

**Minutes of the 9<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Student Opportunity and Achievement Committee held on 8 November 2019 at HEFCW's Offices, Bedwas.**

- Present**
- Bethan Owen, HEFCW (Acting Chair)
  - Cara Aitchison, Cardiff Metropolitan University
  - Stuart Coombs, Cap Gemini
  - Nick Fox, part-time student representative
  - Stephen Griffiths, Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW)
  - Jon Howden-Evans, Royal Holloway, University of London
  - Ewart Keep, Skills and employability representative
  - Ioan Matthews, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol
  - Rob Simkins, National Union of Students Wales (NUSW)
  - Chris Taylor, Cardiff University and Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD)
  - Claire Taylor, Wrexham Glyndŵr University
- Observers**
- Kieron Rees, Universities Wales
- Officers**
- Nicola Hunt, Senior Student Experience Manager (Secretary)
  - Jane Johns, Head of Widening Access and Inclusion
  - Savanna Jones, Widening Access and Inclusion Manager
  - Emma Mock, Head of Skills and Employability
  - Cliona O'Neill, Head of Student Experience
  - Alyson Thomas, Director of Policy and Funding
  - Angela West, Skills and Employability Manager
- Apologies**
- Ben Calvert, University of South Wales
  - Louise Casella, Open University
  - James Davies, Council
  - Ruth Hayton, Welsh Government
  - Rob Humphreys, Council (Chair)
  - Ryan Jarvis, HE in FE
  - Martin Stringer, Swansea University

**1 Introduction and welcome**

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the ninth meeting of the Student Opportunity and Achievement Committee (SOAC), including new and substitute Members. She confirmed she was chairing the meeting on behalf of Rob Humphreys, who was unable to attend, and reminded

Members of the need to observe the disclosure category for each paper. She also noted that items 10 and 12 had been brought forward in the agenda of the meeting and would follow item 6.

## **2 EHRC Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged (SOAC/19/14)**

- 2.1 The Chair introduced Christina Barnes, Senior Associate of the Equality and Human Rights Commission Wales, who provided an oral presentation on the EHRC report '*Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged*' (published in October 2019), including a summary of the outcomes of the EHRC online survey.
- 2.2 The EHRC report noted:
- an online survey response rate of 89%;
  - that instances of harassment were typically between students but there had been occurrences of staff-student harassment;
  - that there were significant discrepancies between the number of incidents reported through the survey in comparison with the number reported by institutions;
  - that there had been high numbers of respondents who had chosen not to make a formal complaint to their institution;
  - that there was a general lack of understanding and confidence in institutional complaints' systems.
- 2.3 Members commended the report and noted that many of the issues highlighted in the report related to university complaint systems more generally. Members suggested that there could be instances of 'invisible' discrimination occurring (e.g. during assessment, curriculum design and staff promotion processes) whereas the report focused on both overt harassment and micro-aggressive acts.
- 2.4 Members considered that training and support for staff was important and that it was often difficult to deal with complaints with full impartiality due to the small staff base at a senior level who had the appropriate skills and knowledge.
- 2.5 Members considered that it would be useful for the sector to engage with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) in relation to the data protection aspects of complaints' processes. Further guidance from the ICO, working jointly with Universities UK, was expected by the end of the year.
- 2.6 Members noted the link between the EHRC report and the NUS campaign, *Closing the Gap*, which focused on black student attainment gaps at UK universities. NUSW considered that there was the potential for more joint working between institutions and Students' Unions.
- 2.7 Officers noted that HEFCW's role in relation to equality was principally influencing, rather than regulating, as the EHRC were the principal regulator for equality issues in the UK. However, HEFCW was able to take some action under the Higher Education (Wales) 2015 Act in relation to Equality of Opportunity and that it was committed to supporting and sharing best practice within the sector. Members noted

that higher education institutions were subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty.

