



Stakeholder and Partner Engagement

HEFCW

Final Report

August 2019



Strategic Research and Insight Ltd
4 Park Court Mews
Park Place
Cardiff, Wales
CF10 3DQ
Tel: ++44 (0)29 2030 3100

research@strategic-research.co.uk
www.strategic-research.co.uk

Contents	Page
1. Executive summary.....	3
2. Introduction and background.....	5
3. Awareness and perceptions of HEFCW	8
4. Contact and dealings with HEFCW	33

1. Executive summary

<p>Most are familiar with HEFCW's work and have favourable impression of HEFCW</p>	<p>A quarter (25%) of respondents said they felt that they knew the work of HEFCW very well, while around three fifths (58%) said they knew a fair amount about the work.</p> <p>More than four fifths (84%) of respondents said they had a favourable opinion or impression of HEFCW. Only one individual (1%) gave an unfavourable opinion.</p>
<p>Partnership working strengths:</p>	<p>The strengths of HEFCW's partnership working were seen to be its personal and tailored approach, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and its strong visibility.</p>
<p>How to further develop partnership working:</p>	<p>There was a desire for clearer timelines and improved forward planning, and to maintain the recent improvements in contact and visibility.</p>
<p>Mixed perceptions about HEFCW's independence from Welsh Government</p>	<p>Almost two thirds (64%) agreed to some extent that HEFCW operates independently of Welsh Government but almost a fifth (18%) disagreed which was the highest negative perception rating.</p> <p>However, around three quarters of respondents (74%) agreed to some extent that HEFCW represents the sector fairly to Welsh Government.</p>
<p>Overall perceptions of HEFCW are positive, but many perceive HEFCW to be bureaucratic</p>	<p>This view was related to the functions it performs, particularly relating to funding and regulation. While HEFCW's approach is generally seen as more favourable when compared to similar organisations, some felt there was room for improvement, especially with fee and access planning.</p>
<p>HEFCW's staff and reputation are highly rated, but there are mixed views on HEFCW's public profile</p>	<p>Around 9 in 10 (88%) rated the quality of the staff as good, including over half (51%) who rated them as 'very good'. No respondents rated HEFCW's staff negatively in the survey. Some commented in the depth interviews that new staff who had been appointed had particularly enhanced relationships.</p> <p>A majority also rated the reputation of the organisation (83%) and the effectiveness of the HEFCW Council (73%) positively.</p> <p>While not all respondents rated HEFCW's public profile positively (15% negative) and some had mixed views (21%), many suggested that HEFCW does not need to have an outwardly public profile as it has little requirement for communication with the general public.</p>
<p>Generally good interaction with HEFCW but work needed in some areas</p>	<p>Respondents were most positive about the level of interaction they receive from HEFCW about funding (74%) and statistics and data collection (74%). They were most negative about the level of interaction on fee and access planning and regulation (13% poor) and skills and employability (11%).</p>

Fee and access planning and regulation interactions are most in need of improvement	While respondents recognised that the process is necessary, they felt that improvements could be made by revising the template to streamline it and make it shorter as well as less repetitious, changing the frequency of submission, setting more realistic and individualised targets, making outputs more engaging and allowing more time to complete and sign off documents in line with the academic year.
High levels of satisfaction with the relationship with HEFCW and interactions have mostly improved	<p>Around half (51%) of respondents felt that their interactions with HEFCW had become better in the last two years, including nearly three fifths (57%) of institutions and around two fifths (42%) of partners.</p> <p>More than three quarters (79%) of respondents were satisfied with their relationship with HEFCW overall.</p>
Direct contact with HEFCW staff is the most common way of keeping up to date as well as the most useful	<p>Almost all (87%) of respondents keep up to date via direct contact with HEFCW, and an almost identical proportion (88%) identified this type of contact as the most useful they receive.</p> <p>Respondents wanted to know more about transparency in decision making, including how information provided by institutions is shared with the Council and the Council's decision-making process; funding, e.g. Innovation and Engagement Fund and funding formulae; shaping policy and working with Welsh Government; and HEFCW's role in future including planning for CTER.</p>
Ease of reaching staff has most improved, but the administrative burden and timeliness of official requests had worsened for many	<p>When asked about specific areas of interaction, the majority of respondents felt that their experience had stayed the same for each interaction. However, 3 in 10 (30%) felt that the ease of reaching relevant staff had improved.</p> <p>By contrast, a greater proportion felt that the administrative burden on institutions (24%) and the timeliness of office requests (14%) had deteriorated, compared to 8% and 5% that felt it had improved respectively.</p>
What HEFCW does well:	Understanding of the industry, relationships with staff and effective engagement were most valued by respondents.
Priorities for the next two years according to respondents:	<p>Funding and financial stability, e.g. ensuring funding mechanisms are 'fair' and reward quality, are sustainable for institutions and value for money for Welsh Government, support teaching/learning and research resources, and that the impact innovation and engagement funding in particular is measured and monitored.</p> <p>Working towards/keeping the sector informed of future changes (e.g. CTER), including more clarity about the structural reform and its implications; communication to and engagement with institutions about the reform, including keeping the sector informed of key staff changes; publicising the positives of the change; and looking further ahead at changes the sector needs to make over the next 15 years.</p>

2. Introduction and background

Background

HEFCW and the wider post-16 education sector have seen an enormous amount of change in the years since the previous stakeholder survey conducted in 2012.

With HE mergers, a continued drive for widening access, a focus on research and innovation, changes to the regulation of higher education (HE), student finance and HE funding, and significant organisational change within HEFCW itself, the sector landscape is almost unrecognisable compared to seven years ago.

The impact of the Higher Education (Wales) Act 2015 coming into force has brought changes in HEFCW's role, particularly relating to fee planning, quality assurance and as the regulator of higher education.

Proposals published by Welsh Government in 2017 outline the intention to create a new Commission to oversee the higher and further education sector in Wales. The White Paper outlines that the new body will succeed HEFCW to regulate the skills sector and take on responsibility for funding research and innovation, which now form part of the Minister for Education's remit.

HEFCW is supportive of the direction of travel of the proposals and operates as an intermediary body working in partnership with Welsh Government and the education sector to help transition towards the establishment of the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER).

In the wider UK landscape, change is also ongoing elsewhere in the UK with the closure of HEFCE and the creation of the Office for Students and Research England in April 2018.

Making the most of collaboration with stakeholders and partners and looking to the future are key drivers for the post-16 sector at a UK level. It is within this context that HEFCW commissioned Strategic Research and Insight (SRI) to undertake a stakeholder and partner survey.

The survey aimed to gain a detailed overview of:

- how stakeholders and partners view HEFCW, and understand what it does
- what they perceive HEFCW's role to be, now and in the future – particularly pertinent given the ongoing developments relating to this
- the quality of HEFCW services and support provided by staff and the organisation more widely
- how effective communications are and what changes, if any, stakeholders and partners would like to see
- the relationships between stakeholders and partners and HEFCW
- areas for improvement.

Methodology

The survey of stakeholders and partners involved a two stage process:

- Stage 1: An online survey of stakeholders and partners
- Stage 2: Follow up telephone depth interviews with a selection of those initially responding to the online survey

Stage 1: Online survey

SRI designed a bilingual online survey questionnaire in consultation with HEFCW to ensure it met information requirements.

A list of appropriate stakeholders and partners was compiled by HEFCW reflecting the range of different roles in the organisations which it has regular contact within Wales and more widely in the UK. The compiled list included contacts in the following roles:

- Academic quality or L&T
- Alternative providers
- Careers & employability
- Chair of governors
- Clerks to governing body
- Communications
- Data contacts
- Finance
- Independent HEFCW Committee Members
- Planning
- Procurement and purchasing
- Pro Vice Chancellors
- Research and REF contacts
- UK Partners
- Vice Chancellors and Principals
- Welsh Partners
- Widening Access
- WILOs

HEFCW sent out an initial email to all contacts to raise awareness of the project and other HEFCW communication channels were also used to inform potential respondents about the survey. After removing any 'bouncebacks' from this initial email and other de-duplication, there were 240 contacts on the database which were used to launch the online survey. The survey was live throughout May 2019 and the initial email and reminders resulted in a response from 82 participants giving a response rate of 34%. 49 responses were gathered from stakeholders within institutions and 33 came from partners in Wales and beyond.

Stage 2: Follow up telephone depth interviews

At the end of the online survey, respondents were asked if they were willing to take part in a follow up interview. 44% of those taking part in the survey agreed to this (33 respondents).

These were all contacted and telephone depth interviews with 26 participants were conducted to discuss some of the points raised in the online survey in more detail. These depth interviews lasted typically between 20-45 minutes and took place during May to July 2019 to fit in with the availability of the participants.

The topic guide used in the follow up phase was drafted by SRI in close consultation with HEFCW based on a review of the online survey results and the identification of key issues for clarification and further exploration.

Notes on the report

For the online survey responses, some questions included a 'not applicable' or 'don't know' response option. Where appropriate, these have been excluded from the base number of respondents used to calculate the results. This aims to ensure that the results reflect opinions from those able to give a view based on their general experiences of working with HEFCW.

Each chart shows a base figure illustrating the number of respondents on which the chart is based. In charts which show a number of questions on the same chart such as grid questions, base figures are provided in brackets for each particular question. Any relevant notes relating to the base figures are noted underneath the chart.

In some cases, percentages in charts may add up to more than 100% either due to rounding or because questions may have allowed multiple responses. Notes on differences between the perceptions of partners and institutional stakeholders have been noted where relevant throughout the report.

