

Welsh students applying for university will benefit from most generous student support package in the UK

The first of its kind in the UK, it will support students when they most need it, recognising that costs such as accommodation are the main barrier for those making the choice about whether to go to university.

The new student finance package launched by the Welsh Government is the most generous in the UK and is designed to give more help towards living costs by providing the equivalent to the National Living Wage through a mix of non-repayable grants and loans. This means students can focus on their studies rather than worry about making ends meet.

With National Student Money Week approaching (12-16 February), the Welsh Government has launched an awareness campaign to promote the benefits of university with the help of more financial support available. The campaign features "Money Monster"- a personification of money. The character's sole purpose is to stop students getting to university, and if they do, to disrupt their student life adding unnecessary pressure.

A key element of the new student finance package is that it offers a stronger package of support for students who want to study part-time, ensuring that undergraduate full-time and part-time students have the same opportunities. Wales will be the first county in Europe to provide equivalent living costs support – in grants and loans – to full-time and part-time undergraduates, as well as post-graduates.

This has been done to encourage students from all backgrounds to enter higher education, whether they're in full-time work, raising a family or have caring responsibilities. Part-time students will receive equivalent support on a pro-rata basis.

The latest National Income and Expenditure Survey* shows that more than one third of Welsh- domiciled students have overdrafts, nearly one fifth have commercial credit and one tenth are in arrears.

The new student finance package for 2018/19 undergraduate entrants addresses these issues by easing financial barriers for students, meaning that full-time and part-time students have enough money to meet their day to day living costs while studying.

Every eligible student can claim a minimum grant of £1,000 they will not have to pay back, regardless of their household income. This is part of an overall mix of grants and loans for living costs equivalent to receiving that National Living Wage, available to every eligible student while they study.

Grants will be means-tested to support those who need them most. Students

from homes with lower household income will receive the highest grant – up to £10,124 in London and £8,100 in the rest of the UK. This is in addition to the £1,000 minimum grant. It is likely that around a third of full-time students will be eligible for the full grant. Students who receive a smaller grant can access a loan to top up the amount they receive equivalent to the National Living Wage level.

The average household income for a dependent student in the current system is around £25,000. Under the new system such a student will receive around £7,000 a year in a grant they won't need to pay back.

The new financial support package for Welsh students was designed following recommendations of a higher education funding review led by Professor Sir Ian Diamond. Living costs were found to be the main barrier for those making the choice about whether to go to university.

The latest figures from Welsh Government show that students in Wales spent 46% of their student income on their course and 37% on living. Housing came in at 18%.

Wales's Education Secretary, Kirsty Williams said:

“Money is clearly a very important factor when deciding when to go to university, and for those who are already studying, money is found to be a major cause for stress.

“With this in mind, we have designed a new package of support to alleviate these concerns that both parents and students share. This will allow students to focus on their studies without having to worry about how they are going to afford their day to day living costs.

“The support that Welsh students, studying anywhere in the UK, can apply for is now equivalent to the National Living Wage. In addition, most students will have no upfront costs to pay as a tuition fee loan can be taken out to cover their course.

“It is important to remember that student loans are only repayable when borrowers' earn more than £25,000 per year. Repayments can start from as little as £30 a month.

“Living costs must not be a barrier to going to university. I want everyone who has the talent, potential and ambition to have that opportunity. Whether it's studying full-time or combining it with your career and studying part-time, university should be an option for everyone, no matter what your background or income.”

The TV adverts will appear on ITV Wales, S4C, Sky Regional, ITV Player and All4 from 5 February.

For more information, visit gov.wales/studentmoney

£30m for vital local road improvements

This vital new investment in local roads, being delivered through funding to all the local authorities, will help address problem areas and prevent deterioration of the network.

Alun Davies said,

“In my discussions with local government since taking up post, they have been clear with me about the pressures on the road network, and how in some parts of Wales, the state of local roads is simply not up to a safe standard.

“I am really pleased to be able to make this funding available to support a comprehensive refurbishment programme and improve future resilience of the local authority roads network.”

Councillor Andrew Morgan, WLGA Spokesperson for Transport said:

“We are grateful to Welsh Government for listening to our calls for further funding to maintain the highway network. Residents, businesses and tourists across Wales rely on our roads on a daily basis and so it is vital to ensure that they are in a good condition. We welcome this funding as councils get to work on implementing highway asset management plans.”

Councillor Anthony Hunt, WLGA Spokesperson for Finance and Resources said:

“This funding will lift some of the pressures faced by councils in maintaining and improving road conditions in their areas. We are pleased that constructive and open dialogue with Welsh Government has yielded this investment, and we look forward to continue to have constructive and open dialogue to find sustainable responses to financial challenges faced by local government.”

The £30m is a one-off investment that will be based on an established highway allocation formula.

The fund was originally announced as part of the final Budget 2018-19, which set out a series of new revenue allocations for Wales as a result of funding consequential received from the UK Autumn Budget.

Sabbatical scheme contributing to one million Welsh speakers

Launched in 2005, the scheme aims to increase the number of bilingual teachers and teaching assistants in Wales. £3.13m was announced last year to support the expansion of the Welsh language Sabbatical Scheme in line with the recently launched Welsh in Education plan which outlines the role education will play in achieving the one million target.

