

Higher Education Review Team  
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Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills  
Welsh Assembly Government  
Cathays Park  
Cardiff  
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17 December 2008

Dear Professor Jones

### **Review of Higher Education in Wales**

Thank you for your letter of 17 November seeking fforwm's views in respect of the Review of Higher Education in Wales.

fforwm is pleased to have the opportunity to give written evidence to the Review of Higher Education. However we believe strongly that the work of the Review is undermined by the absence of further education (FE) on the team carrying out the Review.

Phase 1 of the Review, which covered student finance (of direct relevance to FE), was stated in the Review's remit to be influenced by the Rees and Graham Reviews (on both of which FE was represented) as well as the Webb Review on Further Education and *Skills That Work for Wales*. In the latter, the Ministerial foreword draws attention to the crucial role of FE colleges in delivering the skills that Wales requires.

The Review Group's remit covers the vision and strategy for higher education as well as the responsiveness of institutions to learners and employers and the need to assess new forms of delivery. All these are crucial for FE institutions in Wales which are increasingly offering the type of HE provision that is central to WAG's vision of a highly trained workforce with higher technical skills.

The WAG policy on Transformation set out in *Transforming Education and Training Provision in Wales* envisages a radical change in the delivery of post-16 education and lifelong learning, including higher education. The document proposes four possible models for transforming the sector. The third model (set out in paras 48 and 49) covers FE and HE and states that:

*'The Assembly Government wishes institutions in both sectors to consider their missions jointly and separately and the strategic contribution they expect to make to deliver the education and training needed today and for the future' (para 48)*

The remit letter for 2008/09 from Jane Hutt, Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, sent to Professor Roger Williams, chair of HEFCW, makes several references to the strategic agendas emerging from the Independent Review of FE chaired by Sir Adrian Webb and to *Skills That Work for Wales*.

It is disappointing therefore that a major review of HE can be carried out in isolation from the rest of the education sector.

The distinguished membership of the Task and Finish Group on Higher Education is dominated by people from HE institutions with only one external member from industry. There is a real risk that its work will be perceived as inward looking and exclusive. It gives a strong message that the HE sector is raising the drawbridge and seeking to exclude other interests.

Compare this approach to that of the Webb Review of Further Education. The Review Team, appointed by the Minister, was led by a retired vice-chancellor supported by two independent members not involved in FE. The external reference group was made up of a range of experts drawn from higher education, further education, business and sector skills councils. This approach was very acceptable to the FE sector in Wales, which appreciated the external focus of the Review and its independent judgements. fforwm was able to give substantial written and oral evidence and provide supplementary papers on key themes as they arose.

Senior managers from FE colleges made a positive contribution to two recent major reviews into higher education - the Independent Study into the Devolution of the Student Support System and Tuition Fee Regime in Wales chaired by Professor Teresa Rees and the Independent Review of the Student Support Available and Financial Arrangements for Part-time Higher Education in Wales, chaired by Dr Heather Graham.

We have kept to the three page deadline as requested in your letter. Doing so inevitably meant eschewing a more detailed textual analysis.

Yours sincerely

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Chief Executive

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## **Review of Higher Education in Wales**

### **fforwm evidence**

#### **Introductory Comments**

fforwm is pleased to have the opportunity to give written evidence to the Review of Higher Education. However we believe strongly that the work of the Review is undermined by the absence of further education (FE) representation on the team carrying out the Review. This point is explained and reinforced in the covering letter.

#### **Some context**

- 21 FE colleges deliver HE courses in a variety of ways and enrol around 7,500 HE students. The most common pattern is delivery through franchise agreements. Seven FE colleges also receive direct funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). Colleges receive fee income from students taking HE courses and deliver a wide range of professional courses at degree and postgraduate level. Any consideration of the future of HE therefore will have significant implications for FE colleges.
- FE colleges' HE provision focuses on part-time students and on vocational qualifications including foundation degrees, diplomas, certificates and professional qualifications. FE makes an important contribution to widening access, one of HEFCW's key priority areas
- FE colleges are keen to have the same powers to validate their own foundation degrees (FDs), as those given to FE colleges in England. Experience from England is that for an individual FE college the process of applying to award a foundation degree is complex and time-consuming. Assuming that legislation giving FE colleges the power to offer and validate their own FDs is passed by the National Assembly for Wales, FE colleges are unlikely to be offering their own FDs before 2012 at the earliest. This will give plenty of time for consultation, planning and preparation. FE colleges have extensive and long established partnerships with HE institutions, with each other and with other providers such as schools and: local education authorities (LEAs).

