The uncertainty surrounding Brexit and the future of the UK post-Brexit is throwing the future of many sectors into doubt. None more so than our education sector. Without European structures and frameworks, the Higher and Further Education sector of Wales at risk.

Plaid Cymru’s submission will focus on four areas that require attention from both the Welsh and Westminster Governments in order to ensure the future of higher and further education in Wales:

1. EU structural funds
2. Research funding and collaboration
3. EU student recruitment
4. EU staff

1. EU structural funds
The aim of EU structural funds is to strengthen regional economic performance and social cohesion. It’s crucial therefore that EU Structural Funds are sustained or replaced at a devolved level. Any replacement fund should ensure funding is directed on a needs-based basis, as well as place based and Wales-specific. This will ensure that universities can not only contribute to the furthering of economic performance, but continue to deliver social development and strengthen social cohesion through the direction of funding to areas of need.

No details about the Westminster government Shared Prosperity Fund have been announced and there has been no consultation thus far with the devolved nations. The department responsible for the Shared Prosperity Fund is the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. As this is an England only department, this raises serious concerns.

2. Research funding and collaboration
Wales has benefited from the funding, mobility and networks that EU research and innovation programmes have offered to participants. We are pleased that the Westminster government has committed to Horizon 2020
and Erasmus+ until 2020, but that year is fast approaching and universities in Wales have no idea what to expect longer term. Plaid Cymru’s ambition of remaining a part of the EEA, which is also the EU Commission’s preferred model, would allow the UK to participate in those schemes.

We know that the Prime Minister is not considering this model. It is therefore imperative that the Welsh Government takes this issue into its own hands, Quebec for example participates in Erasmus+. The Welsh government should be actively seeking out partnerships and collaboration opportunities with non-formal networks and regional and national governments, in priority research areas. The Scottish Government is taking advantage of its offices in Brussels, Berlin, Paris and Dublin, establishing and strengthening their presence across the whole of the EU.

3. Students from the EU
Students from outside the UK bring cultural, economic and educational benefits to our universities and colleges in Wales, and indeed to broader society. Any change in visa arrangements could make Wales look less attractive and result in a drain of academic talent and a difficulty to cooperate on future European wide projects. Student applications have already seen a decline, with an over 8% decrease in applications to Welsh universities from EU students.

There is a need for certainty from the Welsh Government that EU students starting a course in 2019/20, and for those starting a course throughout any transition period, will still be eligible for home fee status, eligible for loans and grants on the current terms, and that this will apply for the duration of their course.

4. EU Staff
EU staff play a critical role in supporting the excellence of Wales’s research base, as well as the quality and diversity of teaching provision. The Higher Education sector in Wales relies on attracting and retaining the most talented researchers to pursue ground-breaking projects at Welsh universities, regardless of where they come from. Inability to recruit and retain the best researchers seriously risks damaging our internationally excellent research reputation and losing the beneficial impact it has on Wales. We need greater legislative certainty on the status and rights of EU nationals as well as a public narrative focusing on the value of people from elsewhere to the UK and Wales to avoid a decline in talent.

Recommendations
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund must be needs based, place based and have Wales specific funding- ideally devolved.
- UK must remain part of the EEA to continue to participate in Horizon 2020, Erasmus+ and various other funding, mobility and networks that EU research and innovation programmes offer to participants.
- If the UK is to leave the single market, the Welsh Government must unilaterally negotiate participation in student mobility and research programmes for Wales.
- Welsh Government must be proactive in seeking partnerships and collaboration opportunities with both non-formal networks and national governments in priority research fields.
- Welsh Government must pledge that EU students starting a course in 2019/20, and for those starting a course throughout any transition period, will still be eligible for home fee status, eligible for loans and grants on the current terms, and that this will apply for the duration of their course.
- Legislative certainty on the status of EU nationals post-Brexit must be attained.
- A wide-ranging public narrative focusing on the value of people from elsewhere coming to the UK and Wales is needed to avoid a decline in talent.