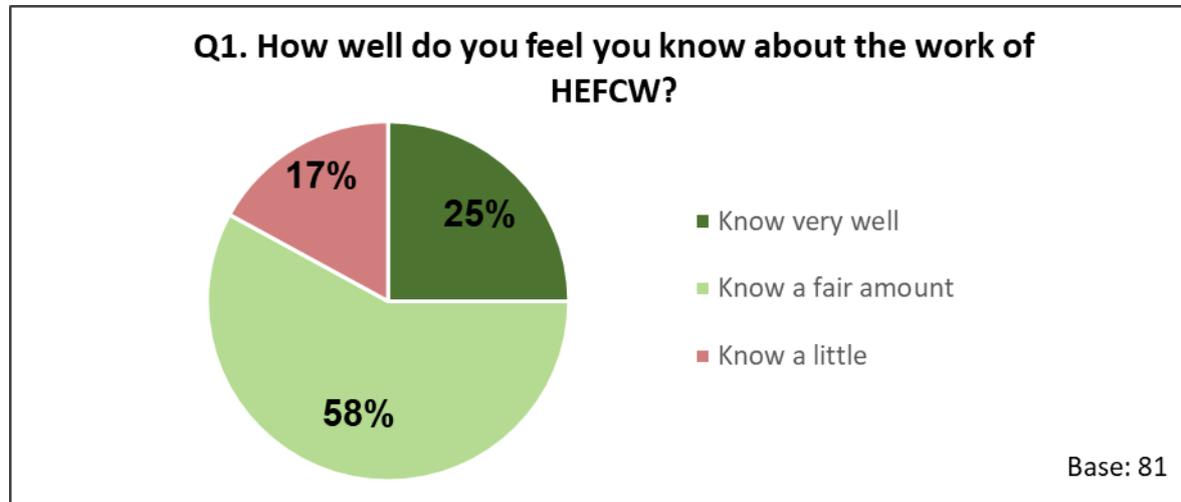
The responses to the two phases of work have been integrated into the findings presented in this report. Where a point was explored in more detail in the second stage depth interviews, this has been indicated.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful for the time and effort taken by both online survey and depth interview participants to provide us with their views and opinions on HEFCW. We hope the findings in this report will be read with interest by stakeholders and partners.

3. Awareness and perceptions of HEFCW

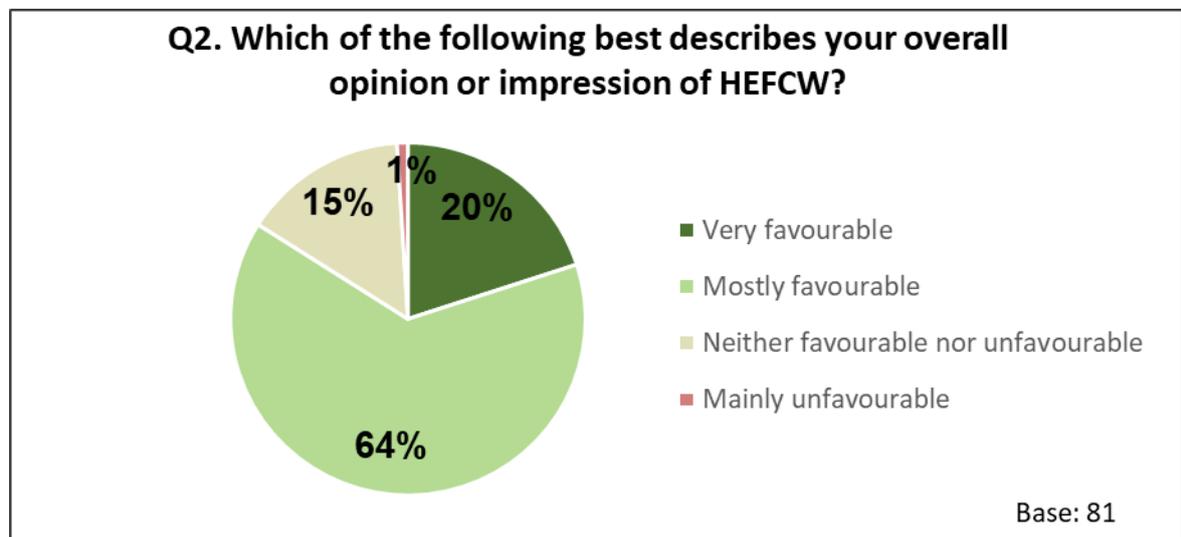
Awareness and views of HEFCW



Most are very familiar with the work of HEFCW

Respondents were initially asked about their familiarity with the work of HEFCW. A quarter (25%) said they felt that they knew the work of HEFCW very well, while around three fifths (58%) said they knew a fair amount about their work.

Less than a fifth (17%) of respondents said they knew a little about the work of HEFCW and no respondents said they knew nothing about HEFCW's work.



Overall impressions of HEFCW are generally very favourable

More than four fifths (84%) of respondents said they had a favourable opinion or impression of HEFCW. Only one individual (1%) gave an unfavourable opinion. These results were similar for both institutions and partners.

Understanding of HEFCW's role

Five key roles of HEFCW identified by respondents

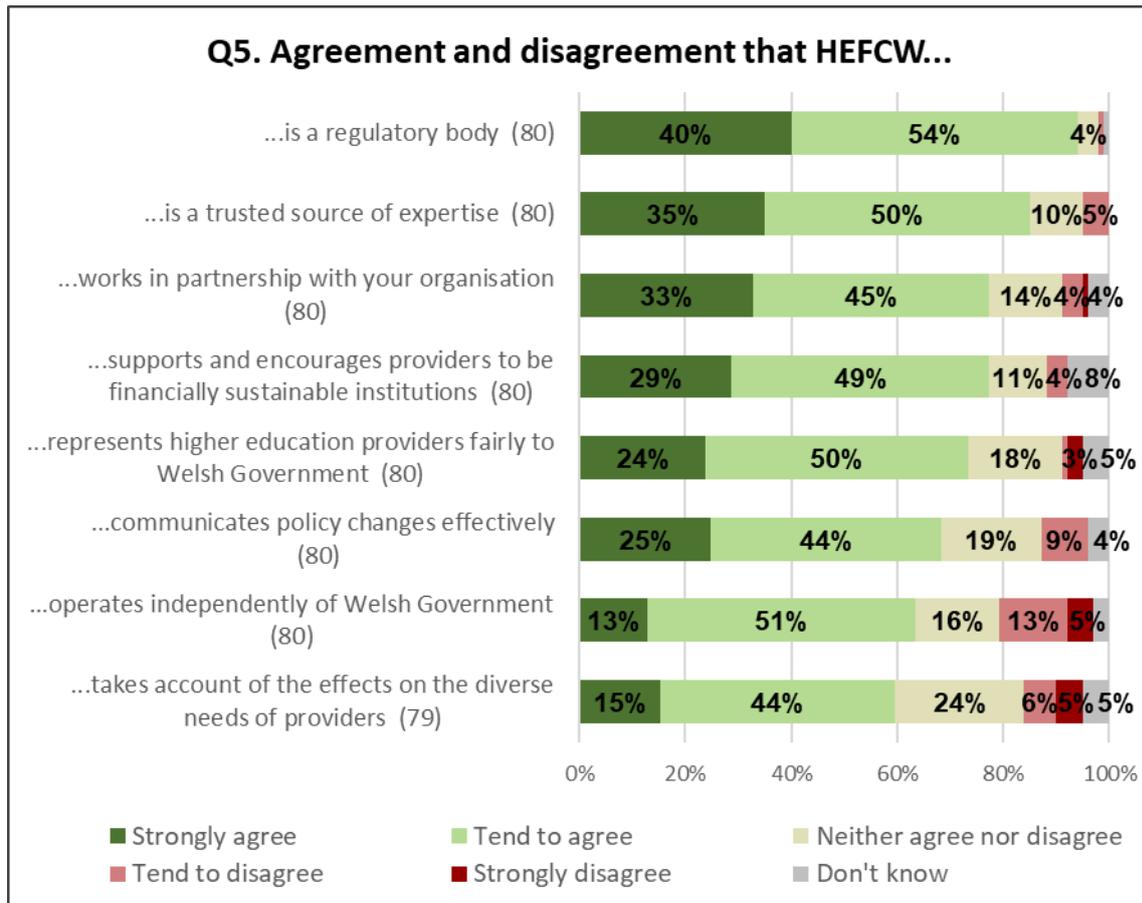
Online survey respondents were asked to explain the current role of HEFCW. These responses tended to identify key responsibilities that HEFCW has, including the following:

- Funding the Higher Education sector in Wales, including fee regulation.
- Regulation, including monitoring, having oversight of quality and maintaining standards.
- Supporting, enhancing and developing the Higher Education sector, including influencing policy and informing future direction of travel for HEIs.
- Acting as an intermediary between Welsh Government and the Higher Education institutions
- Ensuring that the sector meets the needs of and benefits Wales

Few respondents mentioned that HEFCW's role had changed or would change in future, although one respondent suggested a diminishing responsibility in distributing funding.

The scope of HEFCW's role was not explored in detail in the follow up interviews. However, some relevant points raised during discussions about reputation and profile are noted later in this report.

General perceptions of HEFCW



Figures in brackets show the base number of respondents for each question

Generally strong awareness and positive perceptions of HEFCW's functions

Almost all respondents agreed that HEFCW is a regulatory body (94%), and more than three quarters agreed that it is a trusted source of expertise (85%). Indeed, in the follow up interviews, several participants referred to HEFCW as having a role as a 'critical friend' providing advice when needed, both on and off the record.

"When I've had questions or things that I'm not sure about, or even when I'm putting something forward, in the majority of cases I do feel that HEFCW provides that critical friend approach and that doesn't necessarily come across in the title and the way it presents itself, but in the way it operates with me, in that kind of day-to-day function, it's a very powerful critical friend."

Most feel that partnership working is strong

Most online survey respondents agreed that HEFCW works in partnership with their organisation (78%) and supports and encourages providers to be financially sustainable institutions (78%).

