

Meeting
11/12/09

Agenda Item
24

Reference No
HEFCW/09/119

1 Issue

The purpose of this paper is to update Council members on the current position with regard to Subjects of Broader Importance to Wales. Subjects considered to be of strategic importance to Wales are Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM), Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and Islamic Studies.

2 Corporate Planning Implications / Rationale for paper

- 2.1 The Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills sought preliminary advice from HEFCW in 2006 on subjects which might have a broader importance in the Welsh context and which may be difficult to sustain as well as options on how we should respond to this.
- 2.2 Funding provided for Subjects of Broader Importance to Wales focuses on both widening access to subjects which often fail to attract students from backgrounds with little traditional participation in higher education, alongside stimulating employer engagement which aims to address Wales' higher levels skills needs. Funding is also used to support subjects which are viewed as strategically important to Wales.

3 Recommendation(s)

The Council is invited to note the contents of the paper.

4 Timing for decisions

There are no decisions arising from this council paper.

5 Council members' interests

No conflicts of interests have been declared in advance of the meeting.

6 Further information

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7 Background

- 7.1 Since 2005-06 HEFCW has kept abreast of the work in England to identify and protect strategically important and vulnerable subjects. In 2007 the decision was made that whilst we would continue to monitor the situation for some subject areas we would seek, where appropriate, to join in measures currently in place, or planned, in England which sought to stimulate increased demand for those subjects where demand is currently low.
- 7.2 In 2007 HEFCW gained representation on the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) steering group convened by HEFCE. From this grouping we were able to establish contact with four professional bodies – the Royal Academy of Engineering, Royal Society of Chemistry, Institute of Physics, and the Institute of Mathematics and its Applications. In June 2007 Council confirmed a budget for STEM support of £375K per annum for 2007/08 and 2008/09. The funding was to be used to roll out the HEFCE funded STEM pilot projects for the four subject areas into Wales.
- 7.3 In October 2008 Council agreed to make additional funding available to enable the Welsh sector to link into England's National Programme for STEM. It also enabled the creation of a Routes into Languages consortium for Wales in support of MFL provision. In addition, HEFCW agreed to provide a small level of funding in support of a national programme to establish a UK Islamic Studies Network.

8 STEM Developments

- 8.1 It was agreed in March 2009 that England's National STEM Programme would be hosted by the University of Birmingham under the leadership of Professor Nigel Weatherill. Initial discussions between HEFCW, Professor Weatherill and several STEM academics in Wales confirmed that there was significant interest in Welsh participation in the three year programme.
- 8.2 In line with the development of the scheme in England, it was decided that Wales would form its own 'region' alongside five in England. Each region would be led by one Higher Education Institution, in Wales' case Swansea University was chosen. Swansea was selected because of its academic record with STEM subjects, alongside its impressive outreach work already taking place in some STEM areas through the Wales Institute of Mathematical and Computational Sciences (WIMCS).
- 8.3 The first meeting of the National Programme Board to oversee operational developments was convened in September 2009 attended by HEFCW staff and Professor Ken Morgan from Swansea University. The initial meeting focussed on governance and operational issues enabling Birmingham to finalise legal issues and contractual arrangements for the programme. We will also join the overarching Executing Committee, likely to meet for the first time early in 2010.
- 8.4 In November 2009 Wales held the first 'regional' meeting at the lead institution with representatives from ten institutions¹ across Wales. Well attended, the aims of the programme and its plans for Wales were strongly supported. WIMCS will

¹ University of Glamorgan, Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff University, Swansea University, UWIC, UW Newport, Swansea Metropolitan University, Glyndŵr University and the Open University in Wales.

now work up in more detail the plans for activity in Wales. The progress of the Welsh region is currently more advanced than that of the regions in England. Lead institutions in England have been encouraged to emulate Wales' initial all-region institutional meeting as an example of good practice.

- 8.5 Birmingham recently produced a press release to confirm that the lead institutions within the five English regions will be the Universities of Bath, Birmingham, Bradford, Manchester Metropolitan and Southampton. Plans are currently being developed for a major launch event in England early in 2010. It is likely that Wales will also host a local launch event.
- 8.6 The focus of the STEM Programme will be on sustainable activities with the potential to achieve long-term impact rather than short term gains. The professional bodies have already drawn up plans which will see the STEM pilot projects, which were aimed at widening access to higher education, embedded within HEIs across England and Wales. The other focus of the programme will involve employer engagement and innovation with activities to be confirmed over the coming year. We will ensure that future STEM developments in Wales align with the priorities included in the Welsh Assembly Government's new higher education policy, '*For Our Futures*'.

