

1. General Comments

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

1.2. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee on this vitally important issue of our future relationship with the EU.

1.3. NUS Wales believes Wales should remain an open and welcoming nation. We would like to highlight that we are fully in favour of freedom of movement and wish to see it continue. By introducing restrictions on immigration and ending freedom of movement, Wales would be a less attractive partner for future research and development collaboration with Europe which would have a damaging effect on our economy.

1.4. NUS Wales believes student mobility around Europe is an integral and transformational part of study. We do not support any moves to restrict access to education. NUS Wales is calling for international students to be excluded from immigration restrictions.

1.5. NUS Wales calls on the Welsh Government and Welsh Assembly to carry out impact assessments to ascertain the social impact of the decision to withdraw from the EU, particularly in Wales. NUS Wales believes freedom of movement enhances and helps develop our multicultural and tolerant society, by restricting immigration this will hamper our social and cultural development as a nation.

1.6. NUS Wales would like to stress the importance of this inquiry and commend the work of the External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee, we are more than happy to elaborate further on this paper and would welcome the opportunity to give oral evidence to the Committee.

2. Status

2.1. One of the key points that NUS Wales would like to highlight is the ongoing debate as to the status of EU students and academic staff in both Higher and Further Education. The level of uncertainty could potentially hamper the number of students wanting to come and study in Wales. According to Stats Wales the number of students enrolled in Wales fell from 148,020 in 2015/16 to 136,075 2016/17.

2.2. For the UK as a whole, the number of EU students applying for UK universities fell for the first time since 2012. The latest data from UCAS published in November

2017 shows that EU applications fell by 4.4%. Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive of Vice Chancellors' Group Universities UK stated;

"The small fall in EU students suggest that Brexit is starting to deter EU students from coming to the UK."

2.3. The drop in the number of students coming to the UK to study, in particular, Wales, will have a devastating effect on a number of sectors across our economy.

2.4. It is quite clear that international students make a huge contribution to Welsh life. According to research conducted by Universities Wales, there were 5,424 EU students at Welsh Universities in 2014/15 which is equivalent to 4% of the student population. These students generated £150.3m to the Welsh economy, highlighting their immense importance to Wales and the future of our economic development.

2.5. With a high-level of uncertainty surrounding the Brexit negotiations, on various fronts, the need to ensure clarification for the status of international students is vitally important to Welsh institutions, businesses and the wider Welsh economy.

2.6. NUS Wales believes the Welsh Government should continue to lobby the UK Government to ensure a fair and open reciprocal package is negotiated to ensure Wales remains a welcoming nation to students across the globe.

3. Fees

3.1. A major area of consideration for the Welsh sector will inevitably be the future of tuition fees for EU and international students. The current funding regime allows for EU students (and students from the European Economic Area countries) to be eligible for home student funding. This means that EU students will have access to £9,000 loans and the associated maintenance support. Welsh-domiciled students are eligible for a £5,100 tuition fee subsidy, with English students paying the full £9,000. International student fees are much higher.

3.2. International students do not have access to these loan frameworks, meaning that their courses are entirely self-funded. In the immediate weeks following the result of the referendum, it became clear that EU students were worried about the pincer-effect of higher fees and the inability to access schemes to finance them. For students currently in the system, and for those who will likely be in the system by the time Article 50 reaches its conclusion, governments across the UK have indicated that they will be able to finish their course on the terms they started.

3.3. We therefore believe that EU students, at the very least, will be able to expect to finish their course on the terms on which they initially started. We also believe that it would be a regressive move for institutions to be able to charge future EU and EEA students international fee rates. This could lead to a system that

dissuades international students from applying to study in Wales altogether, which would ultimately lead to greater debt for home students to make up this funding deficit. This would have a devastating impact on our economy and would hamper Wales' ability to compete internationally.

