

Enterprise and Learning Committee

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Committee inquiry into economic contribution of higher education - NUS Wales

Background

The National Union of Students (NUS) Wales is the largest democratic organisation in Wales, representing over a quarter of a million students from both the Higher and Further Education sectors.

NUS Wales is an open organisation, which works in partnership with students' unions in Wales. Local and National Government, the Media, Industry, Trade Union, Pressure Groups and Voluntary Organisations all recognise and respect NUS Wales as the collective voice of students in Wales.

NUS Wales is an autonomous 'special region' of NUS UK, setting its own policy, electing its own executive committee, and campaigning on the issues that affect students studying in Wales. As well as the Welsh Executive Committee, NUS Wales has 6 permanent members of staff to support the work of the organisation.

NUS Wales was established in 1974, and campaigned for many years for devolution for Wales, pushing hard for that successful YES vote in the 1997 referendum. NUS Wales now has policy to support a primary law making Parliament for Wales.

The future poses many challenges for the student movement. Our membership is rapidly changing. The students of today face threats very different from those facing their predecessors thirty years ago, but NUS Wales continues to work tirelessly to create an education system that delivers quality courses, develops learners as individuals and protects students against hardship, discrimination and ill-health.

The Student Experience

First contact:

The level of advertisement students receive when they enter university of careers related schemes is usually in the form of multiple leaflets during their pre-fresher's week period and will detail schemes such as the Year in Employment Scheme (Y.E.S.) and other opportunities connected to the GO Wales agenda. These leaflets tend to be glossy and usually refer to contacts where you can find out more information, either through a student services fresher's fair or a particular session that is being offered centrally. There are also some sessions, which are attached to particular departments within the University, although these usually tend to be those that have an employability strategy of their own. There is still some hostility from certain lecturers in higher education institutions to embedding careers advice within the departments and these tend to be those members of the academic community who also still heavily link an education with enriching society rather than a level 4 plank in a government employability strategy.

Embedding advice:

The level of contact that happens whilst a student is studying in Higher Education is linked on the whole to how keen the student is to develop their soft skills. The response from those connected to delivering the soft skills agenda has usually cited the fact that students will seek opportunities in the final year when they are facing the immanency of employment and they won't have the time to properly engage in programmes such as volunteering opportunities. The final year is also too late for students to take advantage of the Erasmus scheme and the exchange opportunities that exist throughout Wales. KPMG recently stated at a Higher Education Wales conference that they looked for an element of foreign experience and particular language when looking at the prospective graduate recruits. The assumption can therefore be made that this is also a key employability factor with other graduate employers, and as such the importance of promoting the development of further linguistic skills and schemes such as Erasmus cannot be underestimated. Attention must also be paid when devising any strategy of this nature to the development of the global economy, and the importance employers are now placing on graduates with 'new' modern foreign language skills, in particular Mandarin and Arabic. HEI's in Wales need to take account of this, and have to be in the position to offer these courses to not only satisfy demand from employers, but also to position themselves favourably in the market for future students.

Graduate information:

The level of graduate support is lower than during the student's studies and depending on the location of the University there is a varying level of connection with graduate opportunities. Those students who have engaged with the Year in Employment Scheme seem to have a quicker link into employment, however this is not a support structure for all students. The graduation process seems to revolve a lot around trying to recruit graduates onto postgraduate schemes or membership of alumni schemes.

Conclusions:

We note that there is a high level of publicity and advertisement when students enter higher education and speak from experience when we say that this isn't continued throughout the academic year. We recommend that a basic "involvement strategy" be established in individual HEI's to combat this.

NUS Wales strongly agrees with Sir Adrian Webb's opinion relating to a provision of real choice for learners.

"To embed more personalised learning we need to offer each learner a choice of a wide range of subjects, pathways and modes of learning to suit as many interests, capabilities, learning styles and career opportunities as possible".

With this quote in mind, it is important to look at how much students are aware of entrepreneurial opportunities available to them before they enter into higher education and this goes hand in hand with the completion of the involvement strategy. It can be looked at in three stages:

1. Foundations begin in schools
2. Experience is developed in further education
3. Experience is put into use in higher education.

The foundation of what enterprise is and how it can benefit the student is discussed at a school level. Young people are free to explore potential business ideas and put some basic ideas into action. At the further education level students start to gain their experience and key skills through involvement of the enterprise initiatives. Meanwhile they are being constantly reminded that these opportunities are always available to them throughout their time in education. Careers advisors are in place to work with the students and direct them down the correct path and inform them of the different range of subjects and modes of learning then finally, once reaching higher education (already knowing the opportunities available) students put their experience and the ability to transfer skills, to use.

NUS Wales would like to see the results of this consultation being compared to the results from the "skills that work for Wales" consultation on how to raise the skills level and increase the economy activity rate in Wales. Wales still has a lower employment rate and a higher proportion of adults without qualifications, than the UK average. We believe starting the foundations of enterprise and entrepreneurial at a school level and continue the emphasis of the benefits that transferable skills can bring, we will have the potential to reach the Assembly Governments target for 2015: by the age of twenty-five, 95% of young people should be ready for high skilled employment or higher education.