

**MINUTES**

**Date:** 24 January 2003  
**Time:** 10:30 - 13:00  
**Venue:** University of Wales Lampeter, Lampeter

**Attendance**

*Members*

Mick Bates (Chair)	Montgomeryshire
Elin Jones	Ceredigion
Kirsty Williams	Brecon and Radnorshire

*In attendance*

Ben Allen (item 3)	President, Students Union, University of Wales Lampeter
Keith Robbins (item 3)	Vice Chancellor, University of Wales Lampeter
Roger Williams (item 4)	Director of Education and Community Services, Ceredigion County Council
Cllr Alun Lloyd Jones (item 4)	Chair, Ymlaen Ceredigion
Helen Nelson (item 4)	Co-ordinator, Ymlaen Ceredigion

*Secretariat*

Vaughan Watkin	Committee Clerk
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## **Item 1: Introduction, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest and correspondence.**

1.1 The Chair welcomed the members of the Committee, attendees and members of the public to the meeting.

1.2 Apologies had been received from Nick Bourne, Cynog Dafis, Delyth Evans and Glyn Davies.

## **Item 2: Top –up fees and the Development of University of Wales Lampeter**

2.1 Ben Allen, President of the Students' Union at the University of Wales Lampeter made a presentation on the issue of top-up fees for students in Higher Education.

2.2 The key points of the presentation were:

- The Students' Union at Lampeter was totally opposed to the introduction of top-up fees as set out in the White Paper. Members should be aware that this was also the stance being taken by the National Union of Students.
- If a graduate endowment scheme replaced university top-up fees it was estimated that that students would leave University with debts in the region of £18000 - £21000. This could be considered a serious disincentive to those who wished to pursue higher education through attendance at University;
- The reintroduction of maintenance grants would involve means testing against parental income. This was not acceptable as students should be regarded as independent adults -as they were in most other financial areas;
- Any financial support would be counted as income and set against any benefit entitlement. This system was originally implemented in relation to the Assembly's Learning Grant and the Assembly was to be congratulated for clarifying the purpose of its grant, thus enabling the Department of Work and Pensions to disregard it for benefits purposes;

- The Union believed that the current problems regarding the funding of higher education would not be solved by the introduction of a graduate endowment fee;
- The decision regarding top up fees should be devolved to the Assembly.

2.3 Keith Robbins, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wales Lampeter gave a presentation on the development of the University.

2.4 The key points of the presentation were:

- The University of Wales Lampeter was the oldest higher education institution in Wales and would celebrate its 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary during the year;
- Difficulty in recruiting students in more recent years in part due to poor transport links, there have been some successes but even so some Departments at Lampeter have closed;
- The University was historically an Arts and Humanities institution but had been under severe recruitment difficulties in some traditional subjects which were being studied at schools by former students. This had resulted in the closure of the French, German and Geography courses. The University had tried to address this by providing more vocationally relevant subjects and enhancing the employability of students;
- In order to attract students from a non-traditional background Lampeter in collaboration with University of Wales Aberystwyth had introduced the Summer University which had proved successful attracting more people both to the University and to the town of Lampeter;
- The introduction of the new Voluntary Sector Studies Programme has encouraged both mature and part time students to enrol in courses at Lampeter;
- The University of Wales Lampeter and Trinity College Carmarthen had recently formed a 'Strategic Alliance' to more effectively address the challenges faced by both institutions. This was not a merger but a means providing practical co-operation on issues of common interest;
- There were many challenges ahead for higher education institutions in Wales and everyone was aware of the possibility of changes in the future.

