



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HEFCW
Stakeholder and Partner Consultation

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1. Executive Summary

Background and Method

- 1.1 Following on from the 2007/8 Stakeholder survey, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) commissioned Strategic Marketing to carry out a second independent survey amongst its external stakeholders and partners about the services provided and relationships with those organisations.
- 1.2 Initially, an online survey was conducted during November/December 2011 to gather the broad views of individuals within education Institutions in Wales and Partners across the UK. The survey was predominantly quantitative in nature. In total there were 111 responses from institution contacts (62%) and 42 responses from partners (52%).
- 1.3 A second phase of work was undertaken in January/February 2012 to explore some of the key issues raised in the first phase in more detail. 50 in-depth telephone interviews were carried out – 35 with representatives from institutions in Wales and 15 with partners across the UK.

Feedback from Institutions

Awareness and Perceptions of HEFCW

- 1.4 Awareness of HEFCW is very strong. 87% either know a 'fair amount' or 'very well' about the work of HEFCW. This remains unchanged from the 2008 survey. Awareness of the work of other bodies is typically lower than for HEFCW, the highest of which were HESA (74%), QAA (73%), Universities UK (71%), UCAS (71%), Higher Education Wales (67%) and the Welsh Government's Department for Education & Skills (63%).
- 1.5 74% have a favourable overall impression of HEFCW. There is no significant change since 2008. 6% have an unfavourable view of HEFCW. HEFCW is rated more favourably than other education bodies.
- 1.6 56% of respondents say that HEFCW is either 'above average' or 'one of the best' education bodies in terms of the service it provides to institutions. 32% consider it about average whilst 7% suggest it is below average or one of the worst organisations for service.
- 1.7 HEFCW is viewed very positively in terms of the attributes it exhibits particularly on approachability (88%), effectiveness (64%), respect (62%), how well it is in touch with the institutions it funds (62%) and responsiveness (60%). However, 68% find HEFCW bureaucratic and 33% comment on a lack of transparency.

Perceptions of HEFCW's Role

- 1.8 Views are fairly consistent on HEFCW's role amongst institutions but there are some areas where opinion is divided. 82% see HEFCW as an agent of the Welsh Government whilst 61% view it increasingly as a planning agency. However, 47% see it as an advocate or spokesperson for the HE sector and

29% do not. This reflects confusions about HEFCW's perceived role and what it will become in the future. Many acknowledge that the various Welsh Government policy measures on areas such as funding and reconfiguration and collaboration have changed HEFCW's role but this has led to uncertainty about HEFCW's future remit.

- 1.9 63% agree that HEFCW works in partnership with the institutions it funds, actively promotes the fulfilment of equalities legislative requirements (60%), effectively responds to policy changes (60%), supports and encourages sustainable development (58%) and works in partnership with other higher education sector bodies (58%).

Levels of Engagement and Support from HEFCW

Overall engagement

- 1.10 63% agree that there are opportunities to give feedback to HEFCW on its work whilst 16% disagree. HEFCW is generally considered to be responsive to stakeholders as 66% believe that it acts or will take action on the feedback it receives. However, a significant minority of one in six (16%) disagree.
- 1.11 Overall engagement and support in most areas of HEFCW's work is good with half or more giving a positive rating. The highest rated area is statistics and data collection where 70% gave a very good or fairly good response. For many of the lower rated areas, there are high proportions of 'don't know' responses which may include respondents who have no involvement with that area.

Institutional Level Feedback

- 1.12 HEFCW is generally effective in most areas of its work with individual institutions and at least half say that it is fairly or very effective in all areas. 79% say that HEFCW is effective in 'responding to requests and queries from institutions' and 77% for data collection. The 'not very/not at all effective' ratings are in the minority but relate to engagement on institutional risk matters (11%), the annual funding allocation process (11%), responding to individual requests/problems and queries (10%) and financial monitoring (7%).
- 1.13 Feedback on improvements on various areas of interaction suggests that HEFCW has become more accessible to staff in institutions. The most positive changes are in electronic communications where 31% see improvement, ease of reaching staff (23%), face to face contact (20%) and dealing with enquiries and requests (19%). 15% see improvement in the quality of service and the involvement of institutions in policy development (11%) although 7% also see a deterioration on this last point.
- 1.14 Interactions which have deteriorated are typically in areas which reflect the 'workload' which institutions are required to undertake. 37% say that the administrative burden on institutions has worsened whilst 21% note deterioration in the timeliness of official requests.
- 1.15 Other areas which have deteriorated relate to HEFCW's ability to understand the needs of and represent the sector. In both cases around six in ten see no change, almost one in ten see an improvement (8-9%) but almost double say

that there has been a decline (15-16%). Further analysis suggests these findings relate to the timing of official requests and the deadlines for response – particularly in Summer 2011, and the administration burden which is driven by the WG policy agenda. In both cases, these are heavily influenced by the pace of change in the sector. However, micro management and the level of monitoring are raised as ongoing issues.