3.4. As we have mentioned in our previous submission, we also believe that it is necessary to address the UK Government's position on the NHS surcharge for international students. Prospective international students applying for a study visa must pay a minimum £150 for access to the NHS for a year. There are currently 19,660 international students in Wales, with a minimum NHS contribution of £8.8m (£2.9m per year). NUS Wales believes that this policy is unfair, and could in fact be met via top-ups from Welsh Government. We accept and understand that the granting of visas is not within the remit of the Welsh Government, but we urge them to ensure this issue is addressed by the UK Government.

3.5. As previously mentioned there are 5,645 EU and EEA students in Wales. If EU students were classified as international students, then they would also be forced to pay this surcharge. Over the lifetime of an average course, a total of £2.5m would be charged. When this surcharge is combined with the staggering level of international fees, the cost of living because untenable for international students, this could hamper our ability to attract the brightest and best from Europe.

3.6. It is also worth considering that, by the time Article 50 takes effect, the recommendations of the Diamond Review will have been put in place. This will not have an impact on international students, but will potentially change the support available for EU students who start pre-March 2019. This has to be fully considered by the sector. We therefore believe that the Committee should consider ways in which EU student fees can be protected, alongside broader visa implications.

4. Erasmus

4.1. The Erasmus+ scheme is one of vital importance to both EU and home students. The scheme pays for the costs (and stipends) for students to study in other areas of the EU for a variety of periods. The aim of the scheme is to promote the social good, and to create students with a genuinely international outlook.

4.2. While there are elements of the scheme that can be improved, including on widening access, it is a scheme that NUS Wales and students believe need to remain in place. Membership of the scheme is not linked to being a member of the European Union, but it is linked to freedom of movement. This is why certain EEA countries are able to take part in the scheme, but also why Switzerland is no longer eligible. This creates a difficult situation, where we would advocate that Wales must argue for continued access to the single market and freedom of movement.

4.3. The above goes hand in hand with maintaining membership of the Horizon2020 programme. The scheme, for Wales, currently attracts almost 2.5% of the UK share of funding, worth a total of €35m. The projects funded are varied, but broadly contribute both to the social good and to important research schemes.

5. Funding

5.1. According to research conducted by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC) the UK's position as a centre for research, innovation and development could be at risk if the Government further restricts immigration. The effects of halting immigration would have a devastating impact on our economy as businesses that rely on open borders across Europe and the wider world, are able to attract the brightest and best researchers to the UK.

5.2. According to PWC, the UK has attracted almost £20bn of 'imported corporate R&D' spending from across the globe. This makes up 80% of all corporate research and development in the UK.

5.3. If the Government decide to tighten border controls from Europe and the wider world, this would adversely affect our ability to attract world class researchers and would have a devastating impact on our economy.

5.4. NUS Wales believes the UK should remain an open and welcoming nation that leads the world in research and development, by tightening immigration controls, this will add to the plethora of issues Wales will face once we leave the EU.

5.5. Another major concern for Wales would be the loss of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for our universities. Again, this would hamper Wales' ability to attract the brightest and best talent to study and research within the higher education sector in Wales.

5.6. NUS Wales would like clarity from the UK Government as to what will replace this funding structure and how Welsh universities will be able to continue to attract the brightest and best students to study at our universities.

6. Summary

6.1. As previously stated, NUS Wales welcomes this consultation process and would urge members of the National Assembly to unite to raise these vitally important issues. As the future prosperity of our nation is at stake, these issues should be raised in a bipartisan way to ensure maximum impact. The outcome of the Brexit negotiations will have a major impact on our economic development,

NUS Wales believes the issues raised in this submission need to be addressed and solutions should be developed on a cross party basis.

6.2. NUS Wales believes it is vitally important to ensure Wales remains an open and welcoming nation. Restricting immigration, withdrawing from Erasmus and the loss of European Structural Investment funds will inevitably affect our ability to attract the brightest and best to Wales. We need to ensure that Wales remains an open and tolerant society, creating barriers to education will only damage our international reputation and our ability to develop culturally.