

Dear Petitions Committee,

Thank you for providing the response to the petition from Jeremy Miles, the Minister of Education and Welsh Language. Unfortunately, I find the Minister's response to the petition disappointing and very dismissive of the challenges faced by incoming and current Postgraduate students in Wales. I have highlighted some areas for your consideration.

More generous support than in England.

While the Minister is correct in stating that support provided to Masters students by the Welsh Government is more generous than that provided in England, this is not a suitable argument or justification for reducing financial support. I find it inappropriate to be constantly comparing the support provided to students in Wales to that provided to students by another Government. If the Minister wishes to compare across nations, then maybe he should consider that young people in Wales (18-29) have the lowest average earnings for that age group across Britain – therefore we should consider the additional support as necessary for providing students in Wales with equal opportunities, rather than just 'generous compared to our neighbors'.

Despite the financial support given in Wales being 'more generous' than that in England, we are still seeing a decline in the number of home students undertaking Postgraduate degrees in Wales, with cost of living often being considered the main cause in this decline. Studies have also shown that Postgraduate students are more likely to report financial struggles, which then lead on to higher rates of mental and physical health conditions.¹

Only a small impact?

The Minister also highlights that while there may be a disincentive effect to the cutting of Postgraduate grants and bursaries, this is expected to be small. To this I'd ask, what evidence does the Minister have to make this assessment? What equality impact assessment has been carried out? When did the Minister conduct any form of consultation with students (incoming and current) on the impact of receiving the grant/bursaries?

As I have already highlighted, the number of people undertaking Postgraduate study in Wales is already declining – while the current support system is in place - therefore I am concerned that we will see an even greater impact to this decline. I am also concerned that the areas we will see further decline are in the numbers of women, working-class/first generation, Welsh speaking, and adult students. Most of these areas have also been highlighted as areas for concern in the Welsh Government's budget.

I have also spent several weeks consulting current Postgraduate students in Wales who have received the Welsh Government's Postgraduate grant and/or bursary. Some current students highlighted how if it was not for the Welsh Government's

¹ <https://russellgroupstudentsunions.org/cost-of-living-report>

support, they would not have been able to pursue their Postgraduate degree. Some statements provided to me by current students include:

Student 1: *'There was some debate in my household as to whether I could return to do my Masters to reskill. The grant was the main reason we decided I was able to return, as it meant that I would not build up even more student debt. It meant I could return to study and still keep a roof over my son's head. My partner still has to work two jobs to support us.'*

Student 2: *'I would not be able to afford cost of living without it'* (STEM Bursary).

Student 3: *'I was able to continue to pay my mortgage whilst furthering my education. Without this, I wouldn't have entered into social work programme which is already an understaffed field. Dread to think what impact these cuts will have.'*

Contribution to costs loan.

Finally, I wish to address the Minister's point on the contribution of costs loan. While I appreciate the loan is not intended to meet the full costs of completing a Doctorate, many students rely on this loan for that purpose. Funding from Research Councils is highly competitive and not feasible for many students (particularly those studying in arts and humanities), therefore the Doctoral Loan is often a last resort and often the only option for many who wish to pursue a PhD.

£28,395 across three-four years of study is not enough for full-time students, even those who work multiple jobs alongside their study. After paying tuition fees (approx. £4,500pa), doctoral students are left with under £4,500 to live on (based on three years study) and are often capped by institutions to 180 hours of work per year. Many of the students who rely on the loan are also working-class and first-generation students.

Despite the Minister highlighting that the Welsh Government has no plans to change the support offered to Doctoral students, I ask that he reconsider this and consult with the Welsh Government, Universities, Students' Unions and students on the actual realities of receiving the Doctoral loans for students in Wales.

Overall

Overall, I do not believe the Minister has truly explored the impact of cutting Postgraduate grants and bursaries for students in Wales, nor do I believe that he understands the realities of self-funded students' experiences who rely on the Doctoral loan.

As highlighted, the Postgraduate taught grant and bursaries are essential to creating equal opportunities for students in Wales, and to lose both may have a devastating impact on the diversity of Higher Education and research in Wales. I ask that the Petitions Committee considers these aspects when discussing the petition on the 4th March.

Thank you for your time.