

Cross-Party Group on Universities

Meeting notes

Date of meeting 18.00pm, Wednesday 02 May 2018

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

Present **Assembly Members:** Hefin David AM; John Griffiths AM; David Rees AM; Kirsty Williams AM.
University Members: Elizabeth Treasure (Aberystwyth University); Sushila Chang (Cardiff Metropolitan University); Colin Riordan (Cardiff University); Maria Hinfelaar (Glyndŵr University); Richard B Davies (Swansea University); Louise Casella (Open University in Wales); Julie Lydon (University of South Wales); Jane Davidson (UWTSD); Amanda Wilkinson (Universities Wales); Olivia Jones (Universities Wales).
ColegauCymru members: Judith Evans, Coleg y Cymoedd; Barry Liles, Coleg Ceredigion/Coleg Sir Gar; Simon Pirotte, Bridgend College; Jackie Doodson, Coleg Cambria; Mike James, Cardiff and Vale Group of Colleges; Dafydd Evans, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai; Mark Jones, Gower College Swansea; Sharron Lusher, Pembrokeshire College; Mark Dacey, NPTC Group of Colleges; Guy Lacey, Coleg Gwent; John O’Shea, The College Merthyr Tydfil; Iestyn Davies, Colegau Cymru; Rachel Bowen, Colegau Cymru; Claire Roberts, Colegau Cymru
Others: Celia Hunt (HEFCW); Carmen Smith (NUS Wales); Gwyneth Sweatman (NUS Wales); Cerith Rhys-Jones (NUS Wales); Alexander Still (Office of Hefin David AM); Dewi Knight (Welsh Government); Rhys Flowers (Secretary).

1. Welcome and introduction from the Chair

- Hefin David AM welcomed attendees and spoke of the importance of future collaboration between HE and FE
- John Griffiths followed up by citing Nash Campus in Newport as a great example of co-working and shared ambition between the two.

2. NUS Wales: A student centred system

- Carmen Smith and Gwyneth Sweatman gave a presentation on behalf of NUS Wales, where they outlined their vision for opening access to students from all backgrounds, and at an affordable cost
- Seeing change as an “exciting” prospect, they spoke about how any future developments would need to be sustainable, resilient and help deliver the Welsh Government’s well-being goals
- The core principles underpinning their response to the PCET consultation was that any changes need to put responsibility on providers to support student representation structures;

that it includes the entire post-16 education sector; develops the ‘National Vision’; and that ‘Outcome Agreements’ work for students

- For them, learning should reflect the lived experiences and histories of students (for example, their ethnicity or religion etc.). Also, they should be able to study flexibly, switch their modes of learning and be able to shape their own learning objectives
- The speakers also spoke of the purpose of partnership working, before emphasising the importance of learning providers putting in place student voice structures that are fully funded and embedded within a new system
- In their closing remarks, NUS Wales noted that the new system was an opportunity to support students whose voices are not currently heard. They also welcomed the fact that FE and HE had joined forces for the meeting and that it was a reflection of the sector’s togetherness in seeking to find a solution that works for all.

3. Alastair Sim, Universities Scotland: Insights from the Scottish Funding Council

- Alastair Sim opened his presentation by outlining some of the distinctive features between the Welsh and Scottish education systems, before describing the journey of the Scottish sector to create a merged FE/HE funding agency
- It was noted that Scottish HE institutions had initial reservations regarding changes, including fears over the distinctiveness of their offer being lost and that the sector ringfenced funding would be removed
- implemented, the changes created some opportunities, including being able to work more intelligently on the ‘learner journey’ (and in so doing, help widen access to HE), joined up thinking around capital investment and also some good examples of institutions offering tertiary provision across the spectrum of further and higher education
- However, there were some inherent risks in the way FE and HE were funded and regulated in Scotland, including FE losing some of its autonomy as a result of reclassification to the public sector; the focus on college / university boundaries not always serving the core business of either of them; and the body increasingly being seen as a department of government, rather than an independent agency
- In his closing remarks, Alastair noted that any new body would need to be able to challenge – as well as advise – decision makers, and be more than just a government mouthpiece.