9 Modern Foreign Languages Developments

- 9.1 In October 2008 Council agreed to make Modern Foreign Languages part of the Subjects of Broader Importance to Wales initiative, and committed funding of £250K per annum to allow Wales to participate in a new programme of activity to promote and encourage people to study MFLs.
- 9.2 The refresh of the Assembly's *Languages Count* strategy was due to be published earlier this year but has encountered several delays, with publication now estimated for late 2009. HEFCW officers provided feedback to the Assembly on the draft strategy in June 2009 and outlined HEFCW plans to establish a consortium of higher education institutions from across Wales to work with one another alongside schools and colleges to encourage greater numbers into language study.
- 9.3 In order to facilitate this activity HEFCW looked closely at the Route into Languages Scheme in England which is jointly funded by HEFCE (£4.5M) and the DCFS (£3.5M). Under the programme, nine regional consortia have been established in England where groups of universities work together with schools and colleges to enthuse and encourage people to study languages. In addition, national networks have been set up to promote translation and interpreting as careers and three research projects have been commissioned.
- 9.4 The English programme was set up to run initially for four years from 2006/07 to 2009/10 and is led by the Higher Education Academy (HEA)'s Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS), in a partnership with the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML) and CILT, the National Centre for Languages
- 9.5 HEFCW officers held preliminary meetings with the Programme Manager for Routes into Languages, based at Southampton University, from March 2009 to discuss the potential inclusion of Welsh higher education institutions. Agreement was reached for Wales to form its own regional consortium. CILT Cymru, with its regional and language based expertise, was willing to host a full-time dedicated

Project Manager (and administrator) to run the Consortium, with the Director of CILT Cymru agreeing to act as a part-time Programme Director.

- 9.6 HEFCW wrote to the sector in May 2009 to invite them to participate in the Consortium. The response was very positive with nine institutions² now making up the Routes Cymru Consortium. CILT Cymru and LLAS have recently appointed a Project Manager who is currently undertaking interviews with all institutions to draw up a programme of activities. As a new consortium, Wales will also receive support from LLAS including online resources and student training, alongside formal contact with the other consortia in England with the opportunity to share good practice with academics across the border.

10 Islamic Studies

- 10.1 We continued to keep a watchful eye on developments in England relating to Islamic Studies. During 2007 and 2008 a consultation took place between the UK funding bodies, the Research Councils and the UK higher education sector to examine how funding could aid collaboration between academics in this strategically important subject.
- 10.2 In June 2009 the English, Scottish and Welsh funding councils agreed to jointly provide £850K to fund a national network to bring the community of Islamic Studies scholars closer together. The network aims to provide information on courses and staff, facilitate events, seminars and exchanges of ideas to enable academics to connect. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is working with the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) to develop the network. HEFCW's contribution will be in the region of £40k.
- 10.3 Phase one, which recently completed, saw the HEA reporting to HEFCE on the provision of Islamic Studies at modular level and a consultation on the Islamic Studies academic community highlighting their priorities and needs from the network. During phase two there will be opportunities for academics and students to network and attend an inaugural conference, alongside the provision of small 'network development grants' through open competition. It is envisaged that by September 2011 the development with JISC, of the gateway for Islamic Studies resources will be complete.

11 Financial implications

- 11.1 There are no financial implications arising from this paper. Funding is available for all activities from the Subjects of Broader Importance budget line.

12 Communications implications

- 12.1 The STEM Programme in Wales will be officially launched at an event in either Cardiff or Swansea early in the new year, date to be confirmed.

² University of Glamorgan, Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff University, Swansea University, UWIC, UW Newport, Glyndwr University and the Open University in Wales.

13 Diversity and Equal Opportunities implications

13.1 Elements of the Route into Languages Scheme and the STEM National Programme are aimed at increasing participation into subjects which often fail to attract students from backgrounds with little traditional participation in higher education. As such both programmes will contribute to the aims of widening access to higher education in Wales.

14 Risk Assessment

RISK	ACTION TO ADDRESS RISK
The proposed interventions are insufficient to prevent loss of provision which is of a broader importance to Wales.	Close monitoring of the situation, including annual statistics, on-going dialogue with the sector and active participation with colleagues in England.
Without additional funding students will not be encouraged to undertake studies in STEM, MFL and Islamic Studies.	The proposals outlined in this paper are intended to address this risk.