. Most outside of full-time higher education (HE) have little-to-no support to help them pay living costs or tuition fees. College students and adult learners have seen funding for their learning squeezed. Tuition fee debt still amounts to thousands of pounds for university students living in Wales. Many students are still living in poor quality, substandard housing.

While we recognise the Diamond Review of higher education funding and student finance will report on many of these issues, we believe it is crucial for political parties to set out a clear vision and offer to students if they genuinely wish to involve students in the democratic process.

NUS believes the National Assembly elections represent a huge opportunity for political parties to put forward a strong and compelling case for students to get out and participate positively – and to demonstrate they are investing in future generations to study, work and live in Wales. While we recognise the difficult economic conditions we face, we ask that all parties use these elections to make a clear offer for students and make a bold investment in the experience of students in Wales.

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A balanced funding system

Living cost support

NUS Wales research has shown a third of all students have seriously considered leaving their course, with the most common reason cited being financial difficulties.

More than half regularly worry about meeting basic living expenses. With rent increasing, cost of food and fuel rising and the cost of transport to places of study becoming less frequent and more expensive - particularly in rural areas of Wales - it has never been more expensive for students to take up study. If a full-time student relies purely on state support, their income amounts to less than that of a single pensioner.

■ We recommend the Welsh Government preserves and enhances a targeted system of support for students to meet rising living costs. This should include a commitment to increase the Welsh Government Learning Grant (WGLG) and Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), preservation of equal access for all students to discretionary funding including the Financial Contingency Fund (FCF) and a pledge to increase the level of financial support available to FE and Adult Community Learning ACL students to meet the costs of study.

70% of higher education students are worried about future debt levels.

Protect tuition fee support

The raising of tuition fees in England has created a system where universities charge maximum fees regardless of subject or assessment of quality, as well as having a sustained and detrimental impact on recruitment of part-time and mature students. Our own research shows 70% of higher education students are worried about future debt levels. We believe the support offered by the Welsh Government offers a buffer from the full effects of the tuition fee rise in England and NUS Wales polling shows it retains significant public support.

■ We recommend a commitment to retain the tuition fee support arrangements for the duration of the next Assembly term for students in Wales as part of a long-term strategy to reduce the level of debt levied on students in the future.

Support for postgraduate students

Investment in postgraduate study drives growth and innovation and attracts high value business to Wales. However, at present there is no central support for prospective postgraduate students to meet the costs of further study outside of a small pool of research funding and personal loans. We believe the next Welsh Government can build upon the English proposals for PG loans to attract highly-skilled students to Wales at relatively low cost.

■ We recommend a competitive, commensurate loans system for postgraduate-taught students is introduced in Wales, with no restriction based on age or subject.

Sustainable funding for further education and adult learners

The further education sector has seen significant reductions to its budget in this Assembly term which threaten its long-term sustainability. The scale of these cuts has already seen a serious impact on part-time and adult community learning (ACL) course provision and staffing, with half of the budget disappearing in the last 2-3 years. Such cuts have a disproportionate effect on those in low-income areas, women and mature learners and hamper efforts to support unemployed people to re-enter the workforce.

- **We recommend a commitment is made to preserve, in real terms, the further education and ACL sector budgets over the course of the next Assembly term and to introduce a funding floor to prevent it falling below the rate of inflation.**

Fairness for flexible study

Part-time and flexible modes of education provide an essential route for many adults who would otherwise be unable to access education. At present, there is little recognition of the role part-time study plays in enabling many groups - including carers, women and low-income students - to enter education, nor adequate levels of support or funding behind it as a mode of study. It is also the case that mature students, aged 25 and over, receive significantly lower levels of spending (amounting to 14%, while making up around 60% of the population).

- **We recommend the next Welsh Government promote part-time study on a platform of equality with other forms of post-16 learning and build in a strategy to support carers and other groups to its widening access measures.**

Protect access for disabled students

Access to, and flexibility of, education is key for disabled students entering education. Due to the high cost barriers facing disabled students going to university, the provision of support for assistive equipment and IT is a lifeline for students who may not otherwise be able to afford to pursue their studies.

- **We recommend the next Welsh Government commits to protecting and improving the Disabled Students Allowance and rule out reducing support as proposed in England.**

Support for student parents

Research carried out by NUS Wales found that students who are parents were among the worst off in both financial wellbeing and their finances overall. A total of 77% of parents agreed that they worried about not having enough money to meet basic living expenses and parents were far less likely to receive financial support from their families when compared to other students.

