

Mid Wales Regional Committee Mid 01-03 p2

Date: 24 January 2003

Time: 10.30am - 1.30pm

Venue: The Arts Hall, University of Wales College Lampeter, Lampeter

Item 2: Top-up fees and the development of the University of Wales Lampeter

Professor Keith Robbins, Vice-Chancellor

I should like to welcome the Committee to Lampeter. It is fitting that it should do so during a year in which we are celebrating the 175 years in which we have been in operation. We have published a handsome celebratory volume and have arranged various appropriate events throughout the year.

We look forward shortly to a visit from the Prince of Wales as Chancellor of the University of Wales, to be followed by the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, and to climax with a service in St.David's Cathedral on 2 March.

It is right that we should celebrate the long history of this institution as the oldest higher education institution in Wales, with its distinctive ethos and flavour. We believe that we are the smallest town in the UK, if not in Europe, which has a university institution at its heart. This unique circumstance is a product of history - and of factors and considerations which no longer obtain.

Throughout its history, the challenge before Lampeter has always been to

change and adapt as circumstances change around it. It recognizes that it is a small player in the world of higher education and its fortunes are in substantial measure determined by developments over which it has no control. In present circumstances, it has great attractions but also considerable disadvantages - sometimes these are two sides of the same coin. Its campus is compact and attractive. It is environmentally appealing. On the other hand, it has no railway service and public transport is patchy. It is perceived to be 'difficult to get to' - and this is a handicap in an age when students expect to be able to travel easily. It is not an attractive location for students who look to the club life of a big city or other attractions to be found in large urban centres. It is equally the case that Lampeter cannot offer those students who look to part-time work for income - nowadays a considerable number - substantial opportunities in this regard. We have continued to recruit in large numbers from outside Wales but have taken steps to increase our contacts with Welsh schools and there has been a modest increase in the proportion of students from Wales - a trend we expect to continue.

In general, however, it is the case that students who do come here for interview are attracted by what they find. They like its community atmosphere and they realize that to a considerable extent they have to use

their ingenuity and resourcefulness in developing their own social life and entertainment. In itself this is a good thing because it means that many students do learn how to organize societies and activities effectively - with beneficial subsequent effects.

The challenge before the institution has therefore been, over recent years, to maintain a significant presence of full-time students taking three year degrees. In a competitive situation, against the background which has been alluded to, this has not been easy. Recruitment to certain academic disciplines has been difficult in much larger institutions and, where this happens, the pressure hits very hard. Recruitment failure has sadly resulted in the closure of the Modern Languages and the Geography departments over recent years. The costs, in such a situation, are high because we have maintained our commitments to students who have begun these courses. However, this phase of restructuring is now substantially complete. We have naturally developed new subjects to redress the balance. Our strategy has been to grow new areas out of existing strengths or where we already have related activity - I instance Anthropology and Film and Media. Even so, fundamentally, Lampeter remains an institution which is academically dedicated to the Humanities and Social Sciences - our departments are now collected in Schools under these heads. There has been substantial reorganization and an increasing acceptance, alongside

traditional processes of consultation and participation, that the institution must be 'managed' and the structures which have been introduced over recent years reflect this awareness. The Council, or governing body , now chaired by Mr Ray White, is now smaller than it has been in the past and has a membership with appropriate expertise. It takes an active role in the determination of overall policy.

The fact that Lampeter is the kind of institution which has been described necessarily means that its degrees, for the most part, are not 'vocational' in a narrow sense of that term. There are relatively few direct career paths which directly present themselves to our graduates - an aspect which perhaps also has a bearing on recruitment in our contemporary society. The importance of 'employability' is, however, increasingly recognized throughout the institution. We have an 'Employability Unit' and students are urged, from an early stage, to think strategically about their career aspirations. We recognize the need to encourage the development of ICT and other general skills alongside a continuing proper attention to particular disciplines. In an institution of this character, the inculcation and encouragement of entrepreneurial attitudes is not an easy matter - not least because academic staff, outside specific areas of Business Management, have little experience - and in some cases little interest -

themselves. The challenge is to sustain traditional academic values alongside new imperatives and to develop a 'Third Mission' where our skills can interact with local aspirations and needs.

One development which has notably expanded over recent years has been the programme we have developed in Voluntary Sector Studies - where colleagues have had substantial contact and interaction with a host of voluntary bodies. Courses have been offered at various levels and now a complete degree programme is on offer. The take-up has been substantial and has added an important element to our provision.

However, the growth of this activity has not been in producing full-time students of a traditional type. Colleagues have been operating by distance-learning and have steadily upgraded our facilities and means of delivery. We now boast a Virtual site. The Departments of Theology and Welsh has also led the way in building up major programmes by this means. Indeed, almost all our departments, to greater or lesser extent, have taken up this challenge. The result is a far more diverse student body than was the case a decade ago. While we have had difficulties in maintaining the full-time residential students we need, we have been very successful in building up a wide range of external links, connections and modes of delivery. The result has been that we have developed an institution which

has enrolled, in total, measured by Full Time Equivalents, a larger body of students than we have ever had in the past. The important difference is that substantial numbers are not actually here on a year-round basis. What we have been endeavouring to do is to build up patterns of short residential courses to supplement distance learning and have upgraded some of our residential accommodation for this purpose. Together with other outside users of our accommodation and facilities, we can be in a situation in which the campus is more active and busy in 'vacations' than in 'term-time' - indeed the difference has largely broken down.

These readjustments present some strain for staff because most still see themselves as active researchers who need dedicated time for this purpose.

The fact that research is externally evaluated will be known to the Committee. The most recent Research Assessment Exercise (December 2001) produced gratifyingly successful outcomes taken in the round. Two of our areas (English and Theology and Religious Studies) obtained '5' ratings - an indication of their national and international standing. This has meant that in certain areas, small though we are overall, we have significant reputation. It is now generally accepted, however, that we must 'play to our strengths'.

At the same time, we have been alert to the aspirations of the Welsh Assembly Government in widening access. Together with the University of

Wales, Aberystwyth, we have developed a 'Summer University' with the aim of attracting students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds. Our record in this area is good but we are not complacent about our achievements.

We have also been active in developing closer links with our own immediate community in Lampeter - by opening up our grounds and facilities to various other bodies. There has been an increased recognition of the extent to which 'town and gown' sink or swim together. The formation of Menter Llambled is one further recognition of this reality and we have facilitated the employment of the Development Officer..

I should like to conclude this sketch by stating that there is a general institutional recognition that the days of complete autonomy and independence are past. There are now too many legislative and other requirements which require levels of special administrative expertise which are beyond a small institution and its resources. It will be generally known that the whole Higher Education sector in Wales is considering its future structures. Specifically here, Lampeter and Trinity College, Carmarthen, have agreed that they will form a Strategic Alliance in the belief that together they will be able more effectively to address the challenges before small institutions. Both institutions have also been in discussion on various pertinent aspects with the University of Wales,

Aberystwyth - and with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. It is too early still to state what the precise pattern of the future will be.

However, what is likely to result - though after my own time as

Vice-Chancellor - is a set of relationships which should mean that, besides their other national and international objectives and missions, the Higher Education Institutions in mid-Wales will be more 'regionally' attuned and working more collaboratively than perhaps they have been in the past. It is to be hoped, in turn, that local authorities and other bodies recognize the skills and expertise available in our institutions so that the possibilities for social and economic development which we all desire may be developed in partnership.