

INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION

IHE response to the Welsh Government's
consultation on the regulation of higher education
providers and designation for student support

July 2025

Question 1

Do you agree with the proposal to maintain the existing policy and only specify full-time undergraduate and postgraduate certificate in education courses as qualifying courses for the purpose of tuition fee limits?

Disagree.

There is no apparent rationale to change this element of the system identified in the consultation, though it may be worth exploring whether incorporating modular provision or accelerated course fees into the scope could save money for both students and the Welsh Government.

To maintain reciprocity in the future, the Welsh Government should consider all the different models available in the UK to ensure that Welsh students have the full range of choice.

This may be particularly relevant to students near the border who wish to take advantage of modular study in England under the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE).

There is no provision, nor is there any provision within these proposals, to accommodate Welsh students to access student funding for the accelerated tuition fee uplift available in England. IHE members are already contacted by Welsh students wishing to undertake accelerated courses at English providers, and are disappointed to find this is not possible.

Within England, with current fee limits for 2025/26, tuition fees for a three-year UG degree would cost £28,605. For an accelerated 2-year degree course, the cost of tuition would be £22,880, allowing an overall saving of £5,725.

Students studying on accelerated degrees are eligible for long course maintenance loans if they are eligible for means-tested maintenance loans. This has been a savings of £3,513 (before interest) for a student compared to those on a three year maintenance loan – these savings are even greater over time when considering interest.

Even in the future LLE system, if accelerated courses theoretically charge on a credit basis, therefore at 180 credits per year with total course fees of £28,605, there is no greater cost to the government and the student will still save on maintenance and interest costs.

Question 2

Do you agree that registration with Medr should be a prerequisite for the automatic designation of Welsh higher education courses, including part-time and postgraduate, for the purpose of Welsh Government student support?

Agree.

IHE supports the policy of bringing providers under the scope of regulatory oversight. This can ensure that the tertiary system best supports students to succeed. There are lessons to be learned from England in the creation of a register, and it is encouraging to see that a Specific Course Designation policy remains proposed for the future, even though this is not the main route for designation. There are significant issues with creating a register with only two routes, both of which presume a size and scale, and capacity for burden, which can eliminate choice and opportunity for students. IHE urges Medr to continue to ensure that alongside routes to automatic designation, flexibility and proportionality remain part of the system design. Transparency on the considerations for Specific Course Designation should be part of that.

It is noted that the consultation states 'Specific course designation policy may also be necessary for English providers who may not wish to register, or are unable to meet the requirements for registration.' IHE would welcome the opportunity to work with Medr on establishing clear definitions of the types of provider that would fall into those categories, including those under different types of partnership arrangement.

The consultation notes that "Medr and the Welsh Government will review specific course designation arrangements and the specific course designation policy to reflect any amendments to the designation arrangements provided for in the Welsh student support Regulations." IHE has noted elsewhere that in order to best understand the risk to public money in the HE sector, oversight and due diligence should be targeted. When revising the arrangements, Medr should consider partnership working, particularly those with sub-contractual activity:

- due diligence on a provider's suitability as a partner, and the fitness and propriety of their management and governance
- transparency on ownership and the terms of any contract for provision
- accountability which is clearly assigned for the critical aspects of provision
- quality and standards which are managed effectively by the relevant partner
- and with the process designed from the ground up to be proportionate and efficient, with the flexibility needed for the diverse range of providers who might wish to apply.

The ways in which this applies to those in partnerships as opposed to operating as single delivery providers should be clear in the guidance to ensure this is not a barrier to those who could otherwise be accepting Welsh students to their courses, but are put off through inaccessible processes.

It would be particularly useful for Medr to publish an open and transparent register of which Welsh providers are operating in partnerships, and the types of partnership activity that is being undertaken.

Question 3

Do you agree with the proposal that the higher education courses provided by OfS-registered providers, whether registered in the Approved or the Approved (fee cap) categories, should be automatically designated for the purpose of Welsh Government student support?

Agree.

The principle underpinning this proposal is strongly supported by IHE, as is the clarity that this brings to the ability for providers and students to operate across the UK nations.

One of the current risks in the nature of devolved approaches to education is the fragmenting of opportunities for students, who understandably are confused by the complexities that can occur as they navigate between the nations within the UK. By approaching these proposals through the lens of simplifying the systems for providers and regulators, this will in turn simplify the system for students.

Using reciprocity is an appropriate mechanism for this and should be encouraged as a model by other regulators and funders across the UK nations, who should note the principle of removing duplicative burden that Medr is proposing to adopt.

Question 4

Do you agree with the proposal that the higher education courses provided by accredited school-based initial teacher-training providers should be automatically designated for the purpose of Welsh Government student support?

There have been significant recent changes to the school-centred initial teacher training (SCITT) programmes during the last government. This has caused a drastic reduction in the number of centres, and in turn a drastic increase in reliance on partnerships so that provision could continue.