- 1.16 43% see an improvement in the service provided to their institution, 12% a deterioration and 35% see no change. Improvements have been recognised in the level of service provided and the relationships with institutions. Many comment that whilst progress has been made, HEFCW should continue to work on the areas which have improved such as approachability, access to staff, effective electronic communications, face to face contact and dealing with enquiries and requests. Areas for further improvement include:
- More client focussed relationship and dialogue with institutions at senior level
 - Continued face to face contact and consultation through regular focus groups and regional stakeholder events
 - Dealing with enquiries and requests – some areas are considered slow e.g. new framework for capped numbers
 - Communicate more about areas of HEFCW's work other than funding

HE Sector Level Feedback

- 1.17 HEFCW is considered to be effective by at least two fifths of respondents in all aspects of its HE sector level activities particularly on policy development and consultation for which almost two thirds (63%) say HEFCW is very or fairly effective.
- 1.18 HEFCW is less effective on support relating to the regional dimension to planning and delivering higher education (37% not at all/not very effective), representing issues of concern to higher education to the Welsh Government (32%), support for reconfiguration and collaboration (30%), support for the new fees funding regime (25%). These issues reflect concerns about HEFCW's ability to act as a strong intermediary between the HE sector and the WG.
- 1.19 HEFCW is considered to be highly effective at HE sector level in providing support for widening access (73%) and Welsh medium provision (71%). The least effective areas are support for developments in the skills and employability of students, links with businesses and the community, and enhancing research.
- 1.20 35% see improvement over the last two years in the service that HEFCW provides to the HE sector overall whilst a third see no change and 14% think it is slightly worse.

Contact and Dealings with HEFCW

- 1.21 Reflecting current areas of policy development, respondents would like more contact with staff involved in reconfiguration and collaboration (23%), student matters (22%), funding (22%), strategic development (21%) and statistics and data collection (20%).

- 1.22 Satisfaction levels are relatively high with 66% of respondents saying that they are either very or fairly satisfied with the overall relationship between HEFCW and their institution. This has risen from 60% in the 2008 survey. 9%, however, are dissatisfied to some degree. This is slightly down from 12% in the previous survey.
- 1.23 37% say that HEFCW's relationship with their institution has improved in the last two years; mostly it is 'a little' better. There is evidence of progress as this is up from 22% in the previous survey. However, a significant minority (13%) take the opposite view and believe that the relationship has worsened.

Communication and Engagement

- 1.24 The most commonly used communication channels are direct contact with HEFCW staff (83%), HEFCW circulars (82%) and the website (71%). The newsletter is used by 18% as a main channel. The preferred channels are also direct contact with staff and circulars followed by HEFCW conferences/seminars or meetings and the website. Direct contact is highly valued to enable understanding, gain clarification and assistance.
- 1.25 Feedback on the newsletter suggests that it may not always be received or recalled. It is generally perceived as a lengthy document containing limited 'new' information. A move towards an 'e-zine' format with links to relevant articles could make the newsletter more current and easier to scan for relevant news.
- 1.26 Circulars are valued as a means of consultation but best combined with the opportunity for discussion and dialogue through seminars/workshops on key issues. This offers a useful opportunity for engagement with Institutions.
- 1.27 85% indicate that HEFCW communicates very well or fairly well with their institution. This compares with 75% in the 2008 survey. 7% of respondents say communication is fairly or very poor.
- 1.28 The most useful communications are circulars, the website and funding circulars all of which were considered useful by 80% or more respondents. The least useful channels are the annual report, press releases, the equality scheme, newsletter and the Welsh Language Scheme.
- 1.29 Again reflecting current HEFCW activities, respondents would like more information on funding higher education (60%), reconfiguration, collaboration and the structure of the sector (53%) and the fees regulatory role (38%).
- 1.30 In terms of policy areas, further information is sought on higher education in further education (45%). Other policy topics have a significant but lower level requirement for further information such as innovation and engagement (36%), skills and employability (36%), student engagement and representation (34%) and research (32%).

