

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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The economic contribution of higher education in Wales

Swansea Metropolitan University

Purpose

The Committee wishes to follow up the implementation of its recommendations to the Welsh Government in its October 2009 report 'Economic Contribution of Higher Education in Wales' and have requested assistance with this through written and oral evidence for this hearing. Specifically, the Committee have requested my views as an educator - within the context of the Committee's recommendations to the Welsh Government and the Government's response.

Background

As my personal views are being sought, I wish to outline my working context clearly to the committee. For example, this evidence is being provided from two perspectives, one from the view of a 'grass roots' enterprise and entrepreneurship educator, and the other from the perspective of a Chair of two National UK Enterprise Educator Bodies.

As a Senior Lecturer at Swansea Metropolitan University (SMU - formerly Swansea Institute of Higher Education) I have been delivering Enterprise Education since May 1987 and have led the development of credit bearing, sector specific curriculum that embeds enterprise. In 2007 the Higher Education Academy's Art Design & Media 'Kellet' report recommended these approaches as one the top 5 in the UK. Kellet specifically noted 'the distinct subversion of traditional business studies approaches' and commended the extensive connections with alumni that informed and continuously updated the curriculum. Notably, this aspect had also received recognition at the 2006 Internationalizing Entrepreneurship Education and Training Conference (IntEnt) in Sao Paulo Brazil, where a co-authored SMU paper won the prestigious, Best Empirical Paper - Exceptional prize for senior researchers.

This teaching role continues to be enhanced by over 20 years of alumni feedback. I am a student of my ex students, many of whom now have senior roles in industry and offer their vast networks to our study programme. Through Swansea Metropolitan University's Commercial Services Department, supported by Dynamo (European Regional Development Funding) from the WAG's Department of Economy and Transport (D & ET), these approaches now permeate approximately 80 per cent of our teaching programmes and have been cited as central to SMU having the highest number of Welsh graduate start-ups (26%), which have survived three or more years (Higher Education Business and Community Interaction Survey, 2010).

Our latest Dynamo funded project looked at the feasibility of developing a University recognised teacher training (PCET / PGCE) module at both graduate and postgraduate outcome levels. This has just been successfully validated at SMU and is the first such 'accredited' module in the UK. Yorkshire and Humberside, through their 'Yorkshire First' initiative, have already expressed interest and offered a keynote at their Initial Teacher Training Conference in Sheffield in May.

My other roles give me far broader perspectives. I am currently Chair elect of the 82-University Network Enterprise Educators UK (EEUK) and since 2007 have Chaired the Higher Education Academy's Business Management Accountancy and Finance subject centre's Entrepreneurial Learning Special Interest Group (HEA-BMAF EL-SIG). Integral to both these roles is developing and managing best practice events throughout the UK. I am a founder member / senior Judge of the National Enterprise Educator Awards (NEEA) and sit on judging panels such as the regional Shell Livewire Awards and the UK finals of the Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) competition. Latterly I have commenced work with the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the development of quality assurance guidance for Higher and Further Education, chairing their new Graduate Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Group.

In a policy context, as a founder member of the Enterprise Alliance UK, I have been working with the Westminster Government's Department of Business Innovation and Skills and am an invited enterprise education 'expert' at the United Nations Conference for Trade and Industry, where I am contributing to the development of a new international enterprise education policy toolkit. The International Labor Organization has also recently requested the use of some of the material developed at SMU.

In a Welsh Context, I recently co-chaired the 2010 International Entrepreneurship Educators Conference (IEEC), which I brought to Cardiff University, and have chaired / been integral to the development of the bi annual Entrepreneurial Learning Visions in Swansea (ELVIS) Conference; which is acknowledged to be Wales' premier enterprise education event.

I also undertake three external examiner roles that range from MA to foundation degree provision outside of Wales, including a Russell Group Institution.

As I hope the above indicate, from a personal perspective Wales has much to commend its approaches and, in particular, the interventions and support of the Department for Economy and Transport have been of some significant value, not least in the sponsoring of an international enterprise conference in Cardiff and the development of a teacher training provision. The former informed the education community of cutting edge practice and the latter looks to the very core of educational provision – teaching the teachers. The Youth Entrepreneurship Strategy not only helps to profile the needs within our education provisions, it offers meaningful and practical support.

Delegate feedback at IEEC 2010 confirmed that Wales leads in many aspects of its provision, due primarily to its early adoption of enterprise champions in each of its institutions. These networks and consortia have much to commend them. This lead could be much better disseminated, as it could attract significant overseas interest. Perhaps the diminishing status of some of these champions and their lowered voice within their own institutions is something that the committee may wish to consider.

I note that in the Joint response of November 2009 (2) alumni are referenced as supporting educational institutions in terms of finance only. This surprises me, as in terms of knowledge exchange, those who can evaluate their educational experiences in the context of their own working lives and experiences have much to offer the educational establishment from whence they came. However, there is little or no support for educators who wish to retain such contacts, and many alumni networks appear to be concerned with what can best be described as feeding press releases to their past students. Notably, this view is supported by the National Union of Students and the National Consortium of University Entrepreneurs (NACUE). I should also openly state at this juncture that the current President of the Student Union in Wales is one of my alumni and has always been supportive of our institution.

