



**Review and analysis of learning and teaching,  
and widening access strategies – introductory  
overview**

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## Review and analysis of learning and teaching, and widening access strategies – introductory overview

In 2010 the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) invited higher education institutions to submit strategies for learning and teaching and for widening access. At the same time, the regional Reaching Wider partnerships were also invited to submit strategies covering their work. HEFCW also invited institutions to submit joint learning & teaching/widening access strategies if they so wished. Strategies were submitted in 2011 and three institutions, two of them jointly, took up the option to submit a joint strategy. In late 2011, the Higher Education Academy (HEA), as part of their remit from HEFCW, carried out a review and analysis of these strategies, producing separate evaluation reports for learning and teaching, and widening access, plus Reaching Wider. Prior to starting the reviews, the HEA reviewers published templates for the structure of the evaluation reports to HEFCW for open consultation with the Welsh institutions; as a result a small number of structural modifications were made. At the time of the HEA review, institutions were still modifying their widening access strategies in response to feedback from HEFCW. This introductory overview seeks to highlight common elements and synergies between learning and teaching and widening access as set out in the two evaluation reports. It does not seek to replicate executive summaries or lists of recommendations.

### The Welsh context

Both evaluation reports recognise the challenging context facing the higher education sector for the period (2011/12-2013/14) in which the strategies will be implemented. The Welsh Government strategic direction for higher education set out in [For our Future](#) provides two fundamental themes which guide the developments set out in the strategies: social justice and a buoyant economy. Both evaluation reports show how these themes will be articulated by the sector in, for example, widening access to under-represented groups and ensuring that students have the knowledge, skills and understanding required by employers. Another aspect of current context that is prominent in the strategies is the introduction of student fees and the formulation of institutional fee plans. A response from institutions noted in the evaluation reports is to reinvigorate their commitment to maximising retention through providing learning, teaching and curriculum development, and academic and pastoral support throughout the academic life of a student. The evaluation reports also note how institutions have recognised that the success of more vulnerable students can be improved by ensuring that all graduates have the attributes that enhance their employment opportunities.

Another major challenge for institutions is the reconfiguration and collaboration agenda set out by the Government with HEFCW indicating that the number of institutions will reduce from 11 to 6 by 2013/14. Both evaluation reports highlight the extent of collaboration in the Welsh higher education sector which is considerably above the level seen elsewhere in the UK, for instance in comparable English regional higher education associations. This collaboration is expressed through, for example, the work of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, the sharing of technology-enhanced learning through the Gwella project, the three regional groupings delivering the Reaching Wider programme, the use of the pan-Wales GO Wales initiative for providing work experience, shared foundation degrees established using One Wales funding and the cooperation of two institutions in progressing the Universities of Heads of the Valleys Institute (UHOVI). The evaluation report on the learning and teaching strategies also noted that a recently-merged institution had adopted an



approach which established a baseline for learning and teaching consolidated on developments from the former constituent parts and then framed the strategy in terms of what the newly-merged institution would seek to achieve. There is little doubt that there will be considerable challenges for the Welsh higher education sector during this period but the findings of the evaluation reports outlined above give an indication of a pragmatic and collaborative approach to addressing these challenges.

A final major feature of the current context is the difficult economic situation. The higher education sector contributes to social mobility and the supply of an educated and well-skilled workforce but has a more limited influence on demand. If businesses are reluctant to invest in expansion or new ventures and so increase employment, the higher education sector's contribution to social mobility and a buoyant economy will be constrained. What is apparent in the strategies is that the higher education sector is geared to contributing to the revival of the economy through its promotion of entrepreneurship and in providing funding initiatives for start-up businesses.

### Common elements and synergies

Both evaluation reports note the extent to which key activities and themes contribute to both the learning and teaching and widening access strategies. Shared activities and themes include: flexible and fair entry to higher education; establishing entry into HE from FE and 14-19 pathways; accessible learning opportunities provided by technologically-enhanced learning; inclusive curricula and learning; and better retention of students through greater attention to their employability. Both of the reports see significant merit in HEFCW inviting joint strategies in the next round of submissions. The HEA reviewers recognise the advantages of this holistic approach, which would encourage a more integrated approach to institutional strategic developments in widening access and learning and teaching.

The evaluation reports also noted, however, that a move to joint strategies would require careful consideration of a number of key issues. For instance, the current guidance from HEFCW on the learning and teaching strategies recognised that institutions have *distinctive missions and purpose* and the analysis of the learning and teaching strategies showed major themes closely linked to institutional missions. However, in addition to this, widening access strategies are strongly encouraged to take account of existing and emerging Welsh Government social justice-related expectations. In addition the funding models for the current strategies place quite different demands on institutions. So while the evaluation reports offer encouragement to move to joint strategies, it is clear that a period of judicious consultation with the sector is needed to establish, *inter alia*, monitoring and reporting procedures and specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely (SMART) outcomes that relate to potential differences in the use of funding, including fee plans, for learning and teaching and widening access. Notwithstanding the challenges of moving to a different approach to strategy development, HEFCW should consider inviting joint strategies in the next round of submissions.

### Students as Partners and Employability

The two most prominent features of the learning and teaching strategies are based on students as partners and employability. Compared to the previous round of strategies the current ones are notably student-centred advocating increased engagement of students with the institution to improve learning experiences. Extensive and effective student representation is now well established across the sector with students contributing to assuring quality and standards of provision and increasingly involved with the introduction



and validation of new programmes and the appointment of new academic staff. Institutions are now seeking to further develop students as confident, autonomous, self-reflective learners with a role to play as co-producers of their own skills, knowledge and understanding. The mapping of rights, responsibilities and entitlements in this evolving relationship will be the centrepiece of the development and revision of Student Charters currently being carried out by institutions. Alongside this changing compact between staff and students is the increasing focus of institutions on learning related to employment for all learners, be they on campus, at a distance or in the workplace. The end product of these approaches is for most institutions encapsulated in graduate attributes which will be recorded with the introduction of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).

