

Student Experience, Teaching and Quality Committee

Summary of discussions on *For our Future*

Context

1. At SETQC's January 2010 meeting the strategic discussion focused on the Welsh Assembly Government document *For our Future: the 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales (FoF)*. The purpose of the agenda item was for members to identify and debate the implications of the strategy and action plan on the work of this committee, with particular emphasis on the student experience, widening access and the skills agenda.
2. Paper SETQC/10/01 provided the background for this item and its implications for HEFCW's emerging corporate strategy. Attention was drawn to the fact that the strategy would impact on the range of matters considered by the Committee, which has a role to 'advise the Council on all matters relating to learning and teaching in higher education, including skills, widening access to higher education, Initial Teacher Training and Welsh medium provision, with the aim of ensuring that Welsh higher education meets the needs and expectations of learners and other stakeholders.'
3. Three presentations were provided, covering different issues impacted on by the strategy and action plan:
 - *For our Future: the student experience* – Katie Dalton, NUS Wales;
 - Implications *FoF* will have for institutions, on the basis of HE Academy research to date, with particular regard to the post-graduate taught and research experience surveys – David Sadler, HE Academy; and
 - *For our Future* and HEFCW's corporate plan – Celia Hunt, HEFCW
4. These presentations set the scene for group discussions, which were followed by a feedback session.

Discussion outcomes

5. Question 1: *What are the principal implications of 'For our Future' (FoF) for HEIs?*
 - It was more appropriate to refer to HE than HEIs, to encompass all HE learners.

Students

- The student body and modes of learning are diverse and give rise to a range of student experiences. HEIs should identify what they mean by 'the student experience' - this would be affected by the changing student demographic. It is important to have a diversity of institutions and courses.
- It is essential to ensure the diverse student voice is heard, including through diversity of student representation on institutional committees. This might impact on students' union management and organisation.
- Student participation could be incentivised eg, via increased input into the curriculum discussions and publicising changes made following student engagement.
- Students were familiar with innovative methods of delivery. E-learning can enable more flexible delivery, but new technologies are not cheap.

- The 'traditional' undergraduate route should not be detrimentally affected by new methods of delivery.
- Welcome emphasis within *FoF* on HE for all and at any age. Recognised as inevitable the notion of a hard cap on full time student numbers. Should focus on maximising the engagement of the Welsh population across the board.

HEIs and FEIs

- HEIs need to engage with this strategy as soon as possible, but it will be expensive to implement, and the pan-Wales ESF projects will not be enough to meet expectations.
- Need to strike a balance between employers, who need to focus on the immediate, and HEIs' need to plan for the future. Also need to consider the capacity of HEIs to deliver (eg re accreditation of bite-sized learning).
- HEIs will not be able to respond to the new environment unless their own administrative processes are 'lighter touch', eg in relation to validating new bite-sized modules.
- Some, but not all, HEIs have a strong tradition of supporting local employers and learners. Therefore *FoF* could have a differential impact across the HE sector. Some HEIs view *FoF* as not addressing their particular concerns; others see it as an opportunity.
- Foundation degree awarding powers (fDAPs) and regional planning have implications for HE and the student experience. Some FECs would seek FDAPs, but others would continue to work in partnership with HE. The maintenance of the foundation degree qualification benchmark by the QAA has been helpful.
- Skills development and level 4 and 5 provision will be most effectively delivered via HE/FE partnerships. WAG needs to put in place a policy to support this together with a process that improves the FD brand and an opportunity for rationalising HNC/HND/FD provision, with proper consideration of progression issues.
- It will be a challenge to deliver Coleg Ffederal, an expensive initiative established pre-recession, without impacting on other funded initiatives.
- Awareness should be raised of professionalisation of staff, particularly in further education with regards to training for teaching on HE provision. Managing expectations of incoming staff regarding their role will be necessary.
- There may be implications for staff contracts, eg in terms of what staff will be required to do in working across regions. Reductions in staffing could be one of the outcomes.
- High retention and completion rates are imperative if the social justice agenda is to be maintained and to enable access to higher level employment.
- A challenge for WA policy implementation is to fully embed and prioritise part-time provision.
- *FoF* WA references still largely assume a school to HE learning journey.
- Institutions need to share resources and develop more fully useful collaboration, eg with the Open University in Wales.