Other proposals in the consultation may therefore conflict with the efforts to reduce burden on SCITTs, where process for SCD is being reviewed for those not directly regulated in the other UK nations.

Where SCITTs are offered through partnerships, in order to encourage long-term successful partnerships IHE advocates for reducing SCD requirements, or the need for annual process, when there has been a long-term track record of SCITT delivery.

Question 5

What are your views on the proposed approach to the designation, for the purpose of Welsh Government student support, of courses provided on behalf of regulated higher education providers?

For the majority of IHE members, and other independent providers of higher education, the proposals made within the consultation are a positive move which can simplify processes. Medr have, even prior to the changes, devised the most transparent approach to specific course designation of the nations. IHE hopes to see this clarity continue into the new system, enabling providers to be able to take the necessary steps without barriers to access funding for Welsh students, particularly where they work in partnership.

It would, as outlined in previous questions above, be preferable to consider future flexibility for instances such as modularity, and across all modes of study particularly where this could bring savings such as through accelerated course provision. Building this in now, to enable full reciprocity, is strongly encouraged by IHE.

There is, however, current concern from certain groups of members about delays to process and partnership working which are arising from this consultation.

Providers that normally use the Specific Course Designation process are awaiting outcomes, and that in turn prevents courses being added to UCAS. This delay is directly impacting providers, and the ability of students to access course information.

IHE has heard concerns from providers around lack of clarity on how the changes apply to partnership working between institutions in England. Given that the start date is academic year 2027/28 IHE encourages the Welsh Government to ensure there is greater clarity that this should not impact students in the 2025/26 year, particularly for those Welsh students wishing to access programmes delivered in sub-contract during the upcoming academic year.

IHE also recommends that Medr works closely with the OfS, as proposals under consultation in England with DfE would facilitate more providers in franchise partnerships to register with the OfS and receive automatic designation. However, as those registrations are likely not be granted until 2027/28 at the earliest, it will be too late for the providers to access automatic designation through new proposals in Wales. In cases where these providers have a track record of consistently offering places to Welsh students, Medr should work closely with the OfS to ensure Welsh students continue to have access to opportunities. IHE would be happy to facilitate further conversations in this area.

Question 6

Do you anticipate any resource or cost implications for your organisation arising from the proposed approach to the automatic designation of higher education courses for Welsh Government student support?

Unsure.

We welcome the reduction in SCD, however there will be cases where this system is still a necessity as outlined by the consultation itself. In these instances, it should be acknowledged that the costs associated with resourcing the process of SCD is disproportionate for the smallest providers when compared to the amount of tuition fee funding received.

IHE encourages that consideration be given to alternative SCD models such as a sliding scale, based on risk, of necessary documentation bearing in mind proportionality. This is particularly the case where very small providers operate through partnerships or have robust oversight such as an international QAA review method, for example.

Question 7

Do you anticipate any cost savings for your organisation arising from the proposed approach to the designation of higher education courses for Welsh Government student support? (This can include immediate savings or long-term cost reductions.)

Yes.

IHE welcomes the introduction of these changes, which will significantly reduce burden and therefore cost for many providers, as well as for the regulatory system, by removing duplication of oversight.

Question 8

Do you think any of the proposals in this consultation could impact (positively or negatively) on any persons with protected characteristics covered by the general equality duty that is set out in the Equality Act 2010? If so, how could positive impacts be increased, or negative impacts be mitigated?

It would be useful to see an analysis of the characteristics of students studying via specific course designation to understand more about whether, as in England, there are certain groups of students more likely to study through providers using these types of arrangement.

Question 9

What, in your opinion, would be the likely effects of the proposals in this consultation on the Welsh language? We are particularly interested in any likely effects on opportunities to use the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English.

Do you think that there are opportunities to promote any positive effects?

Do you think that there are opportunities to mitigate any adverse effects?

This information could be more readily ascertained if the Welsh Government published a list of providers, those in partnerships, and student numbers studying across the UK nations through those routes.

Question 10

In your opinion, could the proposals in this consultation be formulated or changed so as to:

- ***have positive effects or more positive effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English; or***
- ***mitigate any negative effects on using the Welsh language and on not treating the Welsh language less favourably than English?***

Not answered.

Question 11

In your opinion, could the proposals in this consultation be formulated or changed so as to:

We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them:

As noted in the comments to earlier questions, more clarification on eligibility for the SCD process in the future should be shared as it is developed, as it was difficult to comment on some of the above questions without this information. In particular, for IHE members in England there have been several instances where OfS has not proven to be the most appropriate regulatory body and they therefore do not choose to register. It would be useful to have a definition of who is eligible in such circumstances for SCD in the future in Wales should the proposed changes all be implemented.

Contact IHE

- For more information, or to speak to someone about this consultation response, please email info@ihe.ac.uk
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