- 2.8 Members noted that a number of the report's recommendations were focused on the funding and regulatory bodies, as well as the UK governments, and that HEFCW should consider doing more to engage with Welsh Government on this issue.
- 2.9 Members noted the work being undertaken by Universities Wales in relation to the report and encouraged HEFCW to work with Universities Wales in order to achieve commonality across the sector.
- 2.10 Members noted that the Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) reforms presented an opportunity for collaboration with the FE sector on this issue.
- 2.11 **Actions:**
- i) Members noted the Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged report and the EHRC presentation; and*
  - ii) Officers would take forward the advice from Members in order to respond effectively to the EHRC report's findings and recommendations.*

### **3 Minutes of the meeting held on 2 May 2019 (SOAC/19/15)**

- 3.1 This paper provided Members with the minutes from the meeting dated 2 May 2019. Members advised these were an accurate record of the meeting.
- 3.2 **Action:**
- i) Members advised that the minutes were an accurate record of the meeting of 2 May 2019.*

### **4 Matters arising tracker (SOAC/19/16)**

- 4.1 This paper provided an update of matters arising from previous meetings.
- 3.3 **Action:**
- i) Members advised that there were no additional matters arising, other than those recorded on the tracker.*
  - ii) Members advised that they were content with the format of the matters arising tracker.*

### **5 Equalities update and Strategic Equality Plan developments (SOAC/19/17)**

- 5.1 This paper provided a progress update on HEFCW equalities' policy and sought advice on development of HEFCW's Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) 2020-2024.
- 5.2 Officers provided a comprehensive overview of action taken to date, noting that HEFCW had invited proposals for funded, collaborative, activity relating to well-being and health.

- 5.3 NUSW noted that there had been technical issues with a number of proposals and that there was at least one proposal which had not yet been finalised.
- 5.4 Members welcomed the range of activity included within the SEP but were concerned that it wasn't sufficiently focused, bearing in mind limited resources, in order to have the most impact.
- 5.5 Officers confirmed that the next stage of the development of the SEP would take into account degree attainment levels and the EHRC report (see item 2).
- 5.6 Members recognised that there was sometimes a disparity of knowledge in relation to equality and diversity issues between senior and middle management level. Additional support for staff (including training especially) was needed to ensure that delivery at departmental level was consistent.
- 5.7 Following on from the discussion relating to the EHRC report, Members encouraged officers to reflect on equality and diversity priorities, including where the most effective progress could be made.
- 5.8 Members felt that the number of staff-related measures within the plan could be increased.
- 5.9 Members felt that one of HEFCW's strengths was the ability to have a pan Wales as well as institutional-level perspective and to challenge and influence activity based on evidence.
- 5.10 Actions:**
- i) Members provided advice on the equality-related policy developments;***
  - ii) Members considered the draft HEFCW Strategic Equality Plan 2020-2024 and provided steers for further development of the vision and objectives;***
  - iii) Officers would consider how to determine the priorities for the draft SEP;***
  - iv) Officers would take account of the steers from Members in relation to the equalities datasets and measures of success of the SEP.***

## **6 Wales Audit Office Report (SOAC/19/18)**

- 6.1 This paper provided the key findings of the Wales Audit Office draft report *Future Generations: a plan for well-being and health in higher education*, for discussion.
- 6.2 Officers provided the context to the report, which had been shared in confidence with the Committee prior to publication.
- 6.3 The Committee noted that HEFCW was subject to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 but higher education institutions were not.
- 6.4 Members suggested that HEFCW should encourage interdisciplinary approaches to developing well-being in Welsh HE, including ensuring developments were informed by relevant academic research expertise.