## 2.5 The following comments were made in answer to questions from the Committee:

- Assembly Learning Grant- Ben Allen said that initial problems with the Grant included the fact that it was counted as income and then set against benefit entitlement, which had now been corrected. Another problem was the lack of clarity about who exactly was entitled to claim, often resulting in wasted time spent on ineligible applications.
- Part Time Employment- Ben Allen said the lack of part-time employment in the town could be seen as a disincentive to apply to the University. However, the Union did provide part-time employment for some students in areas including providing security, working as bar staff and in the Crèche and currently some fifty students were employed. The issue of part time employment for students was not a real consideration at application stage as most students underestimated the cost of a higher education. Professor Robbins said part time employment for students was a sensitive issue as the University did want to be seen to be taking part-time work from the local inhabitants. However the cost of living and accommodation was considerably lower in Lampeter than in a large city and therefore part time employment was less of an issue.
- Top-up fees– Professor Robbins said that the University of Wales was opposed to their introduction. Non-introduction of such fees could possibly make Welsh Universities more attractive to students. However there could be danger in this approach as much needed income to the Universities would reduce, leading to possible cut backs in teaching departments. This could create a two-tier system with those more financially resilient institutions being able to attract better staff and resources resulting in Welsh Universities being seen as 'low cost, low quality' alternatives;
- Choice of courses– Ben Allen said students were likely to choose courses that would enable them to find specific jobs enabling them to pay off debts quickly. Professor Robbins suggested the introduction of top-up fees would affect students' choice of courses as they might opt for course that would ensure employment at completion of their courses. However, there was a general view that there was an enormous benefit to be gained from studying courses that did not necessarily correlate directly to employment.
- Co-operation with other institutions– Professor Robbins indicated that administrative rationalisation with Trinity College, Carmarthen would have an impact on what was taught at each centre of learning, but any changes would

involve staff travelling to teach rather than students travelling to listen. He hoped that new technology would reduce the burden of travel for lecturers.

## 2.6 Comments from the audience included:

2.7 Cllr Peredur Eckland said students should not have to pay to attend University. Many mature students often resigned from well paid employment in order to study for a degree and might reconsider doing so by the thought of incurring future debts. Ben Allen suggested that there was a crisis in funding of the higher education sector but requiring students to incur more debt was not the way forward.

2.8 Michael Bunny who worked in the voluntary sector stated that he would not have been able to attend university as a mature student if top-up fees had been in place. The voluntary sector already had difficulty recruiting staff and the problem would be aggravated further if pressure was brought to bear on them to repay loans quickly. Professor Robbins said the cost of attending a University should be looked at as an investment for the future rather than a debt but it was essential that the system was fair and equitable for the taxpayer.

2.9 Ken Williams said making comparisons between University education today and in the past was flawed as we were not comparing like with like. There are now many more institutions calling themselves Universities that used to be called polytechnics. Professor Robbins suggested the current homogeneous system of higher education had flaws and indicated the need for both teaching and research-led institutions in the future.

## **Item 3: Small rural schools in Ceredigion**

3.1 Roger Williams, Director of Education from Ceredigion County Council made a presentation on small schools in Ceredigion and the impact of the Assembly Special Grant. The presentation included the following points:

- Background—Three-quarters of primary schools in Ceredigion have less than 90 pupils.
- Milestones—In 1998 the Authority produced a major consultation document entitled "The Future of Primary Education in Ceredigion". The document includes financial and statistical information.
- During the Autumn Term 2001 representatives of all the main partners within the education service in Ceredigion were brought together to create the new Education Strategic Plan 2002-2005. The actions recommended in the Plan should be seen

as a package and not as individual items.

- The education service should ensure that teachers understand how learners learn; make teachers experts on learning.
- Create a system that provided seamless provision for pupils aged 3 to 18 and beyond.
- Structural issues including grouping primary schools under one management team, the appointment of new head-teachers to areas rather than individual school buildings and promoting lifelong learning by opening up schools' facilities for community use was also a part of the package.
- The agenda was already in the process of being implemented in two areas and benefits were already being seen.
- The Assembly's Special Grant (used in conjunction with Key Stage 3 monies) has been very useful in promoting this major agenda at secondary catchment level and for instigating innovations such as promoting the use of video-conferencing facilities and additional administrative assistance for headteachers who manage more than one school.
- Of the 76 primary schools in Ceredigion 40 were due to have access to broadband services, this raised the problem of inequality of opportunity for those schools which will not have this facility.

