

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

UNISON's written response to the consultation exercise in respect of the Higher Education review.

**Paul J Elliott
Senior Regional Officer**

Introduction

UNISON is the largest Trade Union in Wales and represents the majority of the non-academic staff who are employed in Wales' 13 Universities and Higher Education Colleges. UNISON is organised and recognised in all these institutions.

The contribution made by non-academic staff – administrative, secretarial, professional, technical, clerical, craft, manual and ancillary staff - to the Higher Education Sector, is far too often overlooked and undervalued. Without their contribution, Universities and Higher Education Colleges would not be able to function.

Between 1993 and the present all HE Institutions in Wales with the exception of the University of Wales experienced considerable change in governance, management and delivery of higher education. This was in addition to facing a funding crisis and funding disproportionate to that of institutions in England and Scotland.

Throughout this period of change in institutions, staff were required to carry out their principle roles, cope with change, face financial constraints in the provision of services and the increase in student numbers, at the same time as a lowering of their conditions of service and levels pay. This period of change also brought about redundancies and outsourcing of services.

The Conservative years were marked by a lack of public investment in our Universities and Higher Education Colleges, but a huge increase in staff productivity with no corresponding increase in salaries or wages. This legacy of the Tory years needs to be addressed to ensure Wales has a vibrant dynamic Higher Education Sector to go forward into the 21st Century.

Staff in higher education have made a considerable contribution to increases in efficiency with little recompense. The Bett Report stated that "student numbers have roughly doubled over the last decade" while support staff numbers have declined or remained static. The Report also emphasises that "much of the substantial growth of the HE sector ... has been achieved through increased productivity ... averaging 6% a year between 1991 and 1995, compared with 2% a year in the UK service sector".

Funding

The three year funding allocation announced in December 1998 for 1999, through to 2002, was a welcome improvement on previous allocations but still does not address the deficiency between the funding per head of students in Wales, compared to England and Scotland. The commitment made by the First Secretary to eliminate this discrimination in funding per student is welcome and

UNISON looks forward to the additional monies that will be made available to individual institutions when this 'gap' is closed.

The largest part of the sector's funding, around 40%, are provided through grants from the Funding Council. The introduction of student-related funding for students from disadvantaged backgrounds will provide a total of £21 million plus £7.5 million of additional funds respectively in 1999/2000. There has continued to be a steady rise in institutional funding from other sources. Institutions generate income from tuition fees, overseas students, special and short courses, consultancies, public/private partnerships, residences and catering, donations and appeals, research grants and contracts paid by government departments, health and hospital authorities, European Union sources, industry and charities. Although this is not a substitute for adequate government funding, the additional income could be used to reward staff for their high productivity and ever increasing skills.

Fees & Loans

Evidence is beginning to emerge that the introduction of fees and loans, far from widening access and participation, is inhibiting prospective students from the social groups whom the Government wished to encourage into Higher Education. There is reluctance on the part of young people from lower income families to take on extensive loans to finance their way through University. This, coupled with fees is resulting in increasing number of students living at home and attending local Universities. This trend could have an adverse effect on student uptake in Universities and Higher Education Colleges in Wales, especially those situated in rural areas with no large local population base. The National Assembly should review the system of loans and fees, with a view to abolishing student fees and reintroducing a system of grants.

Employment Practices

The Higher Education sector is a major employer in Wales, employing 14,000 people full and part time, of which 7,000 are non-academic staff. Some of the employment practices adopted by the Universities and Higher Education Colleges are unsatisfactory for such learned institutions and need to be addressed.

Fixed Term & Temporary Contracts

Far too many staff, particularly those employed in the 'Old Universities', are placed on fixed term and temporary contracts, which are renewed year after year. This is an abuse of these contracts. All employees should be made permanent in their posts following a six-month probationary period, unless these are extenuating circumstances to the contrary. Fixed term contracts should be the exception not the general rule.

Low Pay

Low pay is still endemic in the University and Higher Education Sectors, particularly in the 'Old Universities' where there is an over-reliance on overtime to achieve a living wage. 55% of 'Old University' manual staff are paid £3.80 an hour or less.

Term-Time Only Contracts & Job-Seekers Allowance

Many of the Universities and Higher Education Colleges employ staff on term time only contracts. Until recently, term time only staff, (who receive no payment or retaining fee during University vacation periods), were able to obtain Job Seekers Allowance for the holiday periods.

Regulations introduced during the dying days of the Conservative administration have stopped these payments. As a consequence many term time only workers suffer serious financial hardship during vacation periods. The right to receive Job Seekers Allowance during vacation periods should be re-instated or retainer payments made to term time only workers.