We also know that the greatest expenditure from the Financial Contingency Fund (FCF) in further education is childcare, according to Welsh Government data. This accounts for approximately £2.8m of the total £7m in the scheme. Providing childcare support on a discretionary basis means it is uncertain and unreliable. Parents are not guaranteed to receive it. If they are awarded the funding, it is still not secure. Parents need certainty before they can commit to learning. Many childcare providers also require certainty before they offer a place.

- **For the roll-out of the NUS-backed pilot of a targeted childcare scheme for further education students to improve access for young parents. This would help reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETS) and tackle generational deprivation.**

Accessible Welsh-medium education

Wales is a bilingual nation, with two official languages – Welsh and English. For our education system to be truly accessible, then those who wish to study through the medium of Welsh must be able to. In HE, the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol has been playing a key role in the development of Welsh medium education in universities. In further education, Colegau Cymru has been working on the development of bilingualism in FE. In the past 20 years, census data suggests that there is a 'drop-off' in the proportion of the Welsh population able to speak Welsh above the age of 16 when compared to the same cohorts who were under 16 in the previous census.

- **We recommend the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol continues to receive funding to promote and develop Welsh medium education in universities**
- **A particular focus on promoting Welsh medium education in further education, through a strategy involving Colegau Cymru, colleges, Welsh Government, the Welsh Language Commissioner and NUS Wales. It should tackle issues including supply of Welsh-speaking staff and variable student demand across courses.**

Quality housing for students

**Movement towards greater
protection for tenants from
inadequate housing.**



A significant number of students experience substandard quality housing while in full-time study, with NUS research revealing three-quarters of students suffered a problem with their accommodation, with more than 60% experiencing damp or mould and a quarter suffering infestations.

We welcome progress made to ensure landlords are held accountable for the quality of the homes they rent out, and for the base standards for how landlords should behave, but we must do more to ensure students and other tenants are not exposed to the risks of poor quality housing.

An end to unfair charges

Changes in the law for protections for tenants with regards to landlords has seen minimum standards introduced in the sector that were badly needed. However, proposed legislation to simplify renting in Wales does not address letting agencies - one of the main gateways for students into private rented housing - and the often large arbitrary fees charged by letting agencies to students in order to obtain a tenancy.

NUS research has shown more than half of students are charged £500 or more to secure a property, with more than a fifth charged £1,000 or more - with many forced to get into debt to cover the cost.