Mixed perceptions of independence from Welsh Government

However, although two thirds of online survey respondents agreed that HEFCW operates independently of Welsh Government, almost a fifth (18%) disagreed, the highest level of disagreement with any of the statements, and others (16%) were neutral.

The greatest variation in views between institutions and partners was also on the question of HEFCW's independence. Three quarters of partners (75%) agreed that HEFCW operates independently of Welsh Government, in comparison to just over half (56%) of institutions.

Most felt that HEFCW represents the sector to Welsh Government

Around three quarters of respondents (74%) agreed to some extent that HEFCW represents the sector fairly to Welsh Government and most of the remainder were neutral.

We explore a number of these issues in the following sections in more detail based on responses gathered during the follow up interviews.

How does HEFCW promote partnership working?

Partnership working is considered one of HEFCW's strengths. In the follow up depth interviews participants were asked what HEFCW does to promote partnership working with their organisation.

A personal and tailored approach

Many commented that HEFCW knows how to take a 'personal approach' which reflects the relationship it has with that organisation and individuals within it, and also varies according to the support and type of communication that is needed based on the situation institutions in particular are in.

The ability to have an 'intimate' relationship with institutions in Wales is very much valued - the scope for both formal and informal support is appreciated. Respondents note that it is possible in Wales because of the relatively small size of the sector in contrast to experiences elsewhere in the UK. Some point to a perceived natural advantage in Wales due to the size of the sector which allows closer co-operation and a more 'joined up' approach but which, nevertheless, HEFCW does a good job of maintaining.

"It's the sort of level of personal communication and the way in which a number of colleagues across HEFCW and here at the university are able to engage and make contact where necessary and enable that partnership working to continue."

"What HEFCW do brilliantly actually is they have a fantastic personal touch, so the experience of my colleagues in English institutions and dealing with their regulator is just so different with our experience dealing with HEFCW, where it's possible to pick up the phone with anyone at HEFCW with the Chief Executive downwards and say I've got a problem or I need a bit of advice and they're really helpful and friendly. I find that personal involvement is really great."

“HEFCW has got that balance quite well, they help organisations, or try to help, in addition to carrying on with their work as a managing and ensuring that organisations are governed properly.”

“I know that at any time I can contact the Chief Executive of HEFCW, and we can have a conversation and he’ll always get back as soon as possible and is really responsive. It’s that level of confidence that there will always be an opportunity to discuss something one-to-one before something might escalate or get more difficult. I think that’s a very important part of the system in Wales that we need to cherish and hopefully in future years when there may be changes in how the system of governance is set up, hopefully that will remain to be the case.”

Clarity on roles, responsibilities and communication

HEFCW is also considered to be very clear on communications about what it is able to do and what it is not within the context of partnership working. Some participants also noted that HEFCW is clear about expectations of institutions in its communications and that it has good communication which aims to allow stakeholders to be well prepared for anything they may be asked to respond to.

“It’s very clear about the boundaries of what it can’t do, but as well as that it’s very good with communication with us. They’re also very good at informal contact, so if you want something clarified you can pick the phone up. With the clarity of roles, there’s an appropriate distance so they’ll say where they say ‘we can’t help you with that’. They’re very clear about what their job is and what our job is and the distinct boundaries they don’t cross, but they also have the informal relationship.”

“I think one of the standout things is the materials we get through be it emails or circulars. I think there’s always clarity in terms of the expectation; what communication is required back and the timescales.”

“I also find that there is a “no surprises” culture with them. I cannot think of any occasion where I have had something from them where I have thought I wasn’t expecting that, or that has gone a bit too far.”

Visibility is strong

Relationship building has also been enhanced due to a very visible presence from HEFCW staff. One-to-one contact is important but also it is noted that HEFCW staff make time to attend sector and network briefings.

“They have made the effort to come out and meet with us. So we’ve appreciated that, that they come out to our institution. We have a chat about what we’re doing and they do take a real interest and I’ve found, and even more so lately probably because of the new staff who are keen to find out for themselves and aren’t jaded by being there a long time. They’re just enthusiastic to learn.”

How could partnership working be further developed?

Clearer timelines and planning would be welcomed

When asked how partnerships could be further developed few raise any major issues. However, one common theme is the need for better timelines for responses and, if possible, some would like to see a forward plan for the year which outlines when consultations on sector changes and developments might take place. Many are realistic that this may not be possible for everything which needs to be covered in the year, but steps in the right direction would be much appreciated.

“Things come along at short notice, we all appreciate that, but within the caveat of that a more forward-facing plan of the year in terms of where the touch points would be with the sector. For example, in April there will be a consultation on that, you’ll have to return that in May; just to have that kind of roadmap going forward would help institutions and would certainly help ourselves. It’s not entirely absent, but a more structured process would help serve a number of purposes and would certainly help that engagement and partnership.”

“It would be helpful if they laid out their annual expectations explicitly at the beginning of each academic year. There are increasing amounts of deadlines to meet. The Higher Education Wales Act has introduced more oversight by the governing body, so we are required to get more signatures etc. We understand that it is difficult for them because they are responding to lots of different things. For the next academic year these are all of the deadline dates that we will be expecting and confirmation which ones the governing body is expected to sign. It would be quite nice to have an annual plan ahead of time, really. It might help them as well, actually.”

“A downside to that is their consultations don’t give us enough time to respond and sometimes they are timed over period where it is difficult to get responses e.g. over the summer period where there are a lot of holidays. They do try. We are conscious that they are under a lot of pressure.”

Maintain visibility and build relationships throughout each organisation

Others commented that they would like to see this recent improvement in contact and general visibility to continue. Some wonder if this may be as a result of new staff coming into post but hope that it will continue. This applies to both individual visits and attendance at network briefings and sector events.

“One of the things we’ve got in Wales is a network of FE colleges who meet in relation to HE matters. HEFCW representatives come along to that meeting, and it’s used as a bit of a briefing session on what’s happening, what’s important and what’s coming out in terms of policy. That is extremely valuable.”

“I think they’ve started to take a real interest, because we’re a small institution it’s quite easy to overlook some of our niche expertise in favour of the research intensive institutions.”

“There’s been some changes in the senior team. Of course, it takes time for those changes to bed down and for those people to grow into their roles, so I’d like to think there will be that level of contact, and that those opportunities for one-to-one contact with the

relevant functions. For instance, so my deputy who focusses on all the academic affairs within the institution would be able to liaise one-to-one easily with the relevant person within HEFCW and have the same kind of relationship and open-door working as I have with the Chief Executive.”

“I think just keep that open door and keep that encouragement to us. Clearly, they’ve been through a restructure and they’ve had a bit of staff turnover but making sure that contacts are updated and when there are changes of staff that they let us know what’s happening. We do get to know eventually but they could probably be a bit quicker about that.”

“Because I’m clear with the boundaries I think the partnership working is as good as it can be. I can have personal contact whenever I need it.”

Stakeholders would also welcome direct contact with staff other than at the most senior levels. Some see this as a way of allowing strategic initiatives to be explored following the publication of the remit letter but in general it would help to improve mutual understanding. Another would like to see closer working with the Chairs and councillors of the universities.

“There may be merit in something in between that, perhaps the Chief Exec and some senior officers could meet with a group of senior officers from the institution. So, we build the relationship at the next layer as well. Just so that dialogue is there. I think the Welsh sector is small enough to instigate something like that. With an agenda, maybe an hour or two, it just helps to build relationships.”

“If we could develop a close relationship with HEFCW with the chairpersons, they could help us understand what is good practice, and how we compare to other universities.”

HEFCW's relationship with Welsh Government

As the online survey indicated, there were mixed feelings about how independent HEFCW is from Welsh Government. Views on perceptions of HEFCW's independence from Welsh Government were explored further during follow up depth interviews along with a broader discussion on how it represents the sector to Welsh Government.

Maintaining an appropriate level of independence is a balance for HEFCW

When asked why some people feel that HEFCW does not operate independently of Welsh Government, many understood that point of view because HEFCW cannot be fully independent as its remit comes from Welsh Government and it is tasked with delivering policy decisions made by the Minister.

Often respondents said that they understand that HEFCW has a difficult situation to manage to maintain an appropriate level of independence from Welsh Government which allows enough scope for it to make decisions on how it delivers its tasks as outlined in the remit letter. Many feel that HEFCW handles this well and retains gets the balance right by and large.

"The idea that HEFCW can do what they want without any recourse to the Welsh Government just isn't true in fact, because they operate under a remit. Now that in and of itself means they are not independent because the Government in effect tell them what to do. How they do it I think is the key bit, so it's not the what, it's the how. I think the "how", certainly from my perspective, HEFCW try very hard to retain their "independence", but the reality is they are not independent because they operate under a remit. How they deliver that remit, they try to retain their independence so that they're not influenced by party-political matters and I think that's absolutely right."

"The bit where it's difficult for them to work independently is the allocation of money. The minister is very clear about how she wants the money spent and added things she wants delivered. A key part of HEFCW's role is to implement Welsh Government's policy so they wouldn't be totally independent. There's a very clear line of communication. On other matters then yes, they can look to sector-wide excellent practice and act more independently, but I would say their job is to implement Welsh Government policy."

"I think that on the whole HEFCW manage that role quite successfully. When I worked around Government, HEFCW had quite a good name amongst everyone. Some people would say that they aren't independent enough, but others would say that they are too independent; it might depend on the person. But personally, I think that HEFCW on the whole manage that relationship pretty well."

"It's always a delicate line to draw, I think the Council draw it reasonably well, to be honest if nobody said that they thought there was too much influence by the WG I would think they were disregarding the Welsh Government a bit too much."

"HEFCW of its nature has to work to deliver its remit that it has been given in the remit letter by the Education Minister. Its independence is a qualified independence because it has terms within which it must operate. I am quite confident that it has extremely robust

dialogue with Welsh Government. It gives very strong advice to Welsh Government officials in the construction of that remit letter and the development of policy.”