#### **What in your view are the strengths of higher education in Wales?**

- HE institutions (HEIs) are geographically dispersed through Wales.
- Some universities and individual departments are world class.
- There is a strong research base in some universities.
- Vocational HE has been developed largely through partnerships with FE.
- Several HEIs have good working relationships with FE colleges.
- HEIs attract students from other UK countries, particularly England, and from overseas, raising the profile of Wales and generating external income.
- Having a separate HE funding council in Wales means that decisions are scrutinised by a high calibre appointed Board, there is a separate published remit letter from the Minister and there is clear separation between providers and WAG (although not being directly funded by WAG may have some disadvantages).
- HE has adapted well to many technological challenges and the global challenge.

- A high degree of autonomy is given to HEIs, compared with other parts of the education system.
- The quality profile of HE in Wales is at least satisfactory and often good or outstanding.

### **What in your view are the shortcomings of HE in Wales?**

- The large number of small HEIs in Wales leads to significant competition between HEIs, making partnership more difficult. Some competition can contribute towards raising standards and ultimately benefit learners but it can also lead to duplication and inefficiencies. Wales would be better served by having larger HEIs that can compete successfully within the UK and internationally.
- Some HEIs are not engaging sufficiently with local communities in terms of economic development.
- In a few HEIs, the quality profile is not strong and the research base is weak.
- There is no overarching curriculum planning at national level, inevitably leading to duplication of provision and the lack of a level playing field in academic and vocational provision.
- The lack of interest in the development of foundation degrees and the lack of support for FE colleges to have foundation degree awarding powers has been a significant brake on vocational HE developments and responsiveness to employer needs
- HEIs are not attracting enough research funding from the main Councils. Expertise and funding for research needs to be focussed on those HEIs which already have a strong research base to ensure Wales has universities recognised as world class centres for research.
- Individual institutions sometimes focus on their own historical and cultural interests rather than on the needs of the wider economy in Wales.
- Some HEIs depend too much on overseas markets that could change dramatically.
- In some cases, HEIs are reluctant to respond to the partnership agenda with FE colleges and miss the potential for the development of closer links to assist progression. Some HEIs have no contacts at all with FE colleges.
- Some HEIs are still primarily focused on the needs of young people aged 18-21 studying full-time. Around 35% of undergraduates on courses funded by HEFCW are part-time. By contrast, 84% of all students attending FE colleges, taking a variety of FE and HE courses, are part-time and 75% are aged over 19. There is a need to recognise importance of developing a network of locally available courses for part-time students from a variety of backgrounds.
- In some cases there is a conflict between the needs of research and that of teaching and learning and widening participation.
- There is insufficient flexibility and transfer between programmes e.g. a student may find it difficult to use the knowledge and experience gained on one course to transfer to another relevant course delivered either within the institution or between institutions.

### **What do you consider to be the most significant one or two issues that HE in Wales will face over the coming decade?**

- Rationalisation and financial pressures for a variety of reasons will impact on provision. Economic downturn is likely to lead to locally available part-time routes to HE becoming increasingly important as prospective students find the cost of full-time

provision prohibitive. This point is reinforced by demographic changes which will lead to reduced numbers of 18-21 year olds and an increase in the number of adults. These adults are likely to require flexible part-time vocational courses. The world economic downturn may also have an impact on numbers of overseas students (see also shortcomings).

