

Cross-Party Group on Universities

Meeting notes

Date of meeting 6.45pm, Tuesday 22 November 2016

Location Conference Room 21, Tŷ Hywel, National Assembly for Wales

Present **Assembly Members:** Huw Irranca-Davies AM (Chair); Llyr Gruffydd AM; David Rees AM; Elin Jones AM; Darren Millar AM; Mark Isherwood AM
Universities: Amanda Wilkinson; Olivia Jones; Colin Riordan; Rob Humphreys; Cara Carmichael Aitchison; John Grattan; Jane Davidson; Tom Griffin
Others: Rhys Flowers (Secretary); Jillian Purvis; Carmen Ria Smith (NUS Wales); Clare O'Shea (NUS Wales); Dewi Knight; Sir Ian Diamond

1. Agree terms of reference

- The Chair opened the meeting and asked members to agree to an updating of the group's name and terms of reference to more closely mirror that of the universities APPG in Westminster.
- Darren Millar AM suggested keeping the group's name and terms of reference more general in nature and open to wider interpretation, to which NUS Wales representatives agreed. Amanda Wilkinson cautioned that Universities Wales, in providing the secretariat, would need to work within its charitable aims.
- The Chair said that it would be more "honest" if the group name was updated to explicitly mention universities but will keep it under review for future reference.
- The new Terms of Reference agreed were:

The Cross-Party Group on universities' primary objective is to enable dialogue between Assembly Members, Vice-Chancellors of the universities in Wales and other relevant stakeholders. The group will provide a forum to examine issues affecting the university sector and research, which may influence public policy, while crucially also exploring opportunities for them to continue making a vital contribution to our nation's future development and well-being.

2. Diamond Review Q&A

- Sir Ian thanked everybody who had helped contribute to the compiling of his report before going on to discuss some of the elements contained within it.
- David Rees AM asked Sir Ian if he was satisfied with the Welsh Government's response and also asked further questions around part-time provision, research and postgraduates.
- In response, Sir Ian said that he was satisfied that the majority of the report's recommendations were being taken on and in terms of part time provision, he hoped that the new system would try and minimise the "peaks and troughs" in demand witnessed in England.

- Darren Millar AM raised the issue of the projected £40m in savings each year and to what extent this money would be reinvested into HE.
- Sir Ian responded that only the Cabinet Secretary for Education would be able to answer that question but did raise the issue of proposals being tied to the living wage, and therefore students would benefit from any future increase in this.
- Darren Millar went on to ask whether Sir Ian felt that any potential control in the number of students would be a good thing, to which he replied that he hoped the system would enable all who want to access HE the opportunity to do so and that numbers should not be reduced in any way.
- Elin Jones AM asked about whether Sir Ian had considered incentivising Welsh students to remain studying in Wales, to which he replied that it was a very complex issue but the best incentivisation would be ensuring Welsh universities have top class taught programmes.
- Amanda Wilkinson and Colin Riordan both stated that it would be very difficult to set limits on the number of students in Wales if students are to be funded to study elsewhere.
- When asked by Llyr Gruffydd AM whether he thought it was inevitable that the fee level would increase, Sir Ian replied that it was not necessarily the case.
- Further comments were made by Rob Humphreys, Cara Carmichael Aitchison and Jane Davidson on issues such as the strength of part time provision in Wales compared to England, the threshold for support and comparisons between Wales and the system in Scotland.
- When pressed on whether he could see any “perverse outcomes” of the proposed new funding system, Sir Ian replied that the more he’s discussed his proposals, the more convinced he is that it is the correct way to do it.

3. Future meetings

- The Chair suggested that at least one of the future meetings during the next Assembly term should be held as a roundtable discussion over an informal dinner.
- Colin Riordan stated that he thought the proposed future topics for discussion were good, but suggests that the Prevent strategy and post study work visas should also be added to the list.
- Darren Millar AM suggested that each meeting should cover as wide a variety of topics as possible, to which the Chair agreed that it would be good to look at a broad range of issues during each meeting.
- Rob Humphreys suggested Universities Wales should try and secure 2-3 high-quality speakers to each meeting. It was later agreed that some of these speakers during the same meeting could have differing opinions on any given subject.
- John Grattan said that research funding, visas and capital funding were all areas that merited further discussion. He also suggested future meetings be held to coincide with Universities Wales committee meetings.
- Mark Isherwood AM said that employability and widening access were also important issues and that it was also essential that as much engagement as possible was held with universities in other parts of the country (in his case, north Wales).
- Llyr Gruffydd mentioned that the Children, Young People and Education Committee would be looking at the relationship between FE and HE in the New Year and that it would be good to have a relevant topic to coincide with this.

- After further discussion, it was agreed that the future meetings should be in the order below, with the topics for discussion broadly outlined as follows:
 - **Wales and the world:** to cover issues as outlined in the agenda but to also include the issue of visas, Welsh HE as an export and post-Brexit scenarios.
 - **Community engagement:** to cover issues as outlined in the agenda but to also include the Prevent Strategy (and potentially the Hazelkorn Review).
 - **Working with business:** to cover issues as outlined in the agenda but to also include how universities have a positive impact on the wider local economy that they serve.
 - **Research:** to cover issues as outlined in the agenda.
- The Chair closed the evening by suggesting that future meetings should leave a space in the agenda for topical discussions. It was also agreed by those present that each meeting should have a tangible output, be it in the form of a written report summarising the discussions / suggestions at the meeting or other relevant material.