

Cross-Party Group on Universities

Meeting notes

Date of meeting 6.15pm, Wednesday 01 February 2017

Location Conference Room C & D, Tŷ Hywel, National Assembly for Wales

Present **Assembly Members:** Huw Irranca-Davies AM (Chair); Llyr Gruffydd AM; David Rees AM; Rhun ap Iorwerth AM; Hefin David AM
University members: Amanda Wilkinson; Olivia Jones; Colin Riordan; John Grattan; John Hughes; Cara Carmichael Aitchison; Maria Hinfelaar; Julie Lydon; Richard Davies; Hannah Pudner
Others: Rhys Flowers (Secretary); Dewi Knight; Huw Morris; Tom Woodward; Mairwen Harris; Bobby Mehta; Fflur Elin; Carmen Ria Smith; Sunder Katwala; Jo Attwool; Arlene Griffiths.

1. Welcome and meeting business

- The Chair opened the meeting and thanked the speakers for agreeing to attend the meeting and that he was looking forward to what he was sure would be a lively and informative discussion.

2. Presentation from Jo Attwool of Universities UK on the latest immigration / visa policy and UK Government consultation

- Jo Attwool began by discussing the current number of international students and staff at Welsh universities before going on to analyse the value they bring to the Welsh economy, with figures from 2013/14 suggesting they support 7,600 jobs and bring in £530m
- Further discussions were held around what the short-term priorities would be for the UK government in cutting down the number of net migrants to the UK
- Concerns were raised over what was meant by UK Government suggesting that there should be a focus on “high quality” international students, and what the implications of such a policy would be on universities throughout the UK
- A range of options were discussed on how to ensure routes remain open for international students to continue enjoying a world-class higher education at Welsh institutions
- A series of concerns were raised over the accuracy of the available data and the methods used to measure migration flows into the UK. It was stated that the UK Government should refrain from making further changes to student visas until more reliable data is available
- The presentation concluded by outlining ways in which universities and wider stakeholders could positively engage with the UK Government consultation.

3. Presentation from Sunder Katwala, Director of British Future on the benefits and wider issues around international students, along with a discussion on lessons learned from the recent EU referendum

- Sunder Katwala opened his presentation with an analysis of how constituencies in Wales with a high number of students had voted during last summer's EU referendum
- The presentation went on to look at some of the lessons that could be learned from the campaign, including the failure of many politicians to effectively get their message "beyond the converted" and how there was a need to look beyond usual partners and build wider relationships across different communities, stakeholders and the political spectrum
- While the referendum showed the UK public wanted a cut in the number of migrants, a recent survey by British Future had shown that only 20% of the population wanted a reduction in the number of skilled migrants
- The discussion went on to look at the role universities could play in providing a solution to the increasing polarisation evident within British society, and how university towns could build bridges and provide a global connection to parts of the country that may feel disenfranchised and harbour negative attitudes towards immigration
- The presentation closed with an exhortation that it was now time to come out of the "post referendum trenches" and that universities should play a leading role in building bridges and a broader consensus throughout society.

4. Presentation from Arlene Griffiths of IDP Education on 'Welsh HE as an export'

- Arlene Griffiths began by speaking about her background within the education sector across many different parts of the world
- She went on to discuss current trends in recruitment for international students to Wales, with a decline witnessed overall, though areas such as China and Saudi Arabia displaying strong growth
- Discussion was then held on different modes of study, with undergraduate recruitment performing better than postgraduate
- Further discussion was held on lessons that could be learned from other countries and how there may be further opportunities in areas such as engineering
- The potential benefits of private pathway programmes was also discussed, with some Welsh universities already doing this
- The presentation closed with an outline of some new key messages that could be introduced, such as challenging the perception that Wales/UK is an unaffordable destination for international students. The question was also asked whether universities were cultivating enough of a distinctive Welsh identity in the international market.

5. Q&A and wider discussion following presentations

- David Rees asked some further questions on private partnerships, with Colin Riordan adding that many universities did not go down this route as the costs can be prohibitive
- David Rees also asked the questions on the lessons learned from the EU referendum and how age was a big factor in the result. Sunder Katwala responded by saying that he believed

the impact of age has been overstated and that people's education was a more important factor

- Fflur Elin highlighted the cultural benefits that international students bring to Wales and that their impact should not only be considered an economic one. She also went on to say that there had been a rise in xenophobic attacks in Wales since the referendum result. Jo Attwool responded that Universities UK are making the wider case for all the societal benefits that international students bring.

6. Future meetings

- The forthcoming agenda for the Cross Party Group was agreed, with the next meeting to be held on Community Engagement.

7. Other

- The Chair thanked everybody for their contributions to the information evening and as there had been areas of broad agreement it was suggested that the group would aim to write a letter to the UK Government consultation on visa policy
- The Chair concluded by saying that the sector needed to be clear in arguing for a special case for Wales in connection with student visas.