- 6.5 Members noted the development of a co-created action plan which would underpin the HEFCW Policy Statement on Well-being and Health in HE and considered that a joined-up approach to support services was essential.
- 6.6 Members noted that it was crucial for students to be involved in policy development relating to mental health but that it could sometimes be challenging to engage students who had mental health conditions or requirements.
- 6.7 The Committee noted the challenge of embedding a long-term preventative approach within a short-term funding environment.
- 6.8 **Actions:**  
**Members**  
*i) noted the context and purpose of the WAO examination;*  
*ii) noted HEFCW's well-being and health policy developments;*  
*iii) considered the WAO report findings;*  
**Officers**  
*iv) would take account of the steers of members when considering how to respond to the WAO report recommendations, including taking an interdisciplinary approach to policy development.*
- 7 Degree Apprenticeships: update on recruitment 2018/19 and allocation of 2019/20 numbers (SOAC/19/22 brought forward from item 10)**
- 7.1 This paper provided an update on developments regarding Degree Apprenticeships (DAs) for discussion.
- 7.2 Officers gave an overview of the updated recruitment data 2018/20 and allocation of Degree Apprentice numbers 2019/20. The Head of Skills and Employability noted that HEFCW was working with Regional Skills Partnerships to address the requirements set out in its 2018-19 [Remit letter](#).
- 7.3 Members inquired whether Welsh Government intended to include level 6 and 7 provision in its higher apprenticeship procurement in 2020, as this would impact on Degree Apprenticeship funding via HEFCW. Officers advised that this would be clarified with Welsh Government.
- 7.4 Members noted the update and advised that it might be useful to breakdown the 'over 21' datasets into age bands to provide more meaningful data.
- 7.5 Members noted that it was difficult to influence equality and diversity for those apprentices who are existing employees and many of the degree apprenticeships were based on existing provision. However, Cap Gemini confirmed that 11 new apprentices had joined the company in September 2019, and there was the potential to expand this provision through the recruitment of new staff.
- 7.6 Members identified concerns in relation to meeting the mental health and well-being needs of those undertaking DAs, particularly in engineering / advanced manufacturing, and advised that resources such as case

studies of good practice might prove to be useful. HEFCW would take advice on how to strengthen its steers to HEIs in relation to equality and diversity, e.g. if there were ways to strengthen the requirements around impact assessments of DAs.

- 7.7 HEIW highlighted existing work-based learning provision within the NHS; which followed the apprenticeship model and funded around 100 places per year.
- 7.8 Members advised that, on a small scale, DA provision was financially viable, but as provision grew it would be necessary to ensure that the fees covered the costs.
- 7.9 A query was raised in relation to paragraph 8.3 of the cover paper which cited the recent National Assembly for Wales, Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's Regional Skills Partnerships Inquiry, held in October 2019. Members clarified that the inquiry heard evidence which proposed that the autonomy of higher education institutions might present an 'artificial barrier' to higher level skills planning but the committee itself did not draw that conclusion.
- 7.10 **Actions:**
- i) Members noted the updated position on recruitment of Degree Apprenticeships 2018/19 and the updated allocation of Degree Apprenticeships 2019/20;*
  - ii) Officers would take forward the advice of members in relation to improving the equality of opportunity in STEM subjects through the Degree Apprenticeship programme;*
  - iii) Members noted the delay to the evaluation of the Degree Apprenticeship programme and the potential impact on the timing of decisions relating to continuation funding;*
  - iv) Members commented on the findings of The National Assembly for Wales Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's inquiry into Regional Skills Partnerships, and its potential impact on the work of HEFCW.*

## **8 Graduate skills and employability publication (SOAC/19/24 brought forward from item 12)**

- 8.1 This paper provided an outline of the Graduate Skills and Employability publication which HEFCW intends to publish in June 2020.
- 8.2 Members welcomed the publication and advised that it would be an opportunity to highlight best practice.
- 8.3 Members suggested that it would be helpful to showcase activity that led to a benefit for all students, which was structurally inclusive and thereby unavoidable, as well as focusing on initiatives which targeted specific groups. In this way skills and employability was embedded, and would benefit all students regardless of their characteristics. Members recommended that the publication should also include the Achieve through Work Experience (Go Wales) programme.
- 8.4 Members advised that it would be useful to focus on local community engagement and the civic mission agenda. It would also be useful to use regional skills' priorities as a basis for the structure of the publication.