Many commented that they feel that it is appropriate that Welsh Government influences HEFCW's delivery of its remit, but some question the extent to which this happens. Some note that this has historically varied depending on the perspective of different Ministers. Some feel that the influence and involvement from Welsh Government is too strong and that this can then call into question HEFCW's ability to act independently.

“Welsh Government has very strong views about the way in which Welsh universities should run. So the impression I get is that the Welsh Government is very interested in influencing the way that Welsh universities run and that HEFCW has to respond to that pressure from the Welsh Government. So although they may technically be independent and I also get the impression HEFCW are prepared to assert their independence, it's quite hard for them to do so because the Welsh Government are too interested.”

Some feel that the forthcoming changes in tertiary education and the establishment of CTER will put a greater strain on HEFCW's ability to remain independent.

“Recently with the TERCW proposals, it does put HEFCW under the power of the Welsh Government more than they probably have been. That's an indication of things that might happen and we don't want that to happen. But I do feel that they operate independently as much as they can from the Welsh Government but I think that may be at risk now. The review of Higher Education, the Tertiary Education sector which sees us coming together for research and innovation and including these colleges on our board and giving them access to funding which was just for quality research within universities is a big test for HEFCW to see if they can navigate those recommendations and still feel that they are on our side and not a mouthpiece of the government. It'll be interesting to see how they manage it. I have confidence in HEFCW and the team and I think they will find a way around it but I think it is a threat. Because HEFCW understand the sector in a way that Welsh Government doesn't and we really rely on them to be our voice.”

Representing the sector to Welsh Government

In the depth interviews, participants were asked about how well they feel HEFCW performs this role and how this could be done differently.

Many institutions and partners indicated that HEFCW understands the sector and its challenges and provides a strong voice to represent the position of the sector. However, some note that being the 'voice of the sector' is not HEFCW's role but that it should provide an objective view based on the data it collates and presents back to Welsh Government. Many comment that they feel HEFCW is fair in how it goes about this.

“They really understand the sector and they're good at putting forward our position to Welsh Government.”

“HEFCW understands the sector and the challenges facing the sector here in Wales and is very fair in putting that across. Not just that, but also highlighting some of the strengths of what we do in Wales, I'm thinking particularly of some of the quality arrangements.”

HEFCW remains a good voice for the institutions in terms of the engagement and partnership approach in terms of quality reviews in Wales than is the case over the border.”

“I think they do well, there is a big difference in HEFCW’s role in Wales compared to the equivalent in England, for example. The OFS from the start have set themselves up as an organisation which is completely independent, and they have said publicly that they don’t represent the sector, which I think is a weakness. It’s important for organisations like HEFCW not just to manage but to be a voice for the sector.”

“I think it does do it well, although I’m not sure if that’s such a core purpose of the funding council. After all, universities ought to be able to represent themselves to Government; they’ve got their own organisation in the HE bodies and so I would’ve thought that they ought to be able to directly represent themselves. I think what HEFCW could do is give, again, that independent view of what universities are bound to say; that they’re underfunded, they’re overstretched, they can’t do this or that. I think the WG is bound to be impatient to have more progress towards implementing their policies and I think the role of a funding council can be to say this is the objective situation, so less of a vested interest and more of an objective view.”

“I am in a position to compare and contrast the funding bodies. Looking at the relationships with England, the British funding council and in NI, I can say with confidence that ours is the strongest and most productive relationship that exists. I can say with confidence that in talking to the funding council, I am talking to Welsh Government. I can be clear that our views are fairly represented, and the relationship is appropriate. We get a robust challenge back. The way in which HEFCW helps develop policies contributes to that. It is a fair representation of the sector. It is not its role to be the champion of the sector, but it represents what is going on and is held accountable for it.”

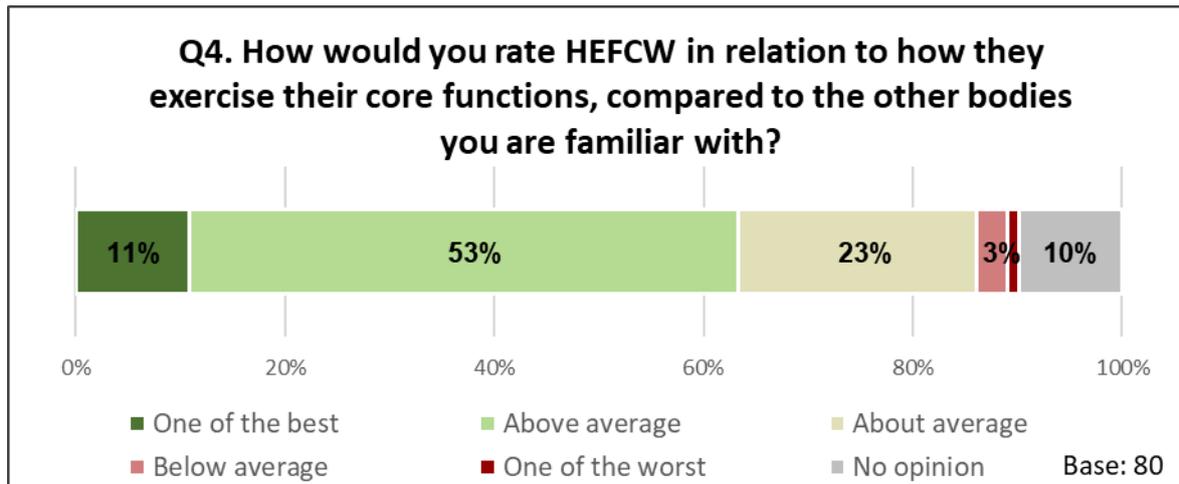
Some scope to communicate the impact of the sector more

Other respondents suggested that HEFCW could do more to support HE within the UK context and communicate the impact of the sector to Welsh Government and national partners.

“At the end of the day we need to project ourselves as universities that are part of the UK-wide system and when we recruit international students or try to establish research collaborations or franchise operations in other countries, that the quality assurance infrastructure and the strengths of the UK-wide Higher Education sector are equally applicable in Wales and that we’re not some kind of a standalone operation.”

“We all miss a trick in communicating the impact of what we do. I’m not just talking about research impact, but impact on the local economy, on the community, on the kids in the local area, everything that a university contributes to a region or area, I don’t think we package it up well.”

Perceptions of how HEFCW delivers core functions

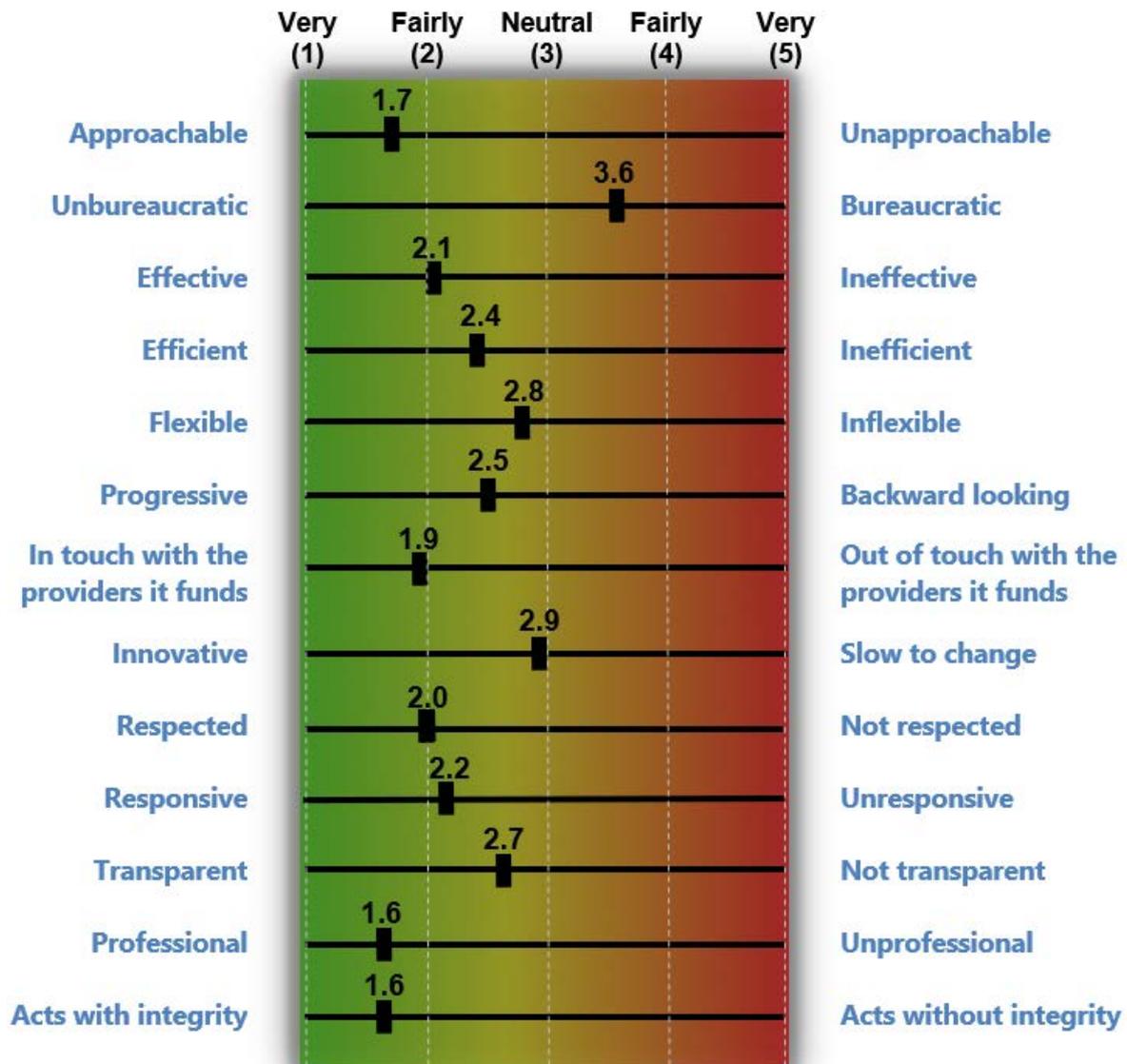


HEFCW is positively perceived in comparison with other bodies

Nearly two thirds (64%) of respondents perceive HEFCW as above either average or one of the best at exercising their core functions. No partners felt that HEFCW was below average in doing so, although 6% of institutions felt that this was the case.