Skills

- Reconfiguration can only take place over time: in this context, there is need for further strategic thinking in terms of enhancing the learner's experience and the role of HE in the knowledge economy.
- Employability skills and career advice should be a core entitlement. It is important to identify where non-professional/non-vocational courses were providing employability skills.
- The WESB *Employer Challenge* document presented to the October SETQC was not intended to be used for audit purposes, but HEIs could be encouraged to use this as appropriate.
- It is important to retain the broad concept of 'graduateness' and not move away from this towards specific aspects such as employability/skills.

Regionalisation

- The regional dimension needs a sensible approach based on good practice in existing regional partnerships.
- Using the employer voice: the establishment of discipline-based regional employer-HE fora would be a useful interpretation of the regional approach.
- A risk is that regional planning leads only to regional learner progression, resulting in WA being more aligned to marketing and recruitment than WA to all HEIs.
- The move to a systematic approach to HE delivery is radical and recognises HE specialist missions and purposes. A risk for WA within this system is that some HEIs fail to prioritise WA, and HEFCW fails to widen access to all HEIs, resulting in limited access to higher earning occupations.
- Evidence indicates that postgraduate students select on reputation of institution and thus they may be constrained by the regional dimension.
- Generally, reconfiguration and collaboration is believed to deliver cost savings, but delivering reconfiguration itself has costs.
- The rationale for regional planning needs to be more fully articulated;
 - A risk of regional planning is that regional 'planning and funding boards' might create an expensive, additional layer of administration/ bureaucracy;
 - A challenge for the regional approach to delivery is how the OU in Wales plays into and across the structures;
 - A challenge for the regional approach to delivery is how the Coleg Ffederal relates to this structure, given its pan-Wales remit;

6. Question 2: *What action should HEFCW take, including via our corporate strategy?*

- HEFCW needs to determine the required strategic outputs and outcomes to achieve cultural change.
- Within the HEFCW corporate plan diagram HE's civic and cultural responsibility should be included as an overarching theme. The vertical line between LLL and social justice and research and knowledge exploitation should be removed.

Collaboration and competition

- Need to encourage more effective use of human capital. This could be achieved via collaborative support for learners and sharing of resources within subject communities. It might be easier to encourage collaboration with institutions which are further away as they are less likely to be perceived as competitors, however, the regionalisation agenda might prevent this.
- HEFCW should play a role in challenging and qualifying the assumption in *FoF* that competition between HEIs is a bad thing.
- HEFCW could assist in enabling HEIs to speak with a united voice.
- Many of the *FoF* recommendations have implications for curriculum reform and HEFCW will need to support HEIs to deliver cultural and curriculum changes, including staff development, changes to staff contracts, etc;
- HEFCW needs to draw attention to the lack of references to the international agenda for HE. There is a danger that the regional agenda could lead to parochialism.

CQFW

- A wider understanding and application of the CQFW is needed, including how chunks of credit can be assembled into a meaningful whole.
- Accreditation of prior learning via use of the CQFW would be helpful. This is difficult and expensive to achieve currently, particularly with SMEs.
- The funding model supports completion rather than lifelong learning. The Assembly and HEFCW could consider a move towards individual learner accounts and the promotion of the benefits to learners of credit accumulation and transfer.

Widening access

- Widening access policy development should also consider increasing post-graduate part-time provision to promote the development of higher level skills. The Graham funding should be targeted at particular categories of part-time students. HEFCW could prioritise the allocation of this funding and re-examine the funding structure to identify how part-time learners might be supported most effectively.
- HEFCW could consider a regional planning board to deliver progression pathways and one Wales-wide RW consortium to respond to ACL, HE/FE and other key WAG priorities.
- HEFCW could establish a regional planning framework which determines its own sub-committees, including WA.
- HEFCW should try to embed an LLL perspective in all policy developments.
- Widening access in Wales should be more clearly defined, setting out its purpose from 2010, taking account of potential budget constraints; and defining the WA target groups.
- Information, advice and guidance should be considered, either within the strategy or at institutional level, particularly in relation to advice, retention and student support.