3.2 The following comments were made in answer to questions from the Committee:

- Closure of small schools—Members considered that authorities should realise that the closure of small schools was not the only option and other solutions should be found through collaboration.

3.3 Comments from the audience included:

3.4 Cllr Dorothy James, raised the point that even though collaborative working seemed to be working small schools were losing out because many parents preferred to send their children to larger schools in urban areas such as Libanus and Brecon. She also asked what was the cut off point for pupils regarding small schools. Mr Williams said there was no cut off point applied in Ceredigion and one of the schools had only nine pupils, but at the end of the day parental choice had an influence where children went to

school.

3.5 Cllr Robert Harris asked what was the definition of a small school. The Chair indicated that the Audit Commission definition of a small school was a school of 90 pupils or less and this was the figure used by the Assembly.

3.6 Cllr Allun Lloyd Jones suggested that the closure of small rural schools was a community issue as small businesses within an area were also affected. The Chair appreciated that small businesses could be affected but there was an issue of sustainability to consider and the quality of education provision had to come first.

#### **Item 4: Sustainability in Ceredigion**

4.1 Cllr Alun Lloyd Jones and Helen Nelson made a presentation on behalf of Ymlaen Ceredigion. The following points were made in the presentation:

- Ymlaen Ceredigion was a voluntary group set up four years ago and dedicated to sustainable development and was a partnership between Ceredigion County Council, the Prince's Trust Cymru and the community group Ceredigion Local Agenda 21 Network.
- The aim of the group was 'looking after tomorrow, today', with projects being developed across the county of Ceredigion one example of which was the 'Solar Club' which aimed to encourage people to install solar watt heating panels.
- Ymlaen Ceredigion had also provided training and advice to the public sector to help improve their environmental performance, and contributed to the Council's internal best value review on sustainability which aimed to produce a countywide strategy on sustainable development.
- Ymlaen Cerdigion had also co-ordinated the development of a County-wide Strategy for Sustainability, launched in September 2001 by Sue Essex AM the Minister for Environment.
- The group was currently applying for funding from the Local Regeneration fund, Objective 1, the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, and a Ceredigion County Council grant called "Growing Communities" to enable them to continue their awareness

activities and education work.

4.2 The following comments were made in answer to questions from the Committee:

- Waste Reduction– Waste remained a serious problem in Wales and further commitment was needed in the private sector to reduce waste and improve recycling. Ceredigion’s record of recycling was good compared with the rest of the UK but had a long way to go to match the European Community;
- Education–Ymlaen Ceredigion were currently involved in a consultation exercise on waste that would hopefully raise the public awareness of the issues involved;
- Objective 1–Funding had been requested for several small schemes which had proved to be the best approach including an application for a development officer to examine renewable energy following a recent forum on sustainability in Ceredigion;
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- Health issues– projects aimed at combating food poverty had been put in place by providing access to local food produce in Aberystwyth through the Farmers Market and also in a scheme in Cardigan but more needed to be achieved.

4.3 Comments from the audience included:

4. Michael Bunny said that sustainability was an issue that cut across many different areas and he applauded the work currently being done by Ymlaen Ceredigion.

4.5 Rhiannon Passmore asked if there were any formal links between the partnerships and the schools. Helen Nelson indicated that some formal links had been established but Ymlaen Ceredigion recognised the need for a more co-ordinated approach to its educational activities and these were being pursued.

4.6 Paul Finch indicated that the Forestry Commission were applying for capitol funding through Objective 1 for heating projects involving the use of surplus wood chippings from sawmills. Cllr Alun Lloyd Jones indicated that the new leisure centre at Llandysul already had a biomass plant attached which used local timber waste to heat the Centre. He suggested that Ceredigion County Council should consider surveying its housing stock with a view to ensuring that it was as energy efficient as possible. This might be achieved by installing lagging and solar panels where appropriate.

**Item 5: Minutes of the previous meeting**



1. The Committee approved the minutes of the previous meeting.

**Item 6: Any other Business**

1. The Committee agreed to hold a further meeting on Friday 14 March at a venue to be decided.