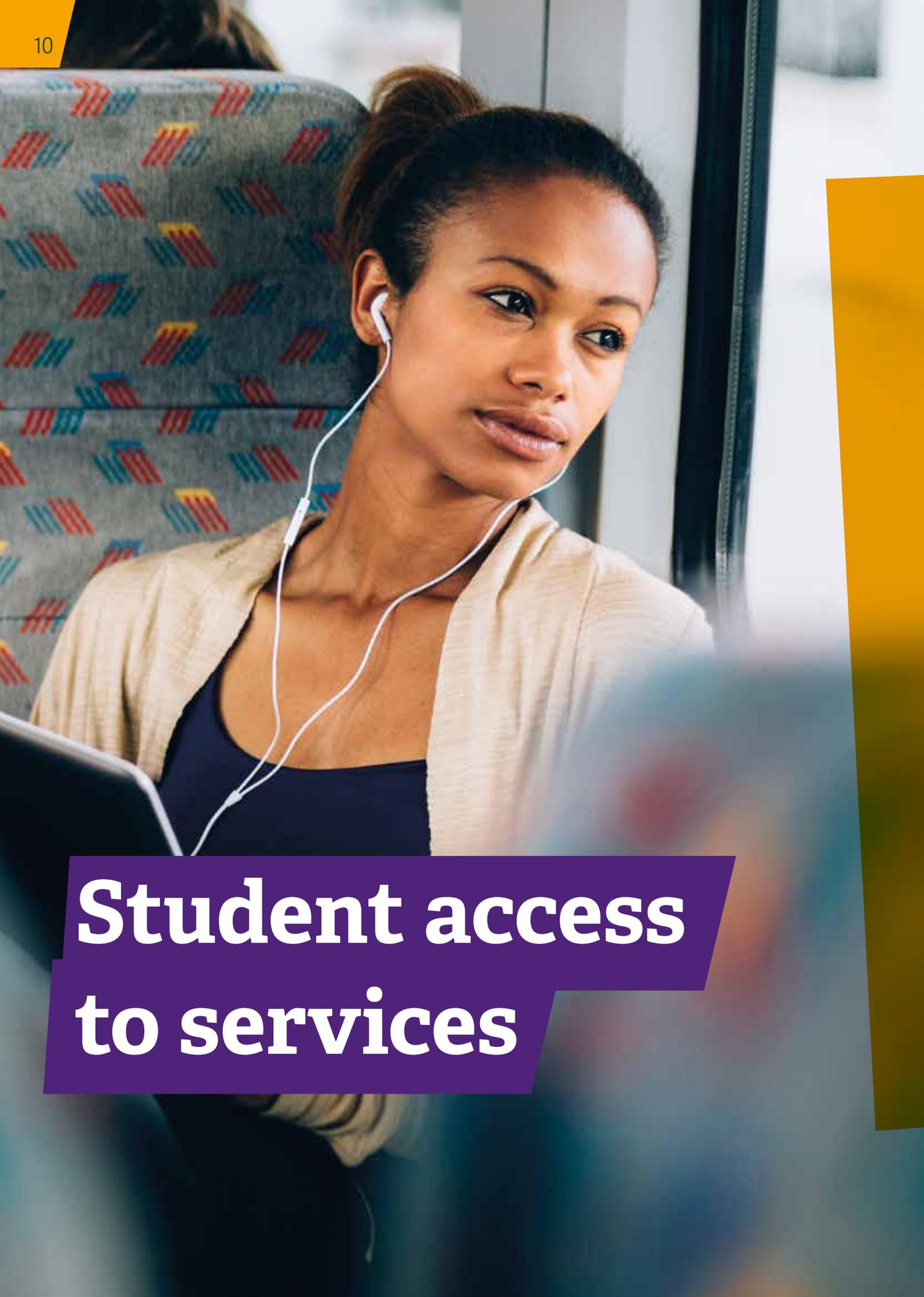
■ We recommend the next Welsh Government legislate to ensure all private sector tenants are protected from all charges outside of rent and bonds, mirroring a similar law in Scotland which has had no measurable impact on rent levels.

Resources to enforce quality standards

New quality standards and proposed simplification of tenancy agreements mean there has been movement towards greater protection for tenants in inadequate housing. But we have concerns that budget reductions have meant local councils do not have enough resource to implement inspection regimes to ensure the law is being enforced.

■ We recommend that councils are given resources and guidance to ensure they plan for adequate inspection and enforcement measures for quality to ensure tenants are protected from negligent or absent landlords.





Student access to services

Affordable transport

The role of affordable transport in, particularly, further education is crucial to open up education to those already facing barriers to obtaining skills. Transport for learners in further education is currently the responsibility of local authorities, with policies differing from authority to authority, including the cost and level of subsidy, the eligibility criteria, and the mode of transport provided. With increasing pressure on local council budgets, we risk isolating the very students - particularly in rural areas - that are underrepresented in education, from opportunities to obtain new skills.

- **We recommend the next Welsh Government extend concessionary travel on public transport to all FE students, building on the My Travel Pass bus scheme for 16-18 year-old students, to ensure none are excluded from opportunities due to transport costs.**
- **We recommend a review of transport routes to and from colleges across Wales to establish any gaps in provision and establish what form of transport is best placed to meet needs – whether public bus services or college-arranged transport – and for local government funds to be ring-fenced to meet that need.**

Access to mental health services

Mental ill-health is a pervasive issue in the student population, with higher-than-average levels of mental distress or mental illness reported by students than the general population. NUS research has shown 92% of students identified having had feelings of mental distress, which often includes feeling down, stressed and demotivated. However, mental health service provision remains comparatively patchy in or around campus.

- **We recommend the Welsh Government to conduct a review of mental health provision in student-heavy population areas, with emphasis on establishing provision for Welsh-language services on or around campuses in Wales.**

Access to gender identity services

There are an estimated 31,300 trans people in Wales, yet they face significant problems accessing adequate healthcare and housing. Wales is the only country in the UK with no gender identity clinic (GIC), meaning trans people must travel to England to access treatment or face generic health services that do not adequately understand the experiences of trans people or how to support them. This intensifies barriers and challenges routinely facing trans people.