Cross-departmental work is also noted in this report. From where I sit, this is a continued area of concern. In times of financial constraint, there is a tendency to withdraw back into respective silos of experience and funding centres hang on to every penny they can. As noted by the then head of the Higher Education academy Paul Ramsden to John Denholm in 2008, transdisciplinary approaches are essential as new innovative and creative knowledge is more usually formed at the intersection of disciplines, not from more detailed analysis of the cores of subject areas.

By way of example, much of the entrepreneurship education in Wales is still located in business school environments. Arguably, the best innovators come from the creative industries and their educational strategies could do much to enhance the entrepreneurship agenda. As noted by the QAA, HEA, the UN and EEUK, there is much to gain from bringing such mindsets together. This is particularly relevant when it comes to issues of assessment, as it is the creativity and innovation aspects that business educators are finding difficult to grasp, yet the expertise is often to hand in an adjacent department. Design departments for example, already work at the intersection of business and creativity, as recognized by Stanford University in the USA, they respond with innovative solutions to client and consumer needs. The recent loss of some of these courses and their associated stimuli could therefore have more far reaching impact than is currently considered, as could an over focus on STEM provision.

Moreover, there is a dominance of extra curricular activity as opposed to embedded provision within subject areas. The reason for this lack of 'accredited' or 'credit bearing' provision is often cited as being the lack of expertise in assessment strategies, which in turn lead to significant problems of quality assurance within academic frameworks. The call for more 'embeddedness' is widespread, as most provisions only offer voluntary engagement; many students may never receive the trigger experiences that lead them to consider their capacity for enterprising contributions to their own careers and the economy within which they will work.

Regarding point 4. IP policies are fragmented and incomplete, especially from the perspective of the student. In my view, questions should be asked at a more grounded level. What happens if Universities own all IPR generated by students? Will that encourage or deter potential students? If a student has issues of IP in their university work, who guides and helps them to understand the values and risks associated with intangible rights? Who sets this scene for the world of work? Indeed, who guides the educators who provide student role models in areas such as these?

Research-intensive institutions in Wales have what I perceive to be very good connections between large organizations and their senior managers. R&D solutions are undoubtedly at the centre of these strengths. However, in my view institutions need to develop grass root educators who can engage with students at all levels. There is much talk of the knowledge economy, yes those of us in enterprise education have moved on to the concept of 'knowledge harvesters', individuals who are able to make sense out of complexity and grasp the knowledge they need as and when they need it. This is the core aspect of the opportunity recognition strategies that we need to develop in all our students; they are key performance indicators.

Point 14 of the Minister's response references empathy with the commercialization process and access to capital. Perhaps this is also reflected in the comments on business start-ups as being a primary metric for evaluation. In the communities within which I work, this is an outmoded context and has been superseded by more meaningful student attributes that target abilities that may come to the fore after, for example, some years of employment. This, in many ways, is the missing link referenced in point 18 of the response.

I have yet to hear of any enterprise fellowships being awarded. In my view, central brokering will be less effective than empowering and recognizing / rewarding excellence in all levels of enterprise education. This echoes the findings of the IEEC2010 Concordat, co authored by EEUK and the National Council for Graduate Entrepreneurship, which sees this a key failing. Institutional emphasis continues to focus on research publications and academic achievement. This can deny student access to experienced individuals, who find their personal value diminished when they engage with academia. As over a third of those contributing to IEEC2010 Concordat came from Welsh institutions, I commend the 5 key findings (<http://www.enterprise.ac.uk/news/2-general-news/33-key-call-for-action-from-ieec2010>) to you in my summary, for it is the voice of enterprise educators at the chalk face. The bracketed comments provide indicators as to where and how each aspect can be achieved.

Summary / Recommendations

1. Integration and pathways to be developed so that schools, colleges and universities can provide a continuous and integrated approach that will help our learners to develop the lifelong skills needed to be enterprising and entrepreneurial. (YES has potential to advance this)
2. Improved institutional support and leadership that helps to drive forward the entrepreneurial mission across institutions, at all levels. (Consistently targeted funding or other stable incentives)

3. Clarity of impact measures and associated funding priorities so that we can work to develop a more sustainable, transparent and appropriate, approach to developing these capacities. (Move beyond measuring start ups and look to core skills, e.g. the YES ACRO model)

4. Improved guidance on issues of quality and assessment, so that a more coherent yet flexible framework will enable educators to embed more enterprising approaches in their curriculum. (QAA are now engaged but until institutional quality assurance mechanisms recognize enterprise, embedding skills remains a considerable hurdle)

5. Recognition and reward nationally, regionally and institutionally to support those working within a fragile environment of short term funding by providing career progression and recognized development opportunities - for the ultimate benefit of regions, institutions as well as individuals. (Diminished internal recognition and lack of institutionally driven career / progression opportunities seriously hinders our capacity to respond to the needs of enterprise education)