Areas for Improvement

- 1.31 The key areas for improvement in the next three years are:
- Engagement and relationships with institutions – more partnership and consultation

- Stronger representation of the Welsh HE sector to Welsh Government
- Funding and fees – innovation, rationale, monitoring and advice
- Other areas including timing of circulars, deadlines, admin/bureaucracy, prioritisation of key policy areas, transparency and some efficiency improvements.

Feedback from Partners

Awareness and Perceptions of HEFCW

- 1.32 All partner respondents are familiar to some extent with the work of HEFCW. More than eight in ten (81%) say that they know very well or know a fair amount about the work of HEFCW. As with institutions, the partners are more familiar with the work of HEFCW than with other UK education sector bodies.
- 1.33 84% of respondents have a favourable overall impression of HEFCW, more so than for other organisations. The highest rated other organisation is the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education which is rated favourably by 72%.
- 1.34 85% consider HEFCW approachable and 83% say it is effective. Seven in ten agree it is responsive, in touch with the institutions it funds and respected. The most significant negative attributes or bureaucracy (43%), not transparent (18%), slow to change (18%) and out of touch with the institutions it funds (13%).
- 1.35 78% rate the quality of the body of staff positively. Many are unsure about the effectiveness of the Council and this is likely to reflect limited contact. HEFCW is fair and transparent when applying HE policy. There are mixed views on HEFCW's perceived reputation amongst institutions; although most rate this positively (58%), a small minority disagree (8%).

Perceptions of HEFCW's Role

- 1.36 Perceptions of HEFCW's role are also mixed amongst partner respondents. Some areas are very clear, for example, the majority agree that HEFCW works in partnership with other HE sector bodies and with the institutions that it funds.
- 1.37 HEFCW's remit is less clear and has evolved in recent years. 81% believe that HEFCW is an agent of the Welsh Government but almost two thirds (63%) say that it is an advocate or spokesperson for the HE sector whilst 23% disagree with this last point.
- 1.38 Two thirds (68%) agree that HEFCW is increasingly seen as a planning agency. This is up from around half in 2008. There are mixed views over whether this is a positive or negative development and most agree that this role has developed as a result of strategic planning changes on the WG policy agenda. Many believe that this role is likely to remain a key aspect of HEFCW's role in the future.
- 1.39 Opinion is mixed on whether HEFCW is viewed primarily as a regulatory body with 30% agreeing that it is and 43% disagreeing.

Contact and Dealings with HEFCW

- 1.40 The majority of partners say that they are able to provide feedback to HEFCW on its work (83%). A small proportion disagree (5%). HEFCW is considered to be responsive to the feedback it receives (78%). Again, 5% disagree.
- 1.41 Satisfaction levels are high amongst partners and 83% are very or fairly satisfied with the relationship between their organisation and HEFCW. Most of the others are neutral or undecided.
- 1.42 57% see no change in their relationship with HEFCW in the last two years. A third say the relationship has improved. None of the respondents suggest that the relationship has worsened. Comments suggest that the main areas of change relate to improved accessibility and the ability to have open and honest dialogue between organisations particularly regarding HE sector policy issues. Maintaining relationships will be important in the future.

Communication and Engagement

- 1.43 Direct contact with HEFCW staff is the most popular communication channel with virtually all (95%) using this route to find out about HEFCW's activities. Six in ten (60%) keep up to date with developments through the website which is up from 49% in 2008. Circulars are less commonly mentioned by partners compared to institutions but are still used by 43%. Just under a fifth (18%) currently use the HEFCW Newsletter as a main source of information.
- 1.44 Preferred routes for communication mostly echo those currently used with direct contact, the website, circulars and seminars/conferences being the most popular. However, almost a quarter would like to be kept informed through the HEFCW newsletter which is slightly higher than the 18% who currently use this route. There is some evidence from follow up activities that some respondents aren't aware of receiving the newsletter.
- 1.45 80% say that HEFCW communicates well with their organisation. 5% indicated that it is carried out fairly poorly. The remainder were unsure.
- 1.46 Further information on HEFCW's HE sector-facing activities is of interest on specific topic areas which reflect current changes and developments in the HE sector in Wales and the UK. The main priorities for further information are funding higher education and reconfiguration/collaboration/sector structure.
- 1.47 For HE policy activities, half would like further information on 'innovation and engagement' and 'higher education in further education'. Other topics of interest include research and 'skills & employability'.

Areas for Improvement

- 1.48 HEFCW's key areas for improvement in the next three years should focus on:
- Communication – particularly on key policy issues, maintaining an open and transparent approach
 - Future development of the HE Sector – strategic influence