4. Kirsty Williams AM, Cabinet Secretary for Education: Update from Welsh Government

- The Cabinet Secretary for Education emphasised that she was keen to hear the views of the leaders who had gathered for the meeting
- The Welsh Government had set out consistent principles which had been outlined through its white paper, remit letter to HEFCW, technical consultation, the responsibilities around the ‘Civic Mission’ of institutions and its economic action plan
- There were three core principles underpinning the desire for change, namely:
 - Expertise (equitable access and opportunity): would include leading on the implementation of Diamond; creating a system that influences developments outside of Wales; helping deliver the employability action plan; and equalising skills levels
 - Excellence (quality of teaching and learning): PCET consultation has been clear on this priority and wants a system that delivers quality education, research and innovation

- Engagement (strong sense of place in community / regional economy / world stage): the government had been heartened by HE's response to developments around living wage and 'Civic Mission'. There was also a challenge for the government to sell the sector to the wider world
- In her closing remarks, the Cabinet Secretary for Education said they were starting from a "strong position" as there was already plenty of existing excellence, and she was looking forward to delivering on a co-operative model for the future.

5. Question & Answers

- John Griffiths AM noted that he wanted to see Wales at the cutting edge and turn the proposals into a practical reality
- Amanda Wilkinson added that one of the key themes was 'empowerment' and that if proposals were to truly deliver then they needed to be implemented through a collective vision rather than a "factory-driven" approach
- Further contributions from sector leaders included:
 - Themes such as inclusiveness and engagement were shared by both FE and HE, but there was also a need to identify areas that are different and it was important that these were recognised
 - While innovation and research has traditionally been seen as the preserve of HE, the role of FE in successful knowledge transfer projects was also highlighted
 - It was hoped that any changes would improve the learner journey from FE through to HE
 - University of Wales Trinity Saint David was cited as a "dual sector institution. While recognising there were differences, it had also brought about exciting opportunities (such as helping deliver the government's employment plan) and also encouraging more students to progress from FE through to HE. In response to this point, Alastair Sim pointed out how developments such as the associate student model was working well in Scotland and was improving course retention and "blending" the student learning journey
 - Concerns were raised about the effectiveness of careers advice services with only 250 advisers currently working in Wales. In response, the Cabinet Secretary for Education said there was a need to take another look at the system and more work would be done on cutting down on "course mismatches". She also went on to say there would not be access uniformity and the key for any new developments would be to tailor them to different localities across Wales
 - It was asked what a mixed economy would look like in practice due to issues such as the porous border with England; FE operating a more "sealed" system compared to HE; and that any changes would need to be made within the broader context faced by many institutions
 - Concerns were also raised about the politics of student recruitment from schools into FE
 - The idea of a review of funding methodology in FE was also raised and may need an approach that does not just take into account student numbers
 - It was also noted that there was a huge challenge to increase overall participation in FE and HE, and this was absolutely fundamental to any future system working.
- The Cabinet Secretary for Education went on to say that the new system would be as transformational as leaders wanted it to be. Students would not be best served by delays and that any outcomes would be better if they were reached by collaboration and leadership from within
- John Griffiths AM said that the meeting was the start of a new conversation and he was pleased to witness a renewed spirit of co-operation

- In his closing remarks, Hefin David AM noted that while questions and conversations would continue, it was good to see debate between the sectors rather than any “turf war”. He called on leaders to use Assembly Members as a sounding board and that there would be further opportunities to engage with relevant Assembly committees. He finished by saying he was interested in replicating patterns of success and that the conversation would continue in a future meeting
- The Cabinet Secretary for Education said the meeting had been extremely helpful and it would be a good time to hold another one at the end of the technical consultation.