

Stakeholder Event Note – 04 July

On 04 July, as part of its inquiry into the opportunities and challenges that Brexit poses for Welsh higher and further education, the Members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee held an event to hear the views of stakeholders.

This note summarises views expressed by stakeholders during the event on the three themes of the inquiry. The views expressed are their own and not necessarily the views of their organisations, or Assembly Members.

Learner Outcomes and Employability

- One stakeholder held the view that there continued to be scope for UK and EU universities to work together of their own accord (without being reliant on the EU) to offer joint, dual and double degrees. They believed that this work needs to continue after Brexit. Another view was expressed that some universities may be reluctant to grow this route as they can lose fee income from the students who go and study abroad. Linked to this, some stakeholders held the view that continued common recognition of qualifications and awards between the UK and Europe is vital.
- The ending of the Tuition Fee Grant for new students from September 2018 onwards was considered to be significant as EU students now have to fund the entire £9,000 tuition fee – some stakeholders hypothesised that this might be linked to the lower numbers of EU applicants to Welsh institutions for September 2018. Other factors mentioned as possible explanations for this drop included EU students not feeling welcome, and one stakeholder explaining that that in their view institutions have not having focussed on recruiting EU students as much as other international students.
- The view was expressed that better employment terms need to be offered in order to attract excellent research students in what is a very competitive environment. An example was given of PhD students who teach at Bristol University being employed on ‘Fair Work’ terms.
- No stakeholders expressed a view against the need to continue to ensure both the inward and outward movement of students on international mobility programmes. It was argued on all stakeholder tables that this two-way mobility offers considerable benefits to students, particularly students from under-represented groups. The view was expressed that inward mobility also aids a more diverse student body which widens student horizons and improves their soft skills. As part of this, Erasmus+ was considered vital as it is a very large and well-established programme, a recognisable brand and is tried and tested. Stakeholders all held the view that the next Erasmus+ programme due to run from 2021 would be a considerable improvement on the current

version. The best option, it was argued, was to continue to participate in the new Erasmus+; if this was not possible, stakeholders all agreed that Wales must create a similar scheme.

- Stakeholders expressed the view that engagement between HE/FE and employers and industry, particularly global ones such as General Dynamics and Airbus in Wales, will become more important, post Brexit, in improving the employability of students.

Financial Sustainability and Investment Opportunities

- Stakeholders expressed the view that EU funding was filling funding gaps that will still exist if EU funding ceases. One stakeholder commented that if EU funds cease without replacement, there would need to be a change to the 'educational model' in Wales.
- There was wide consensus that the current model of European funding (in particular structural funding) is not without drawbacks and problems – views expressed included that it is bureaucratic, creates artificial geographical boundaries, can split projects across local authority borders and sees institutions look for ways to use the types of funding made available, rather than be able to bid for generic funding for university devised research projects.
- Concern was expressed that future regional investment, post-Brexit, might get absorbed into the Welsh block grant and will not then be accessible in the same way as now. There were varying views on the operation of any future UK regional fund with some stakeholders arguing for the full 'pot' to remain with the UK so as not to place a limit on potential funding bids, whilst others felt the 'pot' should be devolved.
- There was concern about the lack of information regarding the UK Shared Prosperity Fund¹ and the level of influence Wales will have over it. Stakeholders expressed the view that Welsh voices need to influence the conversations around post-Brexit funding.
- Stakeholders felt that the fact there does not appear to be an agreed UK Government position on post-Brexit arrangements makes it more difficult to plan. This, they argued, creates a dilemma about whether Wales should be scenario-planning or waiting to see what happens.
- Stakeholders held the view that there was scope to replace some, but not all, EU funding through working in the charitable sector and with industry. However stakeholders from the FE sector in particular warned that institutions will continue to need access to capital funding, not least for estate improvements and to enhance the learner experience.

¹ The UK government has [committed to create a UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#) (UKSPF), a domestic programme of investment after leaving the EU. There is little detail available at the moment.

Research and Innovation Funding and Collaboration

- EU research funding was seen as vitally important and an area in which Wales has underperformed. Stakeholders stated that universities need the capacity to mount successful bids for research funding – they need a lot of research infrastructure already in-place to stand a chance of winning larger funding competitions. Getting to the position of winning large bids therefore requires funding in the first place, and EU funds, some stakeholders felt, have helped the Welsh HE sector build up this capacity. A number of stakeholders argued that Welsh universities are now able to win more UK funding due to the additional capacity EU funding has enabled institutions to build up.
- There was consensus that the UK must remain a part of the European research programme Horizon 2020 and its successor programme Horizon Europe from 2021. Those present believed that these programmes offered longer-term stability with 7 year cycles and multi-year programmes.
- Stakeholders also expressed the view that the recommendations of the Reid Report into Government funded research and innovation in Wales needed to be implemented as soon as possible to help Welsh universities gain funding from UK sources to replace EU funding.
- Stakeholders discussed the potential for winning research from charities. Whilst many agreed this was a large source of funding it remained problematic as:
 - particular types of research conducted by charities may not match provider research profiles; and
 - funding from charities may not cover overheads, requiring these to still be met by institutions.
- It was emphasised by a number of stakeholders that successful researchers are very globally mobile – they will move to the best research institutions in a very competitive international market. They believed Brexit may put the UK at a disadvantage in this regard if border controls are restrictive.