### **Widening access partnerships and flexible learning**

A strong feature of the widening access strategies is continuation of existing work to build and maintain long-term partnerships with schools, colleges, communities and employers. This is evidenced by institutions and Reaching Wider partnerships continuing to engage with learners of all ages in Communities First areas, in seeking to extend progression pathways from schools and FE to HE, and in enhancing support for students from under-represented groups to aid transition to HE. The Reaching Wider Partnerships arguably represent one of the most effective and cost-efficient examples of regional collaboration within the higher education sector.

For some institutions, the employability of graduates was based upon flexible delivery of work-based programmes based on credit accumulation. Assessing the impact of widening access initiatives often includes HEFCW Corporate Strategy measures and analysis of HESA key performance indicators. However, tracking and monitoring of student achievement and demonstrating successful interventions remained challenging for widening access and Reaching Wider, particularly the tracking of students prior to entry into higher education. A few institutions were gaining a snapshot of the effectiveness of pre-entry interventions through the tracking of summer school students. One outstanding area of advance noted in the evaluation reports was in the commitment to care leavers with all Welsh institutions undertaking the considerable amount of development required to gain and retain the Buttle UK higher education quality mark.

The analysis of strategies indicated that widening access within both an institutional context and a regional context, through the Reaching Wider Partnerships, was a key way for the Welsh HE sector to deliver the social justice aspect of the Government's *For our Future* agenda. In addition the Reaching Wider Partnerships have taken account of emerging regional needs and priorities. Given this, if there is a move to joint learning and teaching and widening access strategies in the next round it would be important to ensure that institutions and partnerships maintain their commitment to widening access, equality, diversity and social justice.

### **Welsh medium**

The evaluation reports highlight the influence of the newly-created *Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol* in promoting Welsh medium learning and teaching. The provision of Welsh medium programmes and modules remains strong in institutions in west Wales and with the help of the *Coleg* this is growing in other parts of the country. A particular challenge is the recognised shortage of Welsh-speaking higher education teachers and the aspiration of institutions is, by engagement with the *Coleg*, to achieve more rapid staff development



related to Welsh medium provision. Institutions are also looking to the *Coleg* to provide advice and guidance in providing cultural and pastoral support for students studying in the Welsh medium; a notable development has been the creation of the web portal *Y Porth* with online access to Welsh medium learning materials. Outreach work through widening access and Reaching Wider Partnerships was raising awareness of Welsh medium provision to Welsh speakers in Communities First areas in order to develop their confidence and skills and so encourage progression to Welsh medium HE study.

## Challenges for future development

While the evaluation reports document considerable advances and achievement, some of which are highlighted above, there remains one principal area of weakness in both sets of strategies: evaluation of impact.

Institutions have strong approaches to monitoring the implementation of the strategies through, for example, the annual monitoring process, reports to key committees and oversight by a member of the institution's senior management team. Institutions are also diligent in reporting the extent of activity undertaken in previous strategies, and there are some impressive lists of outputs. These include institution-wide development and consolidation of virtual learning platforms; introduction of centres to promote general learning and teaching, lifelong learning, sustainable practice, entrepreneurial learning, and digitally enhanced learning; summer schools; community engagement with black and minority ethnic students (BME), asylum seekers and gypsy and traveller learners; regional meetings; on-campus days for disabled students or others with protected characteristics; GCSE revision programmes; the cross-institutional support for progressing Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC); curriculum design to accommodate inclusive curricula and learning; academic accreditation frameworks for those learning in employment, and attainment of the Buttle UK higher education quality mark. All of these reflect the commitment of institutions to improving the learning experience of its students but they are not underpinned by robust evaluation of the impact and success of these developments and interventions, taking account of SMART outcome measures identified at the start of strategy period.

A requirement from HEFCW was that the strategies should set out SMART outcomes to enable monitoring of the strategies by HEFCW, demonstrate the success of HEIs and Partnerships, and account for the use of public funding. Consultation between HEFCW and institutions has led to a better understanding of SMART outcomes. The evaluation reports now indicate that generally the short-term SMART measures are appropriate, well aligned with aims and objectives though generally expressed as outputs and activities. However, they are presented as an appendix to the strategies and within the body of the text there is generally very little reference to the SMART outcome(s) for a particular initiative or project. The Welsh higher education sector itself has produced a guide for institutions on assessing the impact of learning and teaching strategies and it was disappointing that this barely had a mention in most of the institutional strategies. Given that the use of evidence to inform practice was rarely reported in the strategies, it is not surprising that both of the evaluation reports advocate greater attention to evaluation and more use of institutional research and data to provide critical assessment of initiatives and projects.



## Conclusion

In conclusion it can be demonstrated through the evaluation reports that the Welsh higher education sector is vibrant, innovative and with sufficient flexibility and fleetness of foot to provide solutions to the complex challenges that face institutions during the implementation of the strategies. The two evaluation reports provide a concise and up-to-date appraisal of learning and teaching and widening access developments in Welsh higher education institutions which should allow HEFCW to demonstrate how the higher education sector plans to respond to key Government priorities and initiatives. In addition, higher education institutions in Wales and beyond may want to consider using the evaluation reports to contextualise their institution's own responses to learning and teaching and widening access.

