

Welsh Medium Provision Development Fund Consultation (Circular W07/25HE)

Summary of responses

Responses were received from:

University of Glamorgan
Aberystwyth University
Bangor University
Cardiff University
University of Wales, Lampeter
Swansea University
University of Wales, Newport
Trinity College, Carmarthen

The consultation was set in the context of the commitment by the sector, through HEW, to a strategic framework for Welsh medium provision. This includes the preparation and implementation of a comprehensive National Development Plan through the new Welsh Medium Higher Education Sector Group (WM HESG).

Consultation questions

The consultation sought views on four aspects in particular.

1 Future key criteria for the Fund

The consultation set out key criteria which HEFCW would expect for adopt for the Fund to ensure that it supported the National Development Plan: These criteria had already been endorsed by the WM HESG at its meeting in June 2007.

- The funding is used to support the development and expansion of Welsh-medium provision.
- The funding is used directly to support Section 2 of the Sector Development Plan (Provision Development). Projects which are not consistent with the plan will not be funded.
- The funding is used strategically to ensure the maximum benefit from available resources.
- Funding is allocated against clear development plans which have measurable outputs, targets and timetables, including for the preparation and delivery of provision, and student enrolments, and that progress will be closely monitored against these.
- There will be mechanisms for withdrawing/deferring/recovering funding from particular projects if agreed progress is not made, or if there is not sufficient assurance that progress can be made. Funding will then be reallocated to other projects.

Responses

These criteria were supported by respondents to the consultation, a few noting particularly that they welcomed them wholeheartedly. One institution, which was not supportive of other proposals in the circular, welcomed the criteria “in principle”.

2 Future arrangements for the Welsh Medium Provision Development Fund

This section set out the arrangements for determining the use of the fund in future. Details can be found in paragraphs 10 to 17 of the circular. Broadly, this suggested producing a funding plan, which would be consistent with the National Development Plan. The first stage would be to put together expressions of interest by institutions both in terms of the subjects already identified for collaborative development by the WM HESG and subjects where institutions considered they had lead role/niche provision. This development programme would be brought to the first WM HESG meeting of the 2007/08 academic year.

The distribution of the Fund would then be considered, against the development programme, by a panel consisting of the chair of the WM HESG, the Director of the Welsh Medium Teaching Development Centre, HEFCW officers, plus up to three external members to be invited by the chair of the WM HESG. There would be a combination of setting money aside for subjects prioritised for collaborative development (including through plans put together by the network subject panels), and making allocations against proposals for developments by individual institutions or collaborations by smaller groups of institutions.

Responses

Most respondents agreed with this overall approach. Some of the comments made in support were very positive. Several comments emphasised the importance of working collaboratively to ensure the best use of the available resources, while welcoming the recognition of lead roles or niche markets for institutions in some subject areas. One institution queried whether the timetable for 2007/08 was rather tight.

Although the circular indicated that the approach to determining the distribution of funding would primarily be one of negotiation and agreement, a view was expressed that the approach was likely to foster competition rather than collaboration. This might lead to smaller but important institutional/departmental projects competing at a disadvantage with larger collaborative projects and that it would be helpful to ring-fence some funding for individual projects. One response was more critical, advocating rather that, to avoid “one-off” and adhoc developments, the three largest providers of Welsh medium provision should be given responsibility to lead sectoral developments in specific subject areas, “mentor” others in expanding their provision, and lead the subject panels. This would provide three key partners for the Welsh Medium Teaching Development Centre and make the allocation panel suggested in the consultation unnecessary.

3 Transitional arrangements

Under the present arrangements, approximately two thirds of the Fund is distributed to the three largest providers of Welsh medium provision, Aberystwyth University, Bangor University and Trinity College, Carmarthen. University of Wales Institute, Cardiff receives a smaller direct allocation, although it is also able to make bids for funding on top of this.

The original paper considered by the WM HESG in June had suggested a phased approach over two years to moving from direct allocations to allocating the entire funding against a sector development plan in line with the key criteria. Under this approach, the three largest providers would receive 60% of their current allocations for the first year and 30% in the second year.

However, in the discussions in the meeting, the members from the institutions most directly affected stressed that even a partial reduction of their earmarked allocations in 2007/08 would destabilise planned developments. They suggested that they would prefer a year's notice and a clean break with the new method introduced in 2008/09. This was therefore presented as an alternative approach in the consultation, with the expectation that the proposals which the institutions concerned put forward for the use of their direct allocations in 2007/08 would be brought into the sector development plan and considered by the proposed panel.

Further details of the alternative approaches can be found in paragraphs 18 to 22 of the circular.

Responses

One institution stated that it supported the original transitional arrangements put to the WM HESG. Other institutions not receiving direct allocations from the Fund generally were content with either approach. They did recognise the concerns of the institutions receiving direct allocations and were therefore content to accept the alternative approach to allow them time to adapt to the new arrangements. One institution did suggest, that in fairness to those not receiving direct allocations, the institutions concerned should state how they intended to use their funding and if there was not sufficient evidence that this would lead to appropriate developments, a proportion of the funding might be kept back to be used for projects involving other institutions.

In the responses received from institutions receiving direct allocations, the concerns remained that ending their access to this funding would undermine their work and the strategic and sustainable approach which they had sought to foster. They emphasised such factors as the extensive investment made in Welsh medium provision in recent years, the importance of the funding to small but significant projects in academic departments, and that the proposed change might not only damage future progress but also risk achievements to date. One response noted that, if HEFCW did decide to implement the changes as set out in the alternative method, the proposed year's notice was vital. As indicated above, one response was strongly critical, interpreting the proposed approach as an annual bidding

process which would not be conducive to strategic planning and would lead to unsustainable and disjointed developments. It wished the existing funding to be retained within the three leading Welsh medium institutions (to buffer them against change), while requiring them to take a lead and mentoring role in regard to other institutions in the sector. This would allow a new sectoral structure – “network” – to evolve.

Several respondents noted concerns that the funding available was not sufficient to realise the expansion of provision envisaged in the national development plan: in this context some also noted concern that the proposals were a redistribution of existing funding, rather than providing additional investment.

Enrolments element of the Fund

Under the current arrangements, a portion of the Fund is available for allocation on the basis of increases in enrolments. The consultation noted HEFCW’s preference (assuming that the other elements of the Fund were continued for a further year) to discontinue this and add it to the sum remaining for supporting the development plan after the direct allocations were made.

Responses

Responses varied. Several, either through endorsing the proposals overall or making a specific statement were content for this element of the Fund to be discontinued. One indicated a wish that this element be retained. Another saw merit in an incentive of this nature in principle, but recognised HEFCW’s reasons for withdrawing it and therefore supported the proposed change.