HEFCW's organisational traits

Q6. Opinion of HEFCW as a whole organisation



Base:77/78

Generally positive perceptions of HEFCW

In order to gather an idea of some of the specific ways in which stakeholders and partners think about HEFCW as an organisation, respondents were asked to indicate their views using a 5-point scale between two opposing and mutually exclusive positions.

The above chart shows the **overall average score** of all respondents. A score closer to 1 indicates where respondents were, on average, more positive, while a score closer to 5 indicates a more negative response overall.

In general, the most positive responses were that HEFCW as an organisation acts with integrity (1.6), is professional (1.6) and approachable (1.7).

Overall, HEFCW as an organisation is thought of at a mid-point between flexibility and inflexibility (2.8) as well as between being innovative and slow to change (2.9). Perceptions of transparency were also mixed (2.7).

HEFCW is considered bureaucratic, but this is to be expected

The highest score was for bureaucracy (3.6), indicating that at an overall level HEFCW are considered more bureaucratic than unbureaucratic.

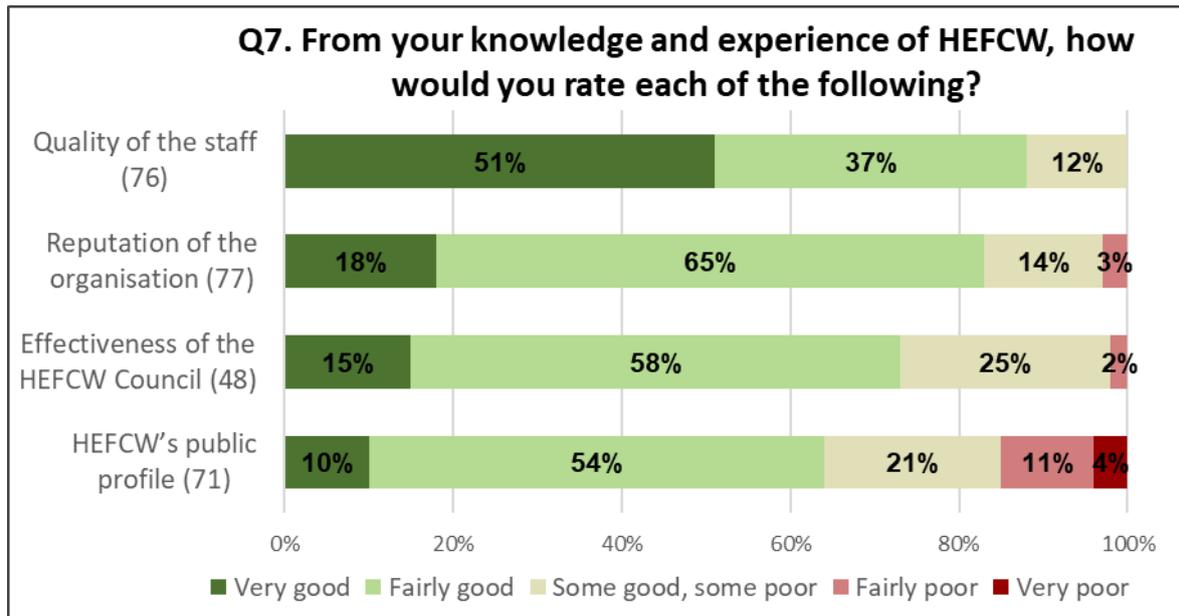
The depth interviews revealed that its role means that HEFCW will generally be considered bureaucratic due to the functions it performs particularly relating to funding and regulation. However, although this was noted, several stakeholders suggested that despite this, HEFCW's approach is generally more favourable in comparison to some of the other organisations they have dealings with.

"It has a job to do, it does its job very well but the nature of its job means there will be people out there who believe it is interfering and bureaucratic."

"They're certainly not as bureaucratic as some grant awarding bodies in Wales and perhaps elsewhere in the UK."

Nonetheless, some highlighted areas where the burden of administration and bureaucracy could be reviewed and potentially lightened, such as fee and access planning, which are discussed later in this report.

Ratings of HEFCW's interactions



Figures in brackets show the base number of respondents for each question

Quality of staff is rated highly

Rated most positively by respondents was the quality of HEFCW's staff. Around 9 in 10 (88%) rated the quality of the staff as good, including over half (51%) who rated them as 'very good', based on their knowledge or experience of them. No respondents rated HEFCW's staff negatively.

In the depth interviews, some participants commented on the fact that there had been a noticeable change in the staff at HEFCW. They commented that new staff had been appointed and some felt that this had enhanced relationships. This is discussed further later in the report.

A good reputation and broadly effective Council

A majority also rated the reputation of the organisation (83%) and the effectiveness of the HEFCW Council (73%) positively. The responses from partners and institutions were broadly similar, but while four fifths (80%) of partners rated the effectiveness of the HEFCW Council positively, this was the case for around two thirds (64%) of institutions.

By contrast, HEFCW's reputation was rated higher among institutions (87%) compared to a slightly lower figure for partners (78%).

Generally a positive view of HEFCW's profile, but not for all

While almost two thirds of respondents rated HEFCW's public profile positively (64%), more than 1 in 10 (15%) rated HEFCW's public profile as poor or very poor and a further fifth had a mixed view (21%).

Reputation and profile in detail

HEFCW has a good reputation among stakeholders and partners

HEFCW's reputation was discussed further in the depth interviews. As expected from the survey results, many said that HEFCW has a good reputation, that it is generally trusted by and supportive of the sector. In comparison to similar bodies in England, respondents said that people are sometimes even 'thankful' for the way in which HEFCW interacts with them. For many, there is a strong sense of 'fairness' in how HEFCW interacts and works with institutions in particular; the trust stems from this.

"HEFCW has worked diligently on behalf and with stakeholders. I think HEFCW's trusted, certainly amongst the institutions. There are always little niggles but by and large they are trusted within the sector."

"They have a good reputation. One of the marks of success, in a way, is that there isn't much mention of them, in the press and things like that. There is a respect between the universities and HEFCW. That's important."

"But in terms of reputation, with witnessing what's going on in England, HEFCW's reputation is probably actually improving further because people are hearing and comparing what it's like in the English university system right now and the anxiety that that is creating, and are thankful we're not part of that."

"I think it's good, and more significantly improving I think, there's a feeling now that it's more professional, it is pursuing an independent and Welsh position, it is no longer trying to be a mini England, it's trying to forge its own way forward. I think there's a feeling that following the Diamond review that they are amongst the best thought of the HE regulatory bodies in the UK."

A few others commented that HEFCW is a little bureaucratic as mentioned earlier and some note that not everyone in the sector has a positive perspective about HEFCW's reputation although did not say so themselves. They suggest that negative perceptions of HEFCW may come from those who may not fully take into account its role and position.

"I think they have a reputation of doing a good job but being a bit bureaucratic."

"I think on the whole it is very good. Sometimes there's a way in which they do things which are a bit frustrating but I think on the whole they have a good reputation as a regulator."

"There are too many institutions who see it as a battle. They don't work with HEFCW in an open partnership model and they choose to take an adversarial approach with HEFCW, and therefore you get back what you put in. I think there is some failure to understand the context in which HEFCW is working and the pressures that are put on HEFCW and the extent to which HEFCW acts as a buffer to Welsh Government and others."

Although its reputation is considered very positive on the whole, a few respondents said that they would like to see HEFCW change its behaviour to improve its reputation. The main suggestions they make are giving some context to its actions and requests, demonstrating its independence from Welsh Government, speaking out on HE issues and better understanding some of the institutions it has dealings with:

“There’s been the odd occasion in the past where there was just a little lack of understanding of the context of certain institutional situations, even when this was explained to them. This is only in isolation set against the context of what I think is a very fair, just and understanding organisation. Just on times you think ‘you’re not quite getting this’.”

“I think they need to put a little bit of distance between them and Welsh Government and a bit of distance between themselves and the universities, and be very clear what their role is, and then I think their reputation will improve.”

“I suppose it is demonstrating their independence a bit more from Welsh Government and their support of HEIs.”

“If they could show they have a bit of teeth or influence on funds, outside of Wales, their reputation would improve massively. It’d be a massive boost for them if they can say “Because we influenced this, this happened, and now this is accessible to Welsh universities where it wasn’t before” or “This fund now includes Welsh priorities” or giving us any kind of inside scoop on funds, I think that would really benefit their reputation because it would benefit the entire sector to have something tangible.”

“Their PR could be improved... it is important to be very clear about what you’re trying to achieve, to establish that independence by being prepared to speak out on HE issues independently of government and of institutions. I think to use the objective knowledge they have in the public sphere is important to the Welsh people.”

“They could look at a bit more work on the context of what they are asking sometimes or how they set out some of their circulars and communications. It wouldn’t hurt to give that a bit of a shakeup sometimes. It is fairly dry material so it is hard to communicate it in an engaging way, but there are things they could be doing.”

Does HEFCW need a better profile?

The question of HEFCW’s profile was explored further in the depth interviews although it overlaps to some extent with perceptions of reputation. Respondents were asked what HEFCW needs to do to improve its public profile.

