

# Extend the postgraduate STEM bursary to all MSc students in Wales

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 16 Gorffennaf 2021  
Petitions Committee | 16 July 2021

Reference: SR21/189-6

**Petition Number:** P-06-1163

**Petition title:** Extend the postgraduate STEM bursary to all MSc students in Wales.

**Text of petition:** In June 2019 Welsh Government announced a bursary scheme to increase the number of Welsh graduates who remained or returned to Wales to undertake a master's degree in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics or Medicine (also known as 'STEMM' subjects). This funding currently only extends to traditional Universities, excluding students who choose a STEM Masters through alternative providers. This excludes some students, who need more flexibility in STEMM subject matter or course delivery.

## 1. Key points

In August 2019, Welsh Government announced three new incentives for students to do their Master's degree in Wales. One of those incentives was a £2,000 bursary for graduates of all ages to study in Wales for a Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics or Medicine (STEMM) Master's degree – this is the scheme to which the petition refers.

It was announced at the time that the incentives would be administered to Welsh higher education providers via the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).



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At the time of writing, whilst students on specific Masters level courses taught at the Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) (the provider referenced in the petition) can receive student financial support for fees and maintenance, the provider itself, CAT, is not eligible to receive public funding from HEFCW.

This is because CAT does not meet the relevant definition of a higher education institution needed to allow HEFCW to fund it. HEFCW is therefore unable to allocate incentive scheme funding to CAT (and other similar alternative providers) for its relevant Masters courses.

To allow HEFCW to consider allocating public funding to CAT and similar alternative providers in Wales, CAT would need to seek to be designated by Welsh Government as a higher education institution using powers under Section 129 of the Education Reform Act 1988.

The basis of the continued allocation of the STEMM Masters incentive scheme has been set out by HEFCW in this circular, and its overall basis for funding is set out in paragraph 6 of this circular.

## 2. Further detail

Public funding for higher education provision and higher education student financial support is a complex matter. The law is such that students can conceivably receive Welsh Government financial support to undertake a course, whilst the provider itself is not eligible to receive public funding directly. This is because the law pertaining to funding providers, and the law pertaining to awarding student financial support, are separate.

### 2.1. Funding providers

Public funding is released to providers by HEFCW using powers set out in the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 (the 1992 Act). These powers include the specific nature of activities eligible for funding and the particular types of institutions that can be funded. The activities eligible for funding are mainly those undertaken by 'Higher Education Institutions'.

Therefore key test in this situation under the 1992 Act is if a provider comes within the definition of a "Higher Education Institution". Section 65(5) of the 1992 Act defines a higher education institution as 'a university, an institution conducted by a higher education corporation or a designated institution.'

Currently CAT does not fit into any of those definitions of a Higher Education Institution. It would therefore be for Welsh Government (using its powers in Section 129 of the Education Reform Act 1988) to determine whether or not it should be designated as an institution eligible to receive funding from HEFCW.

## 2.2. Funding students

Public funding is made available to students for tuition and maintenance support under the student support regulations made by Welsh Government using its powers under the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998. This is done by courses being “designated” for student support. Designation can either be automatic in certain circumstances, or a provider must seek to have each course designated individually by Welsh Government (a process which HEFCW undertakes on behalf of Welsh Government).

In this instance, CAT’s courses are not eligible to be automatically designated, and so it has successfully applied for some of its Masters provision to be specifically designated by Welsh Government for student support purposes. This means students studying such courses can access the Welsh Government’s Masters Finance student support package. Most alternative providers would need to follow the same process to allow their students to access Welsh Government student financial support.

## 3. Conclusion

Students studying specific Masters courses that have been designated by Welsh Government for the purposes of student financial support, can receive the Masters Finance package. This will be true for other alternative providers in Wales who have also had their courses designated for the purposes of student financial support (either automatically or individually).

But as CAT does not come within the definition of a Higher Education Institution, and nor has it been designated as such by Welsh Government using its powers under the 1988 Act, it cannot currently receive HEFCW STEMM incentive scheme funding. Under current law, is a matter for CAT, or any other alternative provider in the same position, to seek to be designated as such by Welsh Government, and for Welsh Government to designate it so. The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill that Welsh Government intends to introduce this Senedd may in future amend the requirements for an institution to be eligible to receive public funding.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.