**How can HEIs best work closely with FE colleges and other providers to widen participation significantly and more directly meet the needs of employers and the economy?**

- HE needs to acknowledge the growing importance of part-time vocational degrees, diplomas, certificates and professional qualifications and the likely increases in numbers of students wishing to study through smaller units of learning rather than taking a more traditional full-time three-year course.
- Recognition of the significant reforms taking place in schools and FE and their longer term impact on HE institutions e.g. the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification.
- HEIs maintaining independence while seeking to respond more directly to the demands of a devolved administration in Wales.
- In some cases, the focus on research capability of academic staff is at the expense of concentrating on the quality of teaching and learning. Need to take forward the work of the Higher Education Academy which is seeking to raise the status of teaching in HE

**How might these issues be tackled by WAG, Welsh HE institutions and other stakeholders in HE in Wales (giving due consideration to funding constraints)?**

- Partnership working between schools/local authorities, FE colleges and HEIs in developing pathways to full-time, part-time and work-based HE from 11 to 14 years of age. Such developments clearly link to the transformation agenda and the need to improve performance at 16, thereby opening up HE opportunities to a wider group of 11-16 year olds. In addition, developing opportunities for progression for students, especially part-time students, such as considering some form of 2 + 2 degree provision as used by universities and community colleges in USA.
- Expanding the number of vocational courses including FDs in partnership with FE colleges as a major contribution to widening participation.
- Carrying out longer term strategic planning to enable HEIs to assess the external environment and be in a better position to respond.
- Increasing the availability of part-time courses suited to adult learners in employment.
- Working more closely with industry in developing courses relevant to the needs of learners and employers.
- Playing a more active role in the transformation and reconfiguration agenda impacting on post-16 education.
- Improving flexibility and transfer arrangements between and within institutions (for example, at one university in England, every course was designed so that students could transfer knowledge gained on the course to another relevant course).
- Draw on the experience of the DCELLS funding benchmarking project to benchmark performance on selected indicators between HEIs and departments across Wales and with comparable HEIs in the rest of the UK.

## Annex

### Some background information on HE delivered in FE institutions

- In 2007/08, six FE colleges in Wales received formula funding of £2,545,228 (£3,174,745 in 2006/07) or 1.2% of HEFCW's overall allocations (excluding capital, 3<sup>rd</sup> Mission and PGR)) (p7 of HEFCW annual report 2007/08). Later in the document it reported that seven colleges had received recurrent funding (this includes non-formula funding) of £2,768,000 (£3,186,000 in 2006/07) which represented just under 0.8% of total recurrent funding. FE Colleges receive no funding for capital.
- In 2007/08, FE colleges enrolled 1,239 students on courses directly funded by HEFCW with 59% being part-time. These compare with 2006/07 when the respective figures were 1,478 and 59.4%.
- In evidence given to the Webb Review of Further Education, fforwm stated that 21 colleges, including the eight colleges above, enrol HE students through franchise and other arrangements. fforwm has estimated that FE colleges receive funding of around £15.8m annually for their HE provision. On top of the £2.6m direct HEFCW recurrent income, colleges receive franchise income of around £6.7m and around £5.5m in fees.
- An estimated total of 7,500 students take HE courses in FE colleges – around 8 per cent of the total 93,800 undergraduate students in Wales. This figure is less than the proportion (11 per cent) in England and there is considerable potential for growth.
- Most of the HE students attending FE colleges are adults taking part-time courses franchised from HE institutions. As such, colleges play an important role in widening access to higher education, although some part-time students may be taking professional and other courses paid for by their employers.
- FE colleges are local, specialise in working with adults and are geared to the needs of part-time students. Attending a college closer to home cuts down on travel and accommodation and general living costs. These are particularly significant for students having to pay back fees.
- Colleges have an important contribution to make to new types of courses such as the two-year Foundation Degrees that are drawn up in consultation with employers and seek to reflect the needs of business. As yet the number of these courses run in colleges in Wales is proportionately less than that in England. They do, however, represent an opportunity for future expansion to meet the need for higher level skills as identified in successive reports including *Skills That Work for Wales*.