The responses were varied but many suggested that HEFCW does not actually need to have an outwardly public profile in the sense of any greater communication with the general public. It was thought by some that this could result in creating more problems than the benefit that might result. Many feel that those who need to know what HEFCW does in and around the sector, are already quite well informed.

“Reputation with the general public I don’t think there is really that much in that space that they should be seeking to do. It’s really the universities themselves that should be building the reputation of the system rather than the funding council doing that for us. They should facilitate opportunities for us to do that but that’s as far as it should go.”

“I think it’s probably less well known in the wider community, but there is a question for it about whether it needs to be known in the areas that it is not well known.”

“Their liaison with the Higher Education sector is strong, their liaison with the Further Education sector is strong as I say through the HEIs and attendance at network meetings, so what would the public want to know about HEFCW?”

Others felt that there is a need to raise awareness about the scope of HEFCW's work to demonstrate it has a role beyond being a funding body. Some also said that HEFCW should be using its profile to talk more about the value and benefit of the sector to the wider community but feel that it has become more isolated since changes in the sector in England.

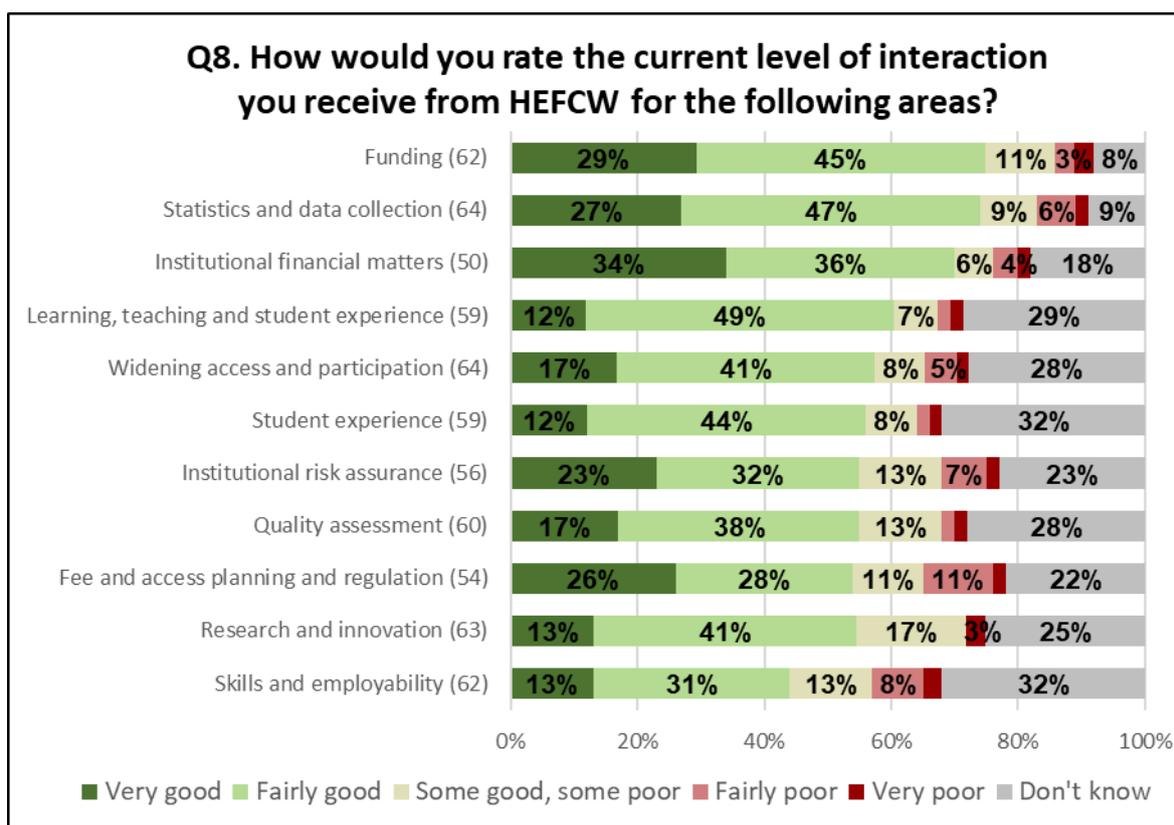
“I think they are quite low key, I think that might change now because some new people joined. Before I worked in HE I didn't really know who HEFCW were, I worked in public sector and I didn't know. I don't really know the breadth of the things that they do and where their responsibilities begin and end. And how their relationship with Universities Wales is or should be. It's a bit blurry whether they should have a public profile or not.”

“I do think that it can improve its public profile, it needs to be more proactive, it needs to be out there a little bit more, arguing for HE and its benefits. Strangely we live in an age where the value of HE is being questioned, not necessarily by the Welsh Government but certainly by the Westminster government and some parts of the media, and HEFCW needs to be out there explaining the importance and value of HE to the economy, to culture, and indeed to democratic process.”

“I think before, HEFCW would link up with HEFCE and do things collaboratively. Some of this is through devolution and the divergence of course, but they're suffering with being a bit more of an isolated voice in the divergence from England. While it used to be HEFCE and HEFCW and it used to have, for want of a better phrase, the weight of England behind it as well, it perhaps feels a little smaller and more marginal now that England has gone a different way. HEFCW do a lot of the same kind of work to help and represent the sector as well as being part of the regulatory structure. I think they've not found it easy at times to say 'look, this is how we do things in Wales and sometimes it works a little bit better than across the bridge'.”

“I suppose it is really about communication with stakeholders about their role and making that more explicit.”

Interactions with HEFCW on specific topics



Figures in brackets show the base number of respondents for each question. Not applicable responses have been removed for clarity purposes, many of which were from partners.

Interactions on most topic areas are generally good or very good

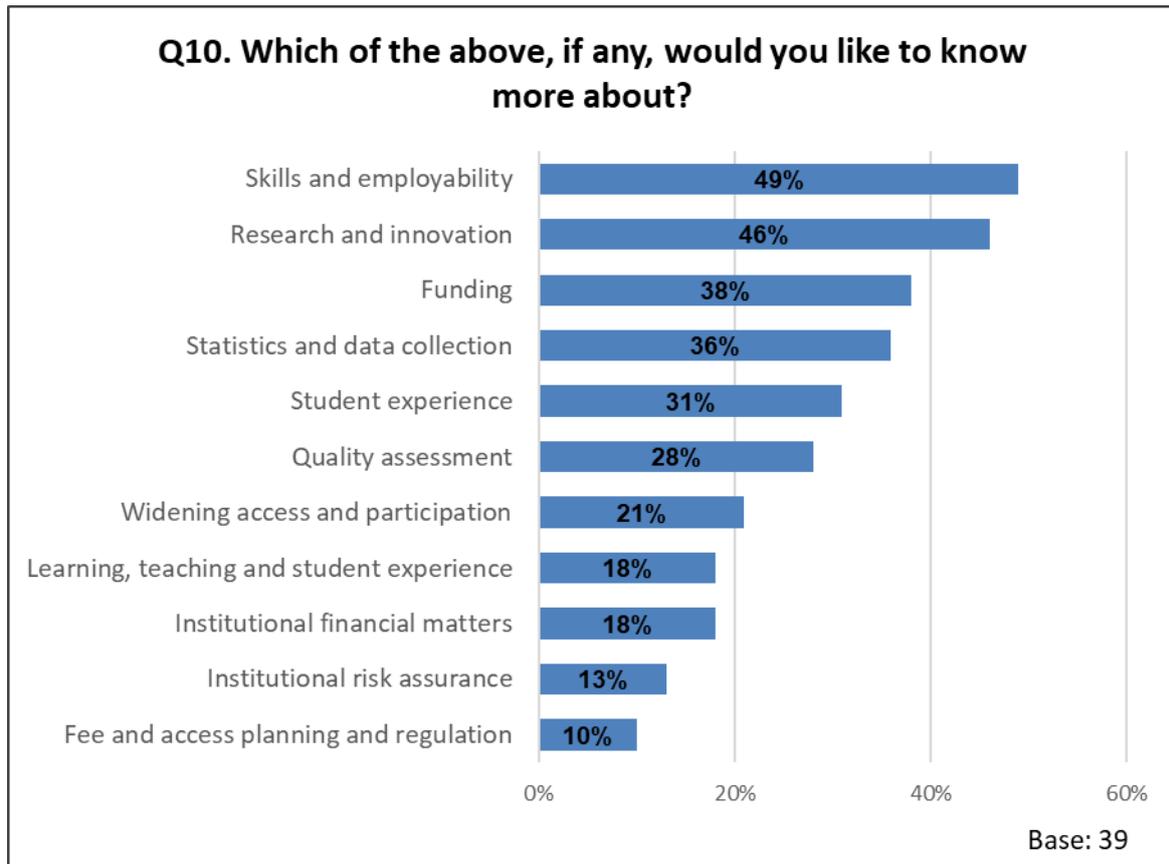
Respondents were most positive about the level of interaction they receive from HEFCW about funding (74%) and statistics and data collection (74%) and were most negative about fee and access planning and regulation and skills and employability, with 13% and 11% respectively saying that the level of interaction received is poor. Views on interactions on research and innovation were also mixed with 17% indicating interactions were sometimes good and sometimes poor. These lower scoring issues were explored in more depth in follow up interviews and discussed later in the report.

In terms of other areas respondents felt HEFCW needs to engage with, 16 respondents gave examples which were broad and had few commonalities. Some of these included the following:

- **Internationalisation**, and promoting the strengths of the Welsh sector to English and overseas applicants.
- **Further Education and industry**, including business engagement, higher level apprenticeships, routes into HE for adults and adult learner experience.

Other suggestions included transparency in grant applications, Equality and Diversity and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, graduate outcomes, crisis support, civic mission, Welsh Government and quality assurance.