Contracting Out

A small number of Universities and Higher Education Colleges have contracted out some non-academic staff functions. UNISON is opposed to contracting out and experience has shown that whilst there may in some cases be a small financial return, quality, standards and staff commitment suffer, and an inferior service is frequently the result.

Superannuation

Unlike academic staff, non-academic staff do not have a National Universities Superannuation Scheme, and have to rely on individual College schemes that vary substantially in respect of benefits. UNISON wishes to see a move towards a National University Scheme for all University employees which will provide improved benefits on current individual College schemes.

The Bett Report

The Bett Committee on pay and conditions in Higher Education was established by the Dearing Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. The Bett Committee reported in June 1999. The Bett Report addressed many industrial relations issues in Higher Education, including these referred to above, and UNISON endorses the broad thrust of the Report. However, the Bett Report stated that success in these matters will only be achieved 'provided Government understands that changes of the sort justified in the Report will need additional funding'. UNISON urges the Government and the National Assembly to provide

the necessary additional funds, so the recommendations of the Bett Report can be introduced.

Lifelong Learning

Universities and Higher Education Colleges have embraced the 'Life Long Learning' philosophy, taking the University to the people, especially those in socially deprived valleys. However, Life Long opportunities have not been extended to non-academic staff employed by the Universities. It is ironic that Universities are trying to widen access and extend learning opportunities to social deprived communities, yet are seen to ignore their own employees.

New approaches to teaching and learning.

New technology need not be a threat to the delivery of higher education. New methods of delivery are probably best based in the traditional campus setting where there is provision for support, maintenance and development. Technologies such as the use of the Internet and Video Conferencing will support and extend rather than replace.

To accommodate new approaches to teaching and learning academic staff and students will require more support from non-academic staff. This support will range from general extra work to specialised technical support, which frequently involves extra skills to be acquired. Higher education institutions, while good at offering education and training to those outside the institution too often overlook their own staff.

Institutional Governance

The 'Old Universities' governance is covered by Charter and can only be changed by legislation. Most 'Old Universities' have broad-based governing bodies through the University Court or Council, and provision is made for non-academic staff representatives to sit on these bodies. The 'New University' sector is different and governing bodies are not always broad based and do not automatically provide for a representative of non-teaching staff to sit on the governing body.

Whilst the Government have done much to try and improve the governance of Universities and Higher Education Colleges, there is a need to ensure that governing bodies are properly representative of the communities they serve; that lines of accountability are established; and that there is automatic right of representation for non-academic staff or governing bodies.

Higher Education Mergers in Wales

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales report to the National Assembly - 'The Scope for Institutional Mergers at the Higher Education Level' –

September 1999, concludes that there is a case for seeing the existing 13 Universities and Higher Education Colleges reduced to 5 or 6 general multi-mission institutions in Wales.

Whilst it is recognised that the small size on some of Wales' Universities and Higher Education Colleges may make them vulnerable as institutions in the global economy, any proposals for mergers need to be examined very carefully. In any merger process the economic, social and cultural contribution made by the Universities to the communities in which they are located, must be protected. This is especially necessary where Universities are located in more rural areas and are the mainstay of the local economy.

Higher education institutions in Wales provide worthwhile employment to local communities. In some locations they are the largest employers and so have a profound effect on the local economy. Regional diversity in Wales helps to spread the financial benefit that higher education provides throughout the whole of Wales.

Where mergers are to proceed, this difficult process must be smoothed by commitments to no compulsory redundancies, additional restructuring monies to provide for enhanced voluntary early retirement payments, and relocation and travelling expenses.

Higher education in Wales has the opportunity to make a considerable contribution to the culture and language of Wales. Diversity of mission in higher education in Wales will allow institutions to offer students in Wales a choice of language and culture.

Geographical diversity will allow the greatest number of students to participate. The provision of high quality vocationally targeted higher education available in both industrial and rural areas should not be overlooked if Wales is to move forward from objective one status to parity with other areas in Britain. Many students coming into or returning to higher education are mature students who may be tied to their local communities by both family and finance. Potential students will be added to the socially excluded if local provision ceases.

There is already collaboration between institutions both in higher and further education. Some of these relationships, especially franchising encourage competition between institutions rather than collaboration. We should be encouraging institutions that are funded from the public purse to work together rather than compete.

Economies of scale might be found through merger, but the public funding saved will be spent in other areas repairing the damage of redundancy. The fall out from merger will affect staff employed on manual grades, clerical and technical

grades, many of whom are restricted financially to living in the locality of their employer.

The Higher Education sector is important to the development of the Welsh economy, wealth creation, and the creation of good quality, well-paid jobs. The problems identified in this manifesto must be addressed in order to ensure that Higher Education can make its contribution to the development of Wales' future.