

National Assembly for Wales

Children, Young People and Education Committee

HEB 15

Higher Education (Wales) Bill – Stage 1

Evidence from : Agored Cymru

Agored Cymru is a Welsh awarding organisation and the Access Validating Agency in Wales. We have developed with universities and colleges in Wales, Access to HE Diplomas that provide an entry qualification to university which is achieved by about 1600 adults each year, many of whom fall into the widening access category. In 2012-13, 26% of learners registered were from Community First areas. On average about 1100 adults from Wales progress to HE with the AHE Diploma, about 80% of those to Welsh HEPs.

We are also a provider of vocational qualifications aimed at developing the skills of the Welsh workforce including qualifications that are included in apprenticeship frameworks. Vocational qualifications play a vital role in providing routes into higher learning and contributing to the widening access agenda.

1. Is there a need for a Bill?

We support the general principles of the Bill, in particular:

- safeguarding the contribution made to the public good arising from the Welsh Government's financial subsidy of higher education; and
- maintaining a strong focus on fair access to higher education.

We endorse the role of both Welsh Government and HEFCW to ensure that national and regional learner needs are delivered through a coherent higher education system.

We welcome the proposals to increase the regulatory role for HEFCW. We acknowledge that the likelihood is that the provision of HE in FE will grow and that the current regulatory system will need to be developed to allow for this growth and to maintain high quality HE provision across all types of provider across Wales. The proposal that all institutions and other providers, will be subject to the same core requirements, is an important factor in ensuring that access to public money, will be made available to only those wishing to deliver quality education.

We welcome the provisions that limit designation for student support to HE providers that have charitable status as one of the mechanisms for securing the appropriate use of public funding.

We see the maintenance of part-time credit funding for HE courses as essential in fully meeting the needs of both social justice and skills. We note the Explanatory Memorandum (EM) of the Bill states that such funding will be maintained for the "foreseeable future". Without the maintenance of the current level of credit funding, it is likely that there would be a massive drop-off in the uptake of part-time higher education in Wales – as there has been in England since a loans-based system was introduced in 2012. This would have profoundly negative consequences for those wishing to re-skill following a career change, a change of personal circumstances or redundancy and would set back the widening access agenda for adult learners considerably.

We note the commitment in the EM to give further consideration to the student support

arrangements for part time study. We wish to see an extension of fee and access plans to part time provision so that HEPs in Wales specifically cover their arrangements for part time progression as this is particularly important for students from widening access backgrounds.

2. Do you think the Bill, as drafted, delivers the stated objectives as set out in the Explanatory Memorandum (EM)?

We consider the Bill delivers its stated objectives.

3. Are the sections of the Bill as drafted appropriate to bring about the purposes described in the EM? If not, what changes need to be made to the Bill?

We support the request from ColegauCymru that provision for the Welsh Government to be able to directly fund HE courses should be reinstated. We agree that this power appropriately used could broaden the range of higher learning available to support the up skilling of the Welsh workforce.

4. How will the Bill change what organisations do currently and what impact will such changes have?

We have no comment to offer.

5. What are the potential barriers to implementing the provisions of the Bill (if any) and does the Bill take account of them?

We have no comment to offer.

6. Do you have any views on the way in which the Bill falls within the legislative competence of the National Assembly for Wales?

We note the declaration of the Presiding Officer of the Assembly on 19 May 2014 that the Bill is within the legislative competence of the National Assembly for Wales.

7. What are your views on powers in the Bill for Welsh Ministers to make subordinate legislation (i.e. statutory instruments etc.)?

We have no view to offer.

8. What are your views on the financial implications of the Bill?

We note HEFCW's view in its written evidence to the committee that additional resources will be required for it to fulfil its new quality assurance duties. It is essential that an appropriate level of resource is available to ensure the intention of the legislation is able to be implemented.