Topics of further interest



Skills and employability and research and innovation are of most interest

Almost half of respondents who gave a response to this question said they wanted to know more about skills and employability (49%) and research and innovation (46%). Only around 1 in 10 wanted to know more about institutional risk assurance (13%) and fee and access planning and regulation (10%).

While nearly two thirds (63%) of partners were interested in knowing more about both skills and employability and research and innovation, only 35% and 30% of institutions respectively wanted to know more. This may reflect the roles and responsibilities of those responding to the survey.

Conversely, just 5% of partners wanted to know more about institutional financial matters, but 3 in 10 (30%) of institutions would like to know more.

Improving interactions

As noted earlier (under Q8) ratings of HEFCW's interactions on three specific topic areas were more negative or mixed. These were highlighted for discussion in follow up interviews to find out if there are ways in which HEFCW could make improvements in these or other areas. The topics discussed were:

- Fee and access planning and regulation
- Research and innovation
- Skills and employability

Understandably, participants only commented on these areas if their experience and role allowed them to give an opinion.

Fee and access planning and regulation interactions are most in need of review

For those involved in fee and access planning in particular, there were few who made any positive comments about the process and template. While respondents recognised that the process is necessary, they felt that there could be improvements in how it is administered. Comments raise the following issues:

- **Revising the template** – it is considered very lengthy and unworkable. Most feel that it could be simplified to make it easier for both institutions to complete and HEFCW to review. Several commented on the volume of data requested and suggested that streamlining and word limits could be beneficial.
- **Frequency of submission or outlook** – the process is annual but the likely changes in the subject matter, planning and outcomes involved would be better suited to a two year or three year outlook rather than an annual view.
- **Repetition** – this refers to repetition within the template but also because some of the information which is provided is requested at other times during the year. Some would like to see a 'what's changed' approach rather than one which needs institutions to start from scratch each year.
- **More realistic targets** and outcome tracking – some find the targets do not reflect the importance and achievability of specific targets to the individual institution. Sometimes this means that queries are raised about unmet targets which affect a relatively small number of students. Additionally, it is difficult to track the outcomes for some targets within a yearly cycle e.g. work with schools needs a longer time window to see any impact emerge.
- **A more engaging output** - the plan is not 'user friendly' for potential audiences – either from a Council review point of view or from published document perspective.
- **Response times** are sometimes difficult to manage – the main issue identified here is having enough time not just to complete the documentation but to allow for those who need to sign it off to do so, as this involves co-ordinating with the timing of institutional Council meetings.

On a positive note, several respondents reported that when clarification is needed, they can call HEFCW and receive very good advice and support. Some quotes to illustrate these points are provided below:

“Fee and access planning every year is quite a mountainous task. A huge amount of detail is required. In principle, the fee and access plan is published and is on our website and ideally should be a document which prospective students can look at, but the current format certainly doesn’t lend itself to that. It’s quite onerous and very time consuming so in a dialogue with the sector I would recommend that we find a method of simplifying that whole process.”

“If you start with a bunch of thirteen-year olds, for instance, and support them through their time at school with particular subjects, then it’s going to take a while before you see the particular impact of that and whether it can be rolled out in other places as well. It’s not the case where we put in place a measure one year and then at the end of that academic year, we know exactly what it’s achieved, because a lot of the time you don’t actually. I would be in favour of making them two- or three-year plans rather than annual plans. It would give more depth to the document; it would also give us an opportunity to produce something which is a bit more aligned with how we develop our own strategies.”

“It could be more focussed more around...what’s changed and the developments, rather than sometimes giving the same information we’ve already given, albeit in a slightly updated way. I think the template could be slightly less burdensome in that sense, but otherwise it’s reasonably clear.”

“They could make that a lot lighter touch. There’s a general issue in that they require a lot of data, some of it is the same, at different points in the year, and there’s something about sitting back and asking themselves what do they actually need? Welsh Government needs to do this as well. What do they actually need, when do they need it, and how much detail?”

“It does seem a bit torturous... It is an important process, I accept that, as it is the basis on which we exist as a university accessing the tuition fees. I do know that the person who actually has the interaction with HEFCW is able to access them easily and to have discussions about clarity on what they are querying and such like. Just need to streamline the process a bit more.”

“The fee and access plan is becoming ever more complicated and their review of it is ever more detailed that makes our life ever more difficult, but if you engage with them and have the conversation they are very good at it.”

“Quite often they want the Council to sign it off and it doesn’t fit in with Council meetings and that can be a bit tricky. Sometimes they want a lot more detail than I think they actually need. They also expect every institution to hit every target, and I think they need to look at the whole Wales picture and provided all targets are being hit across Wales that’s probably good enough. You can’t expect every institution to do everything, because we are a bit different.”

Research and innovation interactions could be further developed

This is particularly relevant to those working this field and many others felt they could not comment.

A few respondents noted specifically that they find HEFCW's approach helpful with generally good communication in this area. Others commented that interactions have improved recently as new staff have been very proactive and visible. A few institutions noted the need to ensure this continues and at the right levels within each organisation.

"I think we're lucky because we've always had an excellent relationship. I would say that the information we're giving to the people we're meeting with is going up the chain properly and that the people at the top know what we're doing. But having had a great relationship so far, but if the people change we need to make sure that what we're doing feeds up the chain and doesn't stop, begin and end, with the people we're talking to. We need to make sure that within HEFCW they are sharing the information, that the people that are making the decisions, it's being fed up to them."

"There's a new member of the team who has certainly made that function within HEFCW more visible by simply going out and meeting people within the sector. [They have] visited campuses, met people within the research teams. [They have] visited every university, and I really appreciate that approach because it's the best way ... to actually understand where the real strengths in the system are. We have challenges because Wales isn't doing as well as it should when it comes to competitive bids for research funding, and one of [the] objectives is to address that. It would be fantastic if [they keep] keep up this kind of engagement and that it isn't just an initial introductory chat. [They] could repeat it once a year or so and see how things are evolving and developing."

However, some partners who work in the entrepreneurship and innovation fields would like to see more reference and integration with the research and innovation policies and developments in Wales and across the UK in HEFCW's approach. As an example, it was noted that the recent research and innovation document that HEFCW published did not originally refer to Welsh Government initiatives, national policy or work in this area in the health and social field. Similarly, another partner commented that they have had little engagement from HEFCW on innovation and entrepreneurship work when putting together a national review.

Some of those involved in this specific field would like to see a more collaborative approach between HEFCW, Welsh Government and other partners and institutions on this subject area. In some cases this relates to decisions on funding but also HEFCW's vision and how it works with the sector.

"It's about being more realistic about the funding... The amount of research that's being done that's not just curiosity research but proper industrial research is getting less and less. They need to be more realistic, certainly work with us on that. I think we could work far better collaboratively on that."

"I think there's a good understanding of Research and the Innovation components, there's a mutual goal that we both don't just want to do get high quality research but we want to see it utilised in some meaningful way, because I think it's good for universities, but it's also good for Wales. I think going forward now will be interesting because we've got the

reinstatement of the Research and Innovation funding, so I think that's going to bring us into much closer contact in terms of working with HEFCW because there'll be a funding stream. There'll be reporting requirements, there'll be consultations. So I think what I would urge is, when that funding comes online that we do work closely together. I don't think it's something where we should just receive the funding and then work remotely, so I think there's an opportunity there to develop relationships around that funding stream, which will be relevant to all Welsh HEIs."

Other comments on this topic were generally quite individual but referenced the following points relating to terminology and the role of Further Education (FE) in research:

- Grouping research and innovation together in a university context is problematic – one respondent suggested that there should be separate discussions about 'research excellence/performance' and 'innovation' with the sector because the spectrum is too wide under the 'research & innovation' label
- One noted that they would like to see the perception that FE does not do research explored further. They note that there could be scope to explore where lecturers within FE have PhD or master's level qualifications and interests.

Skills and employability interactions are generally positive

This is also mostly relevant to those working this field and many others felt they could not comment. Some HE institutions in particular felt that 'employability' in particular was not so relevant to them but others had a different view.

Some were generally positive about HEFCW's interactions on skills and employability but had no suggestions for improvements. One did suggest that pace of change and deadlines could be improved:

"HEFCW has been very supportive of all that we've been doing in terms of engaging our students and some of the things we've been doing to upscale. We have this pretty well in hand institutionally, and HEFCW are certainly no barrier to that and sometimes can be quite helpful. No issues with HEFCW on this one."

"HEFCW is working well on that side. It is engaging in discussions with a very wide range of parties in that. I think that area of work has moved on immensely in the last couple of years. I think it's a broader understanding of the issues and the picture and the people involved. It's not just HEFCW's side, I think on our side and local Learning and Skills partnerships have all improved. It just feels a better conversation."

"I haven't spoken to the person directly, but I do get reasonably regular emails about say, Degree Apprenticeships for example, and I have had some communication about that and the information has been reasonably clear about that, it's fine."

"I am fairly comfortable with what they are doing on that at the moment. I think they are a bit slow on some stuff and have some short deadlines on some things."

One institution highlighted that HEFCW and Welsh Government need to be mindful of the potentially fast pace of change at UK level on this topic and must be able to respond quickly:

“I think they just need to make sure that they are making Welsh Government aware of the changing environment and how we may have to change, and sometimes they have to move more quickly so that if England announces something, we need to know much more quickly. Things like apprenticeships and higher-level apprenticeships. If there’s a policy announcement somewhere that would improve skills and employability, we need to be a little bit more flexible in order to deliver it more quickly. Often if they happen in England they come out of thin air, so we need greater flexibility and rapidity in responding.”