The minister sat in on part of a teaching session and met teachers taking part in the year-long course, aimed at teachers in English-medium primary schools to help them significantly develop their Welsh-language skills.

Other courses available include 25 day and 5 week immersion courses, again aimed at those in English-medium primary schools and a range of part-time courses to practitioners working in Welsh-medium schools or teaching Welsh as a subject in English-medium secondary schools.

The Minister said:

“Education is vital if we are to reach one million speakers, both in terms of increasing the number of Welsh medium schools and in improving and increasing the teaching of Welsh in English medium schools. The sabbatical scheme plays a very important role in this by improving the ability of teachers already in the system to help meet the increased demand.

“It was very interesting to watch some of the session and to speak with the participants, in Welsh, to learn about their experiences on the course and their plans to implement strategies to raise standards in Welsh on return to their schools. I thank them for their commitment to the language and I hope this course gives them the confidence to make a difference once they’re back in the classroom.”

Dr Lowri Lloyd, Director of the University’s Welsh Language Services Centre said:

“It was a pleasure to welcome the Minister to the university to see the course in action. It’s an investment which shows the Welsh Government is serious about reaching one million Welsh speakers by 2050 and contributes directly towards implementing the new curriculum. It was also an opportunity and a privilege for the teachers to show the Minister the progress they have made so far.”

Food for thought at food and drink showcase

During his visit to the event, which was organised by Visit Wales and Food and Drink Wales, the Minister noted that Food and Tourism are particularly important in Wales as the two sectors are key components of the Welsh economy and that Prosperity for All: the new economic action plan, identifies food and tourism as new foundation sectors of the economy and as the backbones of many local economies.

Lord Elis Thomas, said:

“Welsh food and drink are an essential part of the tourism offer in Wales and give the tourism and hospitality industry an opportunity to provide visitors with a real sense of place. Food Tourism provides a means of drawing together the strengths of a local destination by building the relationships between the hospitality/catering industry and local food and drink producers.

“Visitors are looking for quality, local food and drink and they want to know the provenance of what is on the menu, whether they are eating in a café, restaurant, B&B or hotel. We want to shout about our produce with confidence and tell the story of its journey to our plates – we want visitors to enjoy a real taste of Wales and we want them to think of fantastic food and drink when they think of Wales.”

With 2018 being Year of the Sea in Wales the showcase included a feature on seafood and sea themed products in order to give tourism businesses ideas of how to incorporate the themed year through their food offering in 2018.

The aim of the event was to bring together producers and tourism and hospitality businesses to encourage more businesses to use Welsh produce in their food tourism offer.

David Evans, Director of Dylan’s said

“We were delighted to host the Food and Drink Event at our Criccieth Restaurant earlier this week. All our staff thoroughly enjoyed looking after the 150 plus guests on the day and we were hugely impressed by the variety and quality of Welsh produce on display. As ever Dylan’s is committed to promoting the very best of North Wales food and drink and Wales’ Year of the Sea gives us a great opportunity to shout about local seafood and sea themed

products”.

Wales leading on organ donation consent rates

The latest Organ Donation and Transplantation statistics reveal a 72% consent rate and approximately 24.3 donors per million population (pmp), putting Wales at the top of the list.

Statistics also show that 39% of the Welsh population have registered to opt-in to donate their organs following their death.

For the first three quarters during 2017-18, there were 55 deceased organ donors, 16 more donors than the same period the previous year.

On 1 December 2015, Wales was the first country in the UK to move to a soft opt-out system of consent to organ donation. This means that if a person has not registered a decision to become an organ donor (opted in) or a decision not to become an organ donor (opted out), they will be considered as having no objection to being an organ donor – this is known as deemed consent. However, if individuals don't tell their family of their decision to donate, the family may not honour that decision and over-ride the organ donor registration or not support deemed consent.

The figures also demonstrate a decrease in the number of transplants compared to the corresponding timeframe for 2016/17; this was mainly due to fewer living transplants taking place. However, fewer people died whilst on the transplant waiting list at the end of the third quarter of 2017/18 in comparison to the previous year.

Health Secretary Vaughan Gething said;

These latest figures show promise, and I'm proud that Wales is leading the way in giving the gift of life to others.

There are significant steps being made, however small they are, and it is important to remember that this is a marathon, not a sprint.

However, while there are people dying waiting for their transplant, we must work harder to further increase the consent rate in order to have a significant impact on reducing transplant waiting lists.

Our latest campaign highlighted the importance of having a chat with your families and loved ones about organ donation, and I'd like to reiterate that message by encouraging everyone across Wales

to talk to their loved ones about their organ donation decision to ensure they will honour it.

Simply having a chat can help benefit the people of Wales and the UK by reducing the number of people dying whilst waiting for a suitable organ to become available, and transforming the lives of others.

You can register a decision at any time by calling 0300 123 23 23 (Calls to this phone line will be answered by NHS Blood and Transplant) or visiting www.organdonationwales.org or by telling your family (and friends).