- **We recommend the Welsh Government ensures resources are made available to open a Gender Identity Clinic in Wales to ensure fair access to health and support services for trans people.**

NUS research has shown 92% of students identified having had feelings of mental distress

Preparing students for work

Changing how we learn

Wales has an ongoing challenge with retaining the graduates it produces, in part because of lower wages than other areas of the UK and a comparatively weak jobs market that struggles to absorb particular skilled workers. Despite excellent centres of teaching in Wales, there needs to be a concerted, long-term effort to transform how universities and colleges are in tune with the areas around them - so students are learning skills relevant to the areas they are studying in.

- **We recommend the next Welsh Government seek to expand the implementation of active learning models in FE colleges in Wales, which can in turn be linked to existing Enterprise Zone priorities.**

An incentive to stay

With many graduates in Wales struggling to find relevant employment immediately after they leave college or university, it is crucial that living costs are reduced to encourage students to remain in Wales and enter the workforce.

- **We recommend a consideration of a six month-long exemption from council tax for HE or FE graduates if they remain in Wales following completion of their courses.**

Removing barriers to retraining

With a comparatively large number of people who are unskilled or long-term unemployed in Wales, NUS Wales wants the barriers that stop them re-entering education to be removed. We want political parties to recognise that not every learner needs to look the same and to restore alternative routes to learning, particularly those that provide a base level of skills for people to enter the education system.

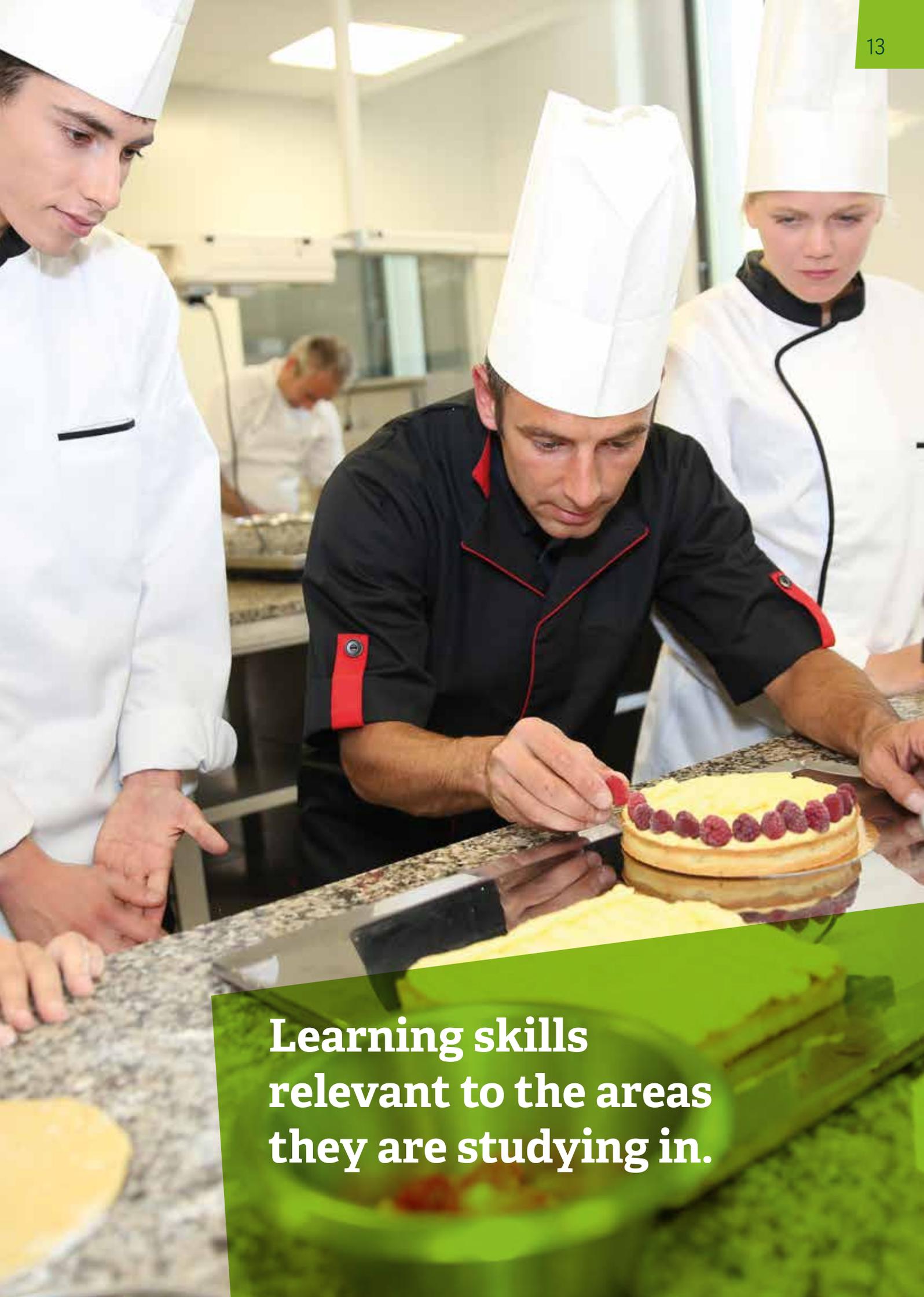
- **We recommend the next Welsh Government take steps to ensure access to basic, low-level skills is affordable, including removal of costs associated with GCSE resits.**

