

## Minutes of Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

**Date:** Wednesday 13 December, 2000

**Time:** 2.00pm

**Venue:** Committee Room 2, National Assembly for Wales

Cynog Dafis, Chair	Plaid Cymru	Mid and West Wales
Lorraine Barrett	Labour	Cardiff South & Penarth
Jane Davidson, Assembly Minister	Labour	Pontypridd
Janice Gregory	Labour	Ogmore
Pauline Jarman	Plaid Cymru	South Wales Central
Huw Lewis	Labour	Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney
Jonathan Morgan	Conservative	South Wales Central
Alun Pugh	Labour	Clwyd West
Owen John Thomas	Plaid Cymru	South Wales Central

### Committee Secretariat:

Delyth Thomas	Committee Clerk
Howell Rees	Deputy Committee Clerk

### Officials:

Richard Davies	Director, National Assembly Education and Training Department
Alan Lansdown	Head, Pupil Support Division

### Apologies:

Gareth Jones

Christine Humphreys

**Substitutions:**

Owen John Thomas

**Declarations of Interest:**

Cynog Dafis	Registered Teacher
Jane Davidson	Registered Teacher
Pauline Jarman	Leader of Rhonda Cynon Taf Council
Huw Lewis	Registered Teacher
Lorraine Barrett	School Governor
Owen John Thomas	Qualified Teacher

**Agenda Item 1: Assembly Minister's Report (10 minutes)**

***Paper: ELL 04-00 (p.1)***

1.1 The Minister said that she had met the Independent Review Group on Student Hardship and Funding on the previous Friday evening to discuss the terms of reference. Two amendments had been made as a result and had been included in the terms of reference attached at annex A to her report. The changes were to add a fourth bullet point on the first page and change the list of appropriate interest groups from specific organisations to categories of organisations. The comments the Chair had provided in his letter of 8 December had arrived too late for the meeting but would be taken into account. She invited Members to write to her with any further comments on the terms of reference. These would be considered at the Group’s next meeting on 19 December. Any changes would be reported to the Committee’s next meeting.

1.2 The Chair felt that an analysis of the causes of student hardship was necessary and made more explicit in the terms of reference and that changes to student support at the UK level should be taken into account. The point was also made that the terms of reference made no reference to ethnicity. That was relevant because people from some groups found access to higher education difficult.

1.3 The Minister acknowledged the points made and said they would be considered by the

Independent Review Group. The issue of ethnicity had been considered carefully. The terms of reference had been drawn up to be inclusive. She reminded the Committee that the investigation was to be completed by Spring 2001.

1.4 The Minister told the Committee that the preparations for the pilot Welsh Baccalaureate were proceeding well. The Committee's views on the draft terms of reference would be welcomed.

1.5 In discussion the following points were made:

- how many schools would be involved in the pilot?
- if the pilot was successful how would it fit in with the present system and would there be a choice between A levels and the Baccalaureate?
- it was suggested that a separate bullet point should be added to include the social and cultural, as well as economic, needs of Wales;
- what would the role of the Committee be as the pilot proceeded?
- was the Institute of Welsh Affairs being involved?

1.6 The Minister responded to the points raised as follows:

- a mix of 12 schools and colleges would be involved in the pilot;
- the way the Baccalaureate would fit in with existing qualifications would be considered as part of the pilot and tenders would need to be clear on how that could be done;
- it was intended to bring reports on the progress of the pilots to Committee when the tenders were evaluated and when the results had been evaluated;
- the proposal to widen the scope of the second bullet point would be considered;
- Assembly officials were liaising closely with experts from the Institute of Welsh Affairs.

## **Agenda Item 2: Policy Review - Early Years Provision for three-year-olds - Committee's Draft report (30 minutes)**

### ***Paper: ELL 04-00(p.2)***

2.1 The Chair invited Loraine Barrett to introduce the report. Loraine Barrett said that a great deal of effort had been put in to the report and thanked Margaret Hanney, Alan Lansdown and David Clayton for their contributions. She provided a brief overview of the report and the main recommendations.

