

Education and Life-Long Learning Committee

THE HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW IN WALES

THE EXPERT ADVISER'S PRELIMINARY REPORT ON ISSUES EMERGING

Background

Having identified the 6 key themes and their associated issues, questionnaires were sent out to a variety of organisations from within and outwith the Principality.

The responses have been analysed to highlight the areas of consensus under each theme. For each area, there is a list of issues to be considered which the Committee may wish to address in their meetings with individual institutions and during the later presentations on the themes.

This report concentrates on the areas of consensus and the major issues. A more detailed analysis of the responses will be provided for the later sessions when individual themes are explored. This will include additional issues and comments made by individual institutions.

General Comments

Higher Education (HE) is a huge global market which is changing rapidly. Major changes have been:

- the move from a small, elitist market to mass participation in HE;
- student funding arrangements and the consequent perception of the student as consumer;
- a move from traditional forms of passive delivery of knowledge to a student centred approach –facilitated by developments in information and communications technology;
- the emergence of new providers of HE in the form of company universities and private for-profit organisations.

1. Size and shape of HE

- Wales needs a world class research institution.
- The HE sector has to serve international, national and regional markets.
- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) recognise that they have an important role to play in social and economic regeneration.
- The HE sector needs to exploit the advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to enable it to compete globally and to deliver student-centred learning across Wales.
- The HE sector must be able to provide vocational courses and to widen access across the whole of Wales.
- HEIs in Wales are small compared with their counterparts in the rest of the UK.
- HE in Wales is underfunded compared with its UK counterparts especially Scotland. This affects the ability to recruit and retain good staff and students.
- Wales needs to retain its diversity of provision (though not with every institution offering every subject). This includes its commitment to Welsh medium provision.
- The sector needs to be encouraged to work together - be it through merger, collaboration or confederation. Current funding mechanisms promote competition rather than cooperation.
- Any restructuring should take account of the fact that some institutions serve niche markets eg Welsh College of Music and Drama, Trinity College.
- Offering courses that are relevant and of high quality will both attract students to Wales and retain home-grown students.

Issues to be considered

1. Are HE institutions in Wales of sufficient critical size to enable them to compete in a growing global market in both Teaching and Research?
2. If not, can this be achieved by encouraging collaboration on current lines or does it require a more radical approach involving restructuring of the Welsh HE sector?
3. What are the implications of adopting various models of HE restructuring in terms of

funding, quality assurance, institutional autonomy etc?

4. Developing new structures and introducing new technologies are not without their own cost implications. Will funding be made available to support these changes?
5. Can Welsh HE remain competitive without receiving parity of funding and treatment?

Learning and Teaching

Information and Communications Technology

- ICT is seen as a key development for the future but there is strong competition internationally.
- It requires massive investment - globally this is being approached on a very large scale - "\$1million to develop one course".
- Wales is not currently at the forefront of ICT developments.
- Students studying on-line need effective local support mechanisms.
- ICT delivery is not appropriate for all categories of student.
- Staff need training.
- Robust quality assurance mechanisms are required for all modes of study but especially for ones involving distance learning.
- ICT can help Wales compete effectively for international students; reach students who have difficulties in accessing HE; facilitate collaboration eg in teaching, research, and in extending Welsh medium provision.

Global competitiveness

- Quality of provision and fitness for purpose are essential.
- Adequate funding is required to attract and retain high calibre staff.
- An international reputation is important.

The market for lifelong, distance and flexible learning

- Wales' record in widening access is better than the UK as a whole.
- Future expansion is likely to be in the part-time and flexible delivery markets.
- Robust support mechanisms are required to encourage student retention.
- Flexible entry routes and seamless progression are key elements.
- The introduction of fees and abolition of maintenance grants has deterred applications from under-represented groups.

Vocationally relevant programmes

- There is a need for clear analysis of the potential market and for forward planning.
- Links with employers need to be strengthened.

Issues to be considered

1. Will sufficient funding be made available to develop ICT on an all-Wales basis rather than this being left to ad hoc development by individual institutions?
2. Can Wales afford to be left behind in ICT development for HE?
3. Are the current credit transfer systems sufficient to ensure seamless progression and flexible enough to respond to changing patterns of study?
4. How can greater employer/academia interaction be encouraged?
5. To what extent should lifelong learning be seen as a benefit in its own right rather than linked to the changing labour market?
6. How can HE institutions improve their retention rates whilst pursuing widening access initiatives (in recent evidence to House of Commons education committee drop out costs to taxpayer were estimated at £200m a year)?

Economic, Social and Cultural Regeneration

- HE is a major resource for the economy – HE in Wales is worth over £1 billion in income and provides over 23,000 jobs. This is not well publicised.