**8.5 Actions:**

- i) Officers would take forward the advice from members on the scope and contents of the planned Graduate Skills and Employability Publication in advance of the call for contributions;*
- ii) Members noted the steer from the Research Wales Committee on the scope of the planned Graduate Skills and Employability Publication.*

**9 How to incentivise part-time provision (SOAC/19/19)**

- 9.1 This paper provided an introduction to the qualitative review of part-time provision delivered by higher education providers in Wales which has been commissioned by HEFCW. It invited the Committee's advice on the subsequent implementation of that review in relation to HEFCW's approach to funding.
- 9.2 Members were content with the approach to the review, noting that the Committee's task and finish group would be invited to consider the findings as soon as the final report was available.
- 9.3 Members highlighted the challenges in defining what part-time provision is, which and the importance of defining this in advance of the work.
- 9.4 Members noted that Welsh Government's wider lifelong learning agenda would have a bearing on the outcomes of the review.
- 9.5 Members recognised that there was sometimes a lack of information, advice and guidance in relation to learner pathways (e.g. apprenticeships) which could impact on the number of learners undertaking a part-time course.

**9.6 Actions: Members**

- i) advised on further issues that should be taken into account in the implementation of the research and discussed during the inception meeting;*
- ii) provided useful steers on how HEFCW should take account of the findings of the review and*
- iii) noted the simultaneous part-time quantitative analysis.*

**10 Outcomes against national measures (SOAC/19/20)**

- 10.1 This paper provided an overview of the sector's performance against national measures related to the remit of the Committee.
- 10.2 Members noted that there was now a meaningful measure in place in relation to the proportion of students studying 5 credits or more through the medium of Welsh. However, this measure included a significant proportion of learners at sixth forms which could lead to fluctuations in the data.
- 10.3 A member suggested that in future HEFCW could adopt a 60 or 80 credit measure. However, additional investment in staff capacity would be required in order to drive an increase in credit uptake. In addition, this information would need to be captured on HESA.

- 10.4 Members noted that there was a risk that the minimum response rate for institutions in the Graduate Outcomes survey might not be achieved.
- 10.5 Members considered that the widening access measures were relatively simple and geographical in nature and could otherwise utilise existing research in this area.

**10.6 Actions:**

- i) Officers would consider how to address the issue of data fluctuations for learners studying through the medium of Welsh at the 5+ credit level;*
- ii) Members encouraged HEFCW to consider how the widening access measures could be developed to utilise existing research.*

**11 NUS Wales paper (SOAC/19/21)**

- 11.1 This paper provided an update on progress against NUS Wales' priorities for 2019/20.
- 11.2 NUSW welcomed the existing Welsh Government funding for health and well-being initiatives. Members noted the outcomes from the NUSW roundtable event and welcomed NUSW's engagement with HEFCW to date in this area. Members also noted NUS Wales's priorities around student mental health for the 2019/20 academic year.
- 11.3 In relation to the proposals for well-being funding, NUSW encouraged more relaxed timescales for proposal deadlines; the ability to roll over funding to the next reporting year would be welcomed.
- 11.4 NUSW noted that they felt that there was a disparity across the sector in how institutions were working in partnership with their students in relation to the funding proposals. Officers confirmed that institutions were required to work with the student body as part of HEFCW's terms and conditions of funding. Officers also confirmed that NUSW were part of the assessment panel for the proposals.
- 11.5 Members advised that it would be helpful for institutions to take advantage of in-house expertise and research relating to mental health and well-being when applying for HEFCW funding.
- 11.6 Members noted that HEFCW could have more of a role in encouraging institutions to work in partnership with their students in relation to funding initiatives.
- 11.7 Actions: Members**
- i) noted the outcomes from the NUS Wales roundtable event;*
- ii) noted NUS Wales's priorities around student mental health for the 2019/20 academic year;*
- iii) provided feedback on HEFCW's process for allocating funding for mental health and well-being initiatives.*

**12 Public information (SOAC/19/23)**

- 12.1 This paper proposed a re-definition of the role of the Committee in relation to public information. Public information outcomes, including

outcomes of the National Student Survey (NSS), are used to inform HEFCW's regulatory responsibilities.

