

OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION**Central Executive Committee (CEC)**

25 September – 6 October 2020

OU STUDENTS ASSOCIATION WELSH MANIFESTO POLICY POSITIONS

The CEC is asked to:-

- i) **approve** the policy positions that will be included in an OU Students Association Welsh election manifesto

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This paper is put to the CEC jointly by the Association Area Rep for Wales and the Association's Policy and Public Affairs Manager.
- 1.2 The intention of this paper is to obtain agreement over the policies that will be included in an OU Students Association Welsh Election manifesto for the devolved elections in May 2020.
- 1.3 This paper is split into three sections: the first section will provide some useful context around Welsh higher education policy and politics as well as the thought processes, discussions and key considerations regarding policy development for the manifesto. The second section will provide an overview of the suggested policies to be included in the Welsh manifesto. Finally, the paper will set out an overview of what will happen next, for your information.

2. Context

- 2.1 *Why have a manifesto:* The main reason to have a manifesto is that OU students in Wales are directly impacted by the actions and decisions of the Welsh government and have a lot to gain or lose from these elections. It is therefore in the Students Association's interest to attempt to influence the parties and politicians taking part in the elections. In addition to this, OU students in Wales are rapidly increasing in number and as such their voices can be increasingly influential. Finally, organisations such as the NUS will have a student-focused manifesto, and it is therefore important that part-time distance-learning student voices are well represented.
- 2.2 *HE policy and politics in Wales:* Part-time HE students in Wales have benefited hugely from the Welsh government's agenda over the last few

years. This has culminated in the introduction of maintenance loans for part-time students under reforms introduced as a result of the Diamond Review in 2018. Through these changes, the OU in Wales has been able to evidence the enormous benefits to individuals, communities and wider-society of enabling more people to access part-time learning. This evidence-base in turn makes it easier to put a case forward for further policy improvements.

- 2.3 Based on the current political picture and polling trends, it seems unlikely that Kirsty Williams, who has overseen the Diamond reforms as Education Minister in Wales, and is the only Lib Dem in the Government, will still be in post after the May election. This means that it is of vital importance to ensure that whoever takes over as Education Minister understands the issues and challenges that part-time students face, and is encouraged to continue with the progressive agenda we have seen over the last few years in Wales.
- 2.4 *Policy development process:* As the OU in Wales were further ahead with their manifesto, we met with the Welsh OU's External Affairs Manager in order to obtain an idea of what their approach to the manifesto was along with their distribution plan and timeline.
- 2.5 From that conversation we decided that an OU Students Association manifesto would be most impactful if it focused on a smaller number of priority policies rather than an extensive list that would dilute the importance of our major asks. This led to a decision to highlight key issues around part-time student finance and removing barriers to access and participation, with a maximum of five policy positions to be included.

3. Suggested Policies

Below are the five policy positions that the OU Students Association Welsh Election Manifesto will contain:

- 3.1 *Keep the reforms implemented under the Diamond Review:* Under the next Welsh Government it will be vital to consolidate the policy improvements we have seen over the last few years and avoid any backwards steps. The central pillar of this manifesto should therefore be to maintain the Diamond Review reforms in part-time HE as a bare minimum.
- 3.2 *Increase the maintenance loan for part-time students in line with inflation/the cost of living:* Our next ask should be to ensure that the offer to part-time students in Wales is fair and increases in line with inflation/the cost of living. A failure to do so would be a real-terms decrease in the amount the part-time students receive.
- 3.3 *Raise the cap on the maximum Childcare Grant for part-time students in line with inflation/the cost of living:* Parents who are part-time students in Wales are also able to benefit from a Childcare Grant. This is a progressive policy that isn't available to part-time students in England. We would therefore like to not only ensure that it is retained under the next government, but also that it is increased in line with inflation/the cost of living to ensure that parents are not excluded from accessing or continuing their education.

- 3.4 *Introduce legislation to address digital exclusion in rural and socially deprived areas:* The lack of decent broadband is a major barrier to accessing part-time and distance-learning education in Wales, especially in rural and lower-income areas, where this barrier most prevalent. We will therefore be making an argument that the Welsh education sector as well as the Welsh economy overall would benefit from an investment in ensuring that everyone in Wales has access to broadband internet that will enable better connectivity and opportunities while reducing social isolation as a side-benefit.
- 3.5 *Carry out a wide-ranging review into the barriers to higher education experienced by individuals with protected characteristics:* Further to the recent commitments the OU Students Association made in its statement regarding Black Lives Matter to embed equality considerations into all of our processes, this policy seeks to provide a national understanding of systemic barriers to access and participation, and begin a conversation about how those barriers can be broken down.

4. Next steps

- 4.1 Once the policy positions are ratified, the language to be included in the manifesto document will be drafted and finalised, including an introduction to the Students Association and some impactful statistics to boost its influence.
- 4.2 A template will be created for the manifesto to ensure a professional finish.
- 4.3 We will liaise with the OU in Wales around creating a plan to send the manifesto out to parties and candidates in order to maximise the impact and enhance the likelihood of engagement with the policy-asks.
- 4.4 Alongside the Wales Volunteer Panel, we will work to engage OU students in Wales with the manifesto in the lead up to the elections to maximise reach.

5 Recommendations to CEC

- 5.1 This paper recommends that the CEC approves the suggested policy positions put forward in this paper.
- 5.2 If the CEC is not minded to approve the suggested policy positions, the CEC should highlight which policies it would like to remove.

6 Questions regarding policy and public affairs work

- 6.1 If you have any questions or want to arrange to meet to discuss any of the points above, or ideas that you have around policy and public affairs, please do not hesitate to email Dan at dan.moloney@open.ac.uk

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