- HEIs also contribute to regeneration through research; technology transfer; consultancy; education of a skilled workforce etc.
- HEIs recognise they have an important role to play in both social and economic regeneration.
- To fulfill this role effectively, HE would benefit from a third income stream separate from its teaching and research funding.
- Wales has good track record in widening participation compared with the rest of the UK but much work still needs to be done to meet the aspirations of the National Assembly.
- Links between Further Education (FE) and HE are cornerstone for cultural regeneration and seamless progression.
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Issues to be considered

1. How can the impact of HE on the Welsh economy best be assessed and publicised?
2. Can a third income stream be provided to ensure core teaching and research activities are not adversely affected?
3. How can a balance be struck between HEIs responding to specific local needs and cooperating (with other HEIs and public/voluntary sectors) on initiatives to avoid wasteful duplication?
4. Should funding be mission-sensitive eg widening access requires premium funding?
5. How can HE further address the problems of social exclusion?
6. How can HE Wales extend access to Welsh medium provision without duplication of courses and bearing in mind the sector's limited resources?
7. Can long-term funding be made available for access and other initiatives to permit a more strategic approach?

4. Research

- Wales needs a world class research base.
- Funding is at the root of building a successful research community – to provide good facilities and to attract and retain good staff.
- It is an area where collaboration between different HEIs or between HEIs/industry can be very valuable. Current funding mechanisms, however, favour competition rather than collaboration.
- The value of all research streams – basic and applied - is acknowledged and funding should reflect this.
- Seedcorn funding is needed to support talented individuals and embryonic research units.
- Research and teaching activities cannot be separated. Each provides a stimulus for the other and both affect an institution's ability to recruit staff and students.
- Many respondents feel staff-student ratios in Wales are worse than in the rest of the UK. Consequently staff have higher teaching loads and less time to devote to scholarly activity.
- HEIs need expert advice on Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) and risk analysis.

Issues to be considered

1. Can world class research be achieved if research activities remain dispersed in small units or should research be concentrated in one or two institutions?
2. If the latter, is there an argument for a world class and a national class research base?
3. Do current funding mechanisms best serve the needs of building a strong research base?
4. How can emerging areas of research best be encouraged and funded?
5. How can a balance be achieved between the research streams?

5. Funding

- Welsh HE is underfunded compared with England and even more so with Scotland.
- Underfunding affects quality; estates; the ability to recruit and retain students/staff; the scope to contribute to the economic prosperity, culture, health and social development of Wales.
- There are several factors which make HE in Wales more expensive to operate than in the rest of the UK including geography, bilingualism, the population spread and the transport infrastructure.
- Efficiency gains (35% between 1989/90 and 1998/99) cannot be sustained without compromising quality.
- Funding for initiatives such as widening access or regeneration activities should not be at the expense of the core activities of teaching and research.
- Competition for funding is felt to be counter-productive and results in mission-drift and conformity. As a consequence HEIs may apply for funding that may be of limited benefit financially or strategically.
- Funding needs to be geared to longer-term planning cycles rather than short-term initiatives.
- Student financial hardship has affected the ability to recruit and retain students.
- Student support needs to be equitable.

Issues to be considered

1. Can HE funding in Wales be raised to levels comparable with England and, perhaps more relevantly, with Scotland?
2. Can funding initiatives be more mission-sensitive and formula-based and less competitive?
3. Can funding be over longer-term cycles to facilitate strategic planning?
4. Can access to student funding be made available to all students regardless of their mode or pattern of study to encourage the growth of part-time and distance learning?
5. Can the independent review of student funding look at the correlation between students working to finance their studies and student retention rates and the quality of their overall HE experience?

6. Accountability

- HE should be accountable for the quality of its provision and for its use of resources.
- The current quality assurance system is over-burdensome, expensive (costing the sector £12.5 million annually), compliance-driven and diverts resources away from students.
- There are risks attached to economic generation activities . HEIs must not be discouraged from such activities but may need expert advice to help them undertake risk analysis in connection with these.

Issues to be considered

1. How can the current system of accountability be made less burdensome and wasteful of resources?
2. What scope does the Assembly have to reduce this burden?
3. What is the correct balance between accountability and the autonomy of HEIs?
4. How will the new Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) programme of quality assurance impact upon Welsh HE?
5. What is the role of the University of Wales Registry and does it provide value for money and reduce the accountability burden for the small institutions?
6. How clear is the status of each institution in academic QA terms?

Additional issues

The following are issues which were not covered, or only partially covered in the questionnaire, and which some respondents wished to be included.

- Human resources – including staff development needs and contractual matters such as the increased use of casual staff.

- Changing the culture of HE – to embrace issues such as developing new teaching and learning methods through ICT, activities related to economic and cultural regeneration, the balance between core and additional activities
- A framework for ending ethnic and gender discrimination in employment.