2.2 In discussion the following points were raised:

- names were suggested to add to the membership of the proposed Early Years Advisory Panel;
- it was suggested that a rate of increase in provision of 10% per annum was too slow. Authorities were however handicapped by a lack of resources.

2.3 The Minister responded to the points raised as follows:

- rather than naming specific individuals it would be more helpful to provide a list of the expertise needed. **It was agreed that this approach would be adopted;**
- some local authorities were further advanced in provision than others.

2.4 The Minister added that the report included a number of recommendations but the first two would be the priority to take forward.

2.5 The Chair commended the report to the Minister. He said that it would now be printed and laid in time for the plenary debate scheduled for 27<sup>th</sup> February. As well as the printed format arrangements would be made for Braille, audio and CD-ROM formats of the report to be available. Copies of the final report would be sent to all those whom the Committee consulted and published on the Internet.

### **Agenda Item 3: Policy Review - Higher Education**

***Paper: ELL 04-00(p.3)***

***ELL 04-00(p.4)***

3.1 The Chair said that the Committee would receive two key presentations that would set the scene on higher education in Wales and identify the main issues that need to be considered in the review. He welcomed Roger Williams, Chair of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), Steve Martin, Chief Executive, Welsh Funding Councils and Professor Phil Gummatt, Director of Higher Education Division.

3.2 Roger Williams welcomed the Committee's review, saying it was very timely. Phil Gummatt and Steve Martin made a presentation setting out the strengths and weakness of the higher education sector and possible ways ahead. A copy of the presentation is at xxx.

3.3 In discussion the following points were made:

- there was strong competition on student recruitment. Was this linked to access issues and how could the potential of groups where participation was low be exploited?
- would the demographic shift towards students living at home be an advantage for Welsh institutions?
- were there lessons to be learned from the experience in Ireland where institutions were encouraged to specialise?
- why had the Open University not been included in the list of Welsh higher education institutions?
- if size mattered was there a case for having only one higher education institution in Wales?
- efforts were being made to increase participation but were the skills needs of Wales taken

into account?

- did the constituent colleges of the University of Wales have good computer links?
- 60% of Welsh students went to study in England. What was being done to encourage them to stay in Wales?
- what could be done, and what funding was required, to prevent a decline of the higher education sector in Wales?
- was it possible for collaboration to take place between institutions without detrimental effects, such as loss of staff, on the smaller one?
- competition was inherent in the Research Assessment Exercise. What effect would that have on collaboration and mergers?
- broad based institutions were needed to meet the needs of local students but what about hinterland areas where there were insufficient students to support such institutions?

### 3.4 The Funding Council representatives made the following responses:

- if participation rates were to be increased to 50% it would be essential to target those groups where participation was low at present. This would be expensive because new approaches would be needed to encourage potential students to come into further education and they would be less well prepared academically;
- urban based institutions would be better able to cope with the trend towards more students living at home. Wales also benefited from a flow of students from England but provision in England was being increased which posed a threat to Welsh institutions;
- specialisation was an option but would mean that an institution might not be able to provide a full range of subjects. It would affect the geographic spread of provision. That in turn could lead to staff moving to other institutions;
- the Open University had not been included because the HEFCW was not responsible for its funding;
- a single higher education institution in Wales posed questions about how services would be delivered and how the component parts worked together. To work there would need to be willingness on the part of the present institutions;
- the Funding Council did respond to information on Wales' skill needs but more information on matching supply and demand was needed;
- excellent computer and video links existed between higher education institutions in Wales;
- the decline of the sector would not happen overnight. The sector faced a process of erosion rather than collapse. Investment was required now to change and strengthen the system. Institutions were already beginning to develop strategic alliances which needed to be encouraged. It was difficult to identify the investment required without benchmarking against England or Scotland;
- the key to successful collaboration was a willingness by the institutions involved. The Funding Councils could only create the right climate to encourage the process. Smaller institutions found it difficult to survive because they had a higher proportion of fixed costs and were less able to respond flexibly to pressures;
- institutions needed to come together through greater collaboration. Links between Institutions which did not carry out research and those that did could strengthen both.