- 12.2 Officers gave an overview of the context to the paper, noting that there would be further engagement with Universities Wales and NUS Wales to ensure the views of Wales were appropriately reflected in NSS developments.
- 12.3 Members discussed the proposed changes to the National Student Survey and raised concerns about the inclusion of all years within the survey dataset, particularly in relation to the aggregation of results.
- 12.4 Members advised that the use of the same question set would not be appropriate for all years as students might not be adequately prepared to answer some of the questions which reflected on the duration of their studies. Due to the timing of the survey, first year students in particular, or those studying at 1 Full Time Equivalent (FTE), could be asked to comment on some aspects of their studies after only a few months on the course.
- 12.5 Officers noted that many institutions undertook their own non-final year surveys which had been established for a number of years and that a one-size-fits-all approach was not appropriate in many cases.
- 12.6 Members queried the purpose of the roll-out of the NSS to all years and whether it might be used as a regulatory instrument by the Office for Students in England.
- 12.7 Members discussed the potential consequences for Wales should it choose not to participate in the revised NSS, noting that it was possible Wales could out-perform the other nations in the UK if it did participate.
- 12.8 Members were informed that there had been some issues relating to the launch of the Discover Uni website, noting significant delays to some datasets and features (such as the Widget) being made available. Officers confirmed that there was a backlog of issues with the website which had already been raised with the Office for Students and which were outstanding.
- 12.9 **Actions:**
- i) Members confirmed that they were content with the proposal for the Committee to advise on matters relating to public information;***
  - ii) no issues were identified in relation to the tender for the NSS delivery and dissemination services;***
  - iii) Members noted that the Intentions after Graduation Survey would cease;***
  - iv) no issues were identified in relation to making the degree apprenticeship questions a permanent part of the NSS from 2020;***
  - v) Members were content with the proposed inclusion in the NSS of students studying 1FTE;***
  - vi) Officers would take forward the steers from Members in relation to the outcomes of the consultation on the potential expansion of the NSS to all years of study;***

*vii) Officers would raise issues regarding the Discover Uni website with the Office for Students.*

**13 SOAC Annual Report 2018/19 (SOAC/19/25)**

13.1 In accordance with the standing orders under the Conduct of Council business each Committee must submit an annual report to Council. The paper provided the annual report from SOAC for 2018/19.

**13.2 Action:**

*i) Members confirmed that the draft annual report accurately reflected the work of the Committee in 2018/19.*

**14 Committee forward plan (SOAC/19/26)**

14.1 This paper provided the Committee's forward plan for consideration by its Members.

14.2 Members noted that the forward plan included HEFCW's work relating to the civic mission agenda. Officers confirmed that this work was a key priority for Welsh Government and that this item would be of relevance both to SOAC and to the Research Wales Committee.

14.3 Members welcomed the addition, noting that it would provide an additional mechanism to showcase positive engagement by institutions.

**14.4 Action:**

*i) Members advised that the Committee forward plan was appropriate.*

**15 Any other business (SOAC/19/13)**

15.1 There was no other business raised at the meeting.

**16 Date of next meeting**

16.1 The next meeting would take place on 9 March 2020.

**17 Minutes of the Quality Assessment Committee (SOAC/19/27)**

17.1 This item provided the redacted minutes of the Quality Assessment Committee (QAC) meeting in June 2019, for information.

**Action**

*i) Members noted the minutes of the June 2019 QAC meeting.*

**18 Minutes of the GO Wales Programme Board (SOAC/19/15)**

18.1 This item provided the minutes of the GO Wales Programme board for July 2019 to Members for information.

**Action**

*i) Members noted the minutes of the July 2019 GO Wales Programme Board meeting.*