Employer Links

The demands on part-time students' time are many. The commitment to informal study averages at around 10 hours a week, and where formal course elements are missed it is often the result of work commitments.

Many students who receive employer support for fees also express a desire for their employers to have a greater understanding of the other requirements of their course.

- **We recommend that the Welsh Government and appropriate stakeholders carry out further research of what employer-institution links already exist in part-time provision.**
- **We recommend that the Welsh Government use this research to work with institutions to pilot approaches across Wales. The purpose of which would be to create a shared understanding between employers and providers. Such a pilot should also focus on provision of information to employers regarding course timings, costs and structures.**



**Learning skills
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Students in an equal society

Educating on sex and relationships

Women face disproportionate levels of sexual harassment, assault and violence in everyday life, including during study. NUS research on lad culture has shown a quarter of students, male and female, had experienced unwelcome sexual advances, with it rising to a third of women. Two-thirds had heard rape or sexual assault jokes on campuses. We believe strong guidelines need to be in place to ensure everyone is safe on campus and that we embed a culture that challenges sexist views of women and trends that leave women more vulnerable.

- **We recommend a whole school/college and community approach across Wales to inform children and young people about violence against women which includes compulsory sex and relationships education in all schools and other educational settings across Wales, including for those not in education or training, through challenging abusive attitudes and behaviours amongst boys and men and empowering girls and women.**
- **A commitment to conduct a review into the issue of sexist lad culture in universities and colleges and to work with NUS Wales to ensure strong codes of practice are drawn up to tackle it.**

pledge to work more meaningfully with younger people

Energising young people in politics

We are going through a crisis of political knowledge and engagement in Wales and the wider UK. There is a wide gap in the level of knowledge of how devolution works between young people (under 25) and older voters, as well as a huge disparity in voter turnout. In the long-term, we need political parties to pledge to work more meaningfully with younger people - providing them with a platform as well as taking responsibility for giving them a clear offer for what they will do for them.

- **We recommend the next Welsh Government use powers in the new Wales Act to extend the vote to all those aged 16 and over.**
- **We recommend a new national youth parliament be established to provide a forum for young people to become embedded in politics and debate, as well as provide a challenge for legislators.**

Diversifying the curriculum

While government and universities have made great strides in addressing historic prejudice and inequality, there remains an over-representation in syllabuses of white, Euro-centric content rather than reflecting the diversity of modern Wales.

- **We recommend the Welsh Government use the Donaldson Review of the curriculum as an opportunity to review opportunities to diversify the curriculum and reflect wider cultural experiences, including those of the BME community.**
- **We recommend the Welsh Government engage with NUS in our campaign 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' and devise a strategy on how to tackle the persistent attainment gap between Black Students and counterparts.**

Freedom to donate: end discrimination in blood donation

While the UK is facing regular, critical blood shortages due to a large-scale drops in donation levels, there remains a central, discriminative policy in place which restricts the pool of donors based on discriminatory assessment of risk groups. The ban applies to all men who have sex with men (MSM) from giving blood, unless they are celibate for one year after their last sexual encounter, as well as any woman who has sex with MSM, criteria which is not extended to prospective heterosexual donors. We believe this is fundamentally unfair and discriminatory.

■ We recommend the Welsh Government examine its devolved powers over blood donation law and seek to introduce a fair blood donation system which is based on an assessment of risky sexual behaviours rather than an individual's sexual orientation.



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