However the HEFCW could not dictate to institutions. It could only encourage collaboration create the right climate.

3.5 The Chair thanked the Funding Council team for a clear and concise presentation.

3.6 The Chair then welcomed Professor Sir Adrian Webb, Chair, and Professor Robin Williams, Vice-Chair, Higher Education Wales (HEW).

3.7 Sir Adrian Webb said that the higher education sector in Wales was committed to helping the Assembly achieve its ambitions for education. He made a presentation focusing on the themes of excellence, relevance, competitiveness and funding. He suggested that the Committee might wish to work with the Economic Development Committee on developing a picture of the future skills needs of Wales and the benefits that might flow from University research.

3.8 Robin Williams added that the review was timely and could be very beneficial. Research in universities could bring benefits in the short term but a longer view also needed to be taken. A longer term view of skills requirements was also needed. The Research Assessment Exercise tended to militate against mergers because of the effect of league tables.

3.9 In discussion the following points were made:

- did HEW agree with the analysis made by HEFCW?
- what evidence was there for greater collaboration and were institutions within Objective 1 areas collaborating with those outside?
- HEW said that a bold initiative on information and communications technology (ICT) could have huge benefits but also huge costs. How expensive might it be?
- could institutions collaborate to access research funding more effectively and make better use of their academic staff?
- how did the level of funding in Northern Ireland compare to Wales and the rest of the UK?
- what outputs could be expected from the higher education sector especially in relation to meeting the skills gap?
- higher education institutions in Wales had to compete with UK and the world on recruitment. What percentage of budgets were spent on recruitment?

3.10 The HEW representatives responded as follows:

- HEW was very encouraged that the HEFCW was working more closely with higher education institutions than previously. It was in broad agreement with the picture the HEFCW had painted but emphasised that there was no single view on mergers within the sector. Mergers needed sensitive handling and the structural changes could not be rushed
- it was too soon to say if collaboration was happening between institutions inside and outside the Objective 1 area but there was progress in a number of areas. In England some major collaborations were taking place to secure large research programmes. Wales had not reached that point but there were signs of collaboration. It would be important to take

advantage of the European research funding that was available. Significant investment had been made in research infrastructure in England and Scotland and Wales needed to invest similarly. The links between industry and research needed to be strengthened and undertaking scientific research tended to encourage co-operation between institutions;

- there was little capacity and a dearth of experience of ICT based learning in the UK. It was very expensive to transfer courses to an electronic delivery format because of the range of skills required and the quality that students expected. A note would be provided on the costs. The advantages of ICT based learning could be huge and an online university for Wales was one option to be considered;
- there were only three institutions with 5\* research ratings in Wales. They were very special and must not be diluted. The benefits of their research needed to be spun off to businesses and enterprises to help develop the Welsh economy. Collaborations between institutions and units could be used to improve research quality and capacity but that collaboration had to be real if it was to satisfy the Research Assessment Exercise;
- no information on comparative funding in Northern Ireland could be provided. There had been significant investment on research in Northern Ireland as well as England and Scotland and Wales had a lot to do to gain research income.

3.11 The Chair thanked the HEW representatives for their presentation. Success in the higher education sector in Wales depended upon close collaboration within the sector, and between the sector, the Funding Councils, business and the Assembly.

3.12 The Committee's expert adviser, Professor Les Hobson tabled a document setting out progress to date on the consultation on the review. 84 responses had now been received. The Chair said that the Committee would take the paper for information.

#### **Agenda Item 4: Minutes of November 17<sup>th</sup> and November 29<sup>th</sup>**

##### ***Minutes: ELL 02-00(min) and ELL 03-00(min)***

4.1 The minutes of the meetings on 17<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of November were ratified.

4.2 The Chair suggested that in future papers to note should be linked to the Minister's report. If Members felt that any paper to note raised issues which required further consideration they should raise the matter with him and he would consider how they could be time tabled. The Committee was content with this approach.