**1. NUS Wales**

1.1National 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.

**2. General Comments**

2.1NUS Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform’s consultation on lowering the minimum voting age for Assembly elections. We believe it is morally right to allow 16-17 year olds the right to vote and this move would support the development of active citizens and a lifetime habit of voting.

2.2 In the last two years there have been five separate polls in Wales, including elections to the National Assembly for Wales, the recent snap General Election and the referendum of the UK’s membership of the European Union (EU). In all five polls the future direction of Wales and the UK have been on the ballot, yet 16 and 17 year olds have been denied the right to influence that future.

3. **Question 1:** *Do you have any evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, that young people want, or do not want, to see a reduction in the minimum voting age?*

3.1 Our membership has made it clear, by passing policy that they want to see 16 and 17 year olds given the right to vote in all future elections in Wales. With changes to youth services, housing and education, our members believe it is wrong that 16 and 17 year olds do not have a say in their future.

3.2 16 and 17 year old are able to marry, join the armed forces, drive and pay taxes, yet are not able to vote on who will represent them. Out members believe this is morally wrong. Furthermore, our members believe that lowering the minimum voting age in Wales will support efforts to develop more active young citizens and ensure they are able to influence their future.

3.3 NUS Wales believes that self-determination is critical; so many decisions taken at electoral level impact upon those over the age of 16 and, with the taxation argument, actively involve them. It is entirely right that those who are affected by these votes are able to hold those responsible to account at the ballot box.

4. **Question 2:** *Have 16 or 17 year-olds made any comments to you about not being able to vote in recent or upcoming events?*

4.1 The Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014 demonstrated that 16 and 17 year olds were more than capable and willing to participate in the political process. Reported turnout among 16 and 17 year olds was 75% and research carried out following the referendum identified those that 97% of 16 and 17 year olds would vote again in the future and the remaining 3% answered ‘don’t know.’ 1 This evidence supports the argument that extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds would result in more politically engaged citizens and develop a habit of voting.

4.2 In contrast, the EU referendum did not allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote, with many highlighting that they will be left with the consequences of the result which they had no say in. A poll carried out by NUS found 76% of 16 and 17 year olds would have voted in the referendum given the opportunity to vote. The same poll also found that 54% of those eligible to vote were intending on voting.2

5. **Question 3:** *Would a reduction in the voting age have an impact on youth engagement or political participation? Are there other ways in which similar impact could be achieved?*

5.1 Within the current climate, where many young people feel disconnected from politics and a lack of control over their futures, a move to lower the minimum voting age would be a strong and positive step in improving political participation across Wales.

5.2 However, lowering the minimum voting age to include 16 and 17 year olds will have a positive impact on youth engagement, we cannot rely on this alone to improve political participation.

5.3 NUS Wales is strongly supportive of the recommendations regarding citizenship education outlined in the Donaldson Review. We believe that citizenship education is essential to equip young people with the knowledge and confidence to become active citizens. To ensure these recommendations are a success, we strongly agree with the ERS Cymru’s calls to ensure that this is sufficiently funded and effectively prioritised by the Welsh Government.

5.4 In order to effectively equip young people to engage with democracy, citizenship education must include political education. We believe political education is essential for young people in Wales to gain an understanding how the decisions taken in Westminster, in the National Assembly and in their local councils affect their lives and how they can influence these decisions.

5.5 NUS Wales believes it is vital for citizenship education to be delivered in schools across Wales, however, this should not be the only way young people learn about politics. We are strong advocates of ‘learn by doing’ whereby young people are given the opportunity to practice what they have learned.

5.6 We are encouraged to see the National Assembly’s commitment to creating a Youth Parliament for Wales. Our members have made clear that it is essential for young people across Wales to have the opportunity to have their voices heard by those who make decisions on policies and services that affect their lives. We believe this experience would be hugely beneficial in providing young people with the confidence to be politically active.

5.7 Additionally, we believe organisations like students’ union and trade unions, can play a key role in developing active political participation. 16 and 17 year olds currently in college or work based learning should have the opportunity to participate in representative organisations that influence their education or employment. This will in turn build their confidence and encourage them to participate in the wider political process.

5.8 To ensure young people have the opportunities to participate in students’ union whilst in education; NUS Wales believes it is vital to make learner voice structures a statutory requirement across the post-16 education sector. We believe this can be achieved through the implementation of the Hazelkorn Review as a means to ensure institutions are able to meet their civic mission.

5.9 NUS Wales also calls for automatic registration of students across further and higher education to be included as part of the implementation of Hazelkorn. Alongside this, we believe local authorities, regional education consortia, further and higher education institutions and training providers should work together on voter registration drives to increase the number of young people on the electoral register.