7. Question 3: *How could success/impact be identified and appropriate measures taken?*

Measures

- There is a lack of data re: identifying success and impact. Currently completion is used as a measure.
 - Wales needs to use the results of the long DLHE study. Clear need for 2nd and 3rd generation data on student destinations.
 - Could map where courses are running, their take-up and by whom, to identify impact, measure change and identify gaps.
 - There needs to be a decision regarding how the success of take-up of higher education would be measured, eg, by institutional profile, diversity of student body, postcode, etc.
 - Need to look at broader social indicators.
 - NSS can be used as a measure of impact, but is very simplistic in the context of the range of student experiences.
 - Cited example of Scottish 'basket of measures' model, which focuses on broad, long-term outcomes: What happens to students? What sort of jobs do they take up?
 - Higher Education – Business and Community Interaction Survey (HEBCIS) captures useful information in areas where Wales had traditionally performed well, eg number of new businesses generated. The questions might be better designed to reflect what we now need.
 - HEFCW could access a wider range of KPIs already captured by HEIs. The strategic planning process offers HEFCW an opportunity to do this.
 - WAG does not hold the necessary data on the skills base (eg on regional LMI). There may be a role for the HE sector in developing an applied research programme, so that policy is clearly based on evidence.
 - A WA success measures/ impact for HEIs should be more closely aligned with those of the post-16 education system, given that HE is part of a wider learner progression framework (this requires strategic planning by WAG and other post-16 providers):
 - In relation to targets, HEFCW with WAG, should work towards establishing some consistency across all post-16 education;
 - HEFCW needs to examine what value for money means in educational/ WA terms to ensure that funding is effectively utilised and measures appropriately applied.
 - Measures/targets are required over which HEIs have total control ie that HEIs are not accountable for achieving targets that rely on other sectors' achievement as with Reaching Higher WA targets.
 - Strategic plans need to identify the contribution of FEIs and other providers to strategic delivery.
8. Question 4: *Are there any additional factors which should be considered in the context of the overarching aim to develop a sustainable, excellent higher education system?*
- Members would welcome a reduction in bureaucracy, as the time spent on benchmarking, quality, governance is substantial. Welsh Assembly Government participation would be required to achieve this.
 - It takes 3-10 years to realise the impact of any changes made in higher education, and therefore the sector cannot respond rapidly to strategy/policy

changes. WAG is trying to change too much too quickly. Need to prioritise carefully over a sensible time period. Danger in cutting core investment and shifting funds from core to strategic at the same time.

- It would be useful to identify the impact of HE on those students who drop out prior to completion.
- *Targeting.* A challenge for HEFCW is to ensure that WA groups continue to be prioritised, given budget constraints and HEIs' ability to increase income streams via increased international recruitment/'traditional' student recruitment.
- *Funding.* A risk is that continued funding through WA premia may continue to advantage HEIs geographically well-placed to recruit from socially disadvantaged groups.
- Query whether it is possible to have an excellent HE system when the value placed on teaching, by some, is unclear. Additionally, it was queried whether, in the light of funding cuts and staff pressure, how HE can be promoted as an attractive profession for staff.
- Do not have a private sector employer base with which to work in Wales, as some sectors are comprised of many small companies. Members identified that it might be useful to identify whether inward investment could be used to fund skills development.
- The impact of private providers could be an interesting longer-term issue. Productive relationships may well be established.
- Skills in relation to the civic role of HEIs are broader than the ESDGC agenda. Proven correlation between higher skills levels and other positive social indicators.
- There needs to be a subsidy (eg an equivalent to the Scottish funding 'horizons resource') for preserving course of importance within regions, eg STEM, MFL.