A few institutions said they would like to see HEFCW reinforce the role of institutions in preparing for the skills needed in the long term rather than to focus only on meeting the short term needs of employers:

“There has to be that balance between the skills and employability focus and the short term thinking you often get as soon as you start talking about skills, and the longer-term approach where you’re building capability, resilience and transferable skills and perhaps also supporting graduates who may also at some stage set up their own company. They need to come up with something new, not just do a job that already exists. What HEFCW could do better is to help us to articulate that, and really counter that narrative that all that tertiary education should be doing is delivering a skilled workforce for next week.”

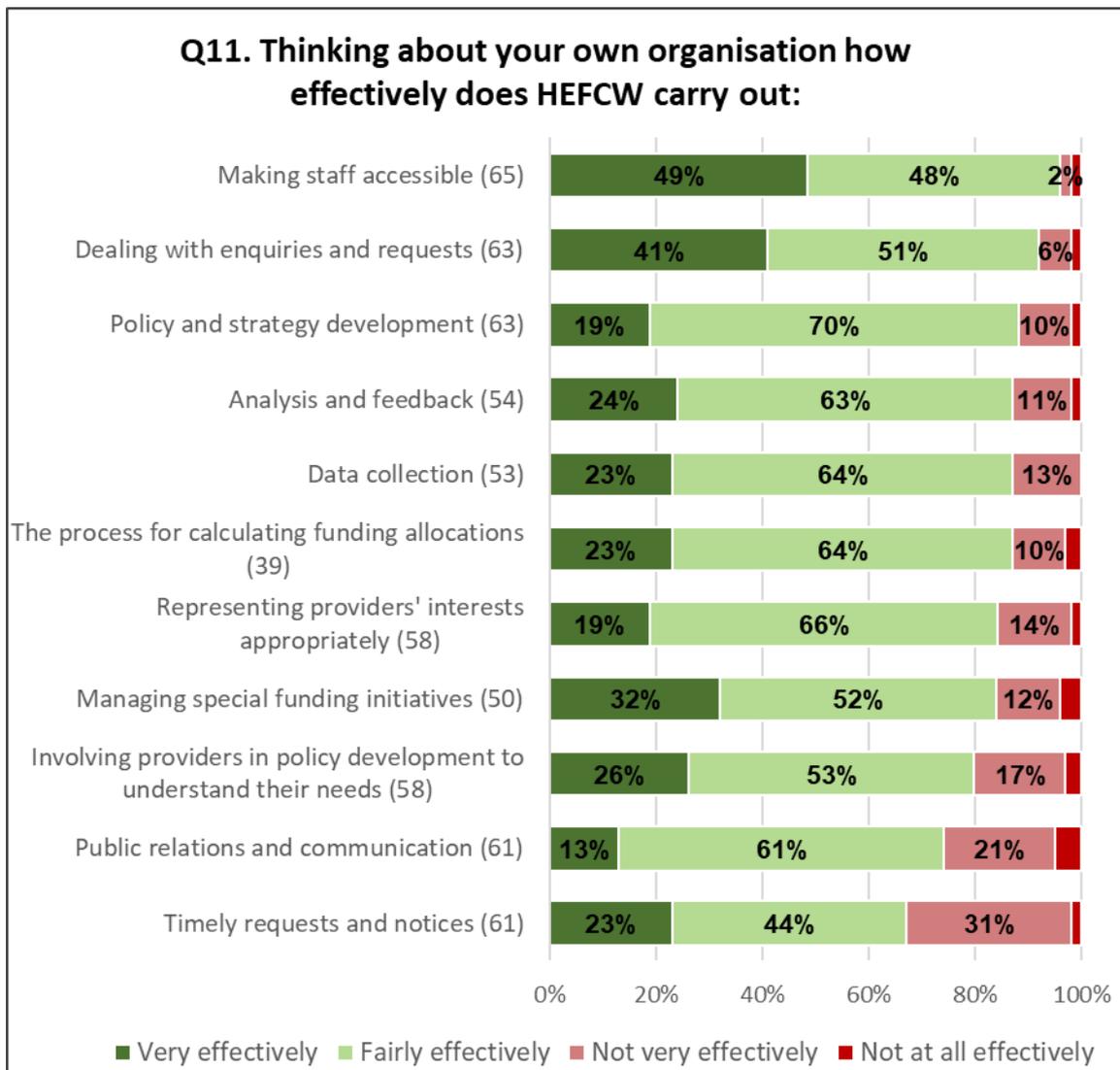
But this is in contrast to one partner who would like to see employers’ needs matched more closely:

“HEFCW could do things a little bit differently to try and encourage the universities to promote their education to meet employers’ needs rather than getting bums on seats to fund universities and there’s a difference. Populating loads and loads of courses for history, media studies, sports studies and so on just to generate cash for universities, without a thought about how these people are going to be employed – I think they could be doing more to try and discourage that behaviour and to encourage the universities to take on more engineering graduates, or sciences – professions where there’s greater industrial need and tailoring their courses more to employers’ needs. I think there’s more work to be done in this area.”

One noted that terminology in this area is difficult when looking at improving student outcomes because ‘employability’ and ‘enterprise’ are separated out in Welsh Government national policy but from an institutional point of view they see this as the same thing:

“I think it’s been excellent, the only one issue I’ve had, is that Welsh Government make a differentiation between employability and enterprise and to me they are, in terms of supporting our students, they are one and the same thing so the Welsh Government policy introduces an artificial barrier for student success, so of course when you’re trying to improve student success and outcomes I’m trying to reduce barriers. That was my concern, sometimes the portfolios or the way things are grouped don’t necessarily always translate into the reality of how stuff is delivered to the students. I was told there is a Minister for Enterprise but not a Minister for Employability.”

Effectiveness of delivery



Figures in brackets show the base number of respondents for each question. Please note that 'don't know' and 'not applicable' responses have been excluded from this chart for clarity.

HEFCW is broadly considered effective in how it works

Almost all respondents felt that HEFCW is effective in making staff accessible (97%) and dealing with enquiries and requests (92%).

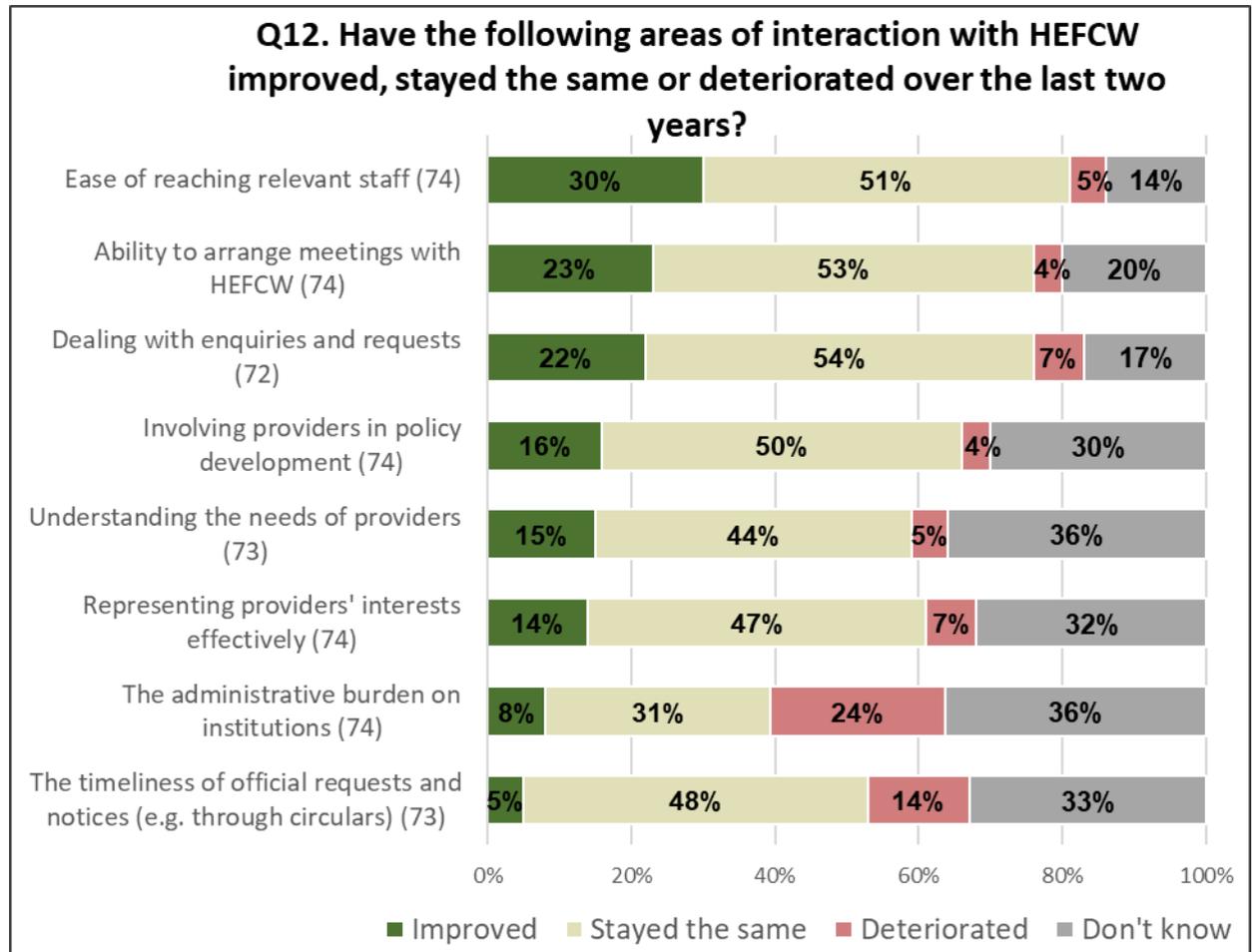
Around three quarters felt that HEFCW's public relations and communication (74%) is carried out effectively by HEFCW.

Just over two thirds say that HEFCW is effective with regards to the timeliness of requests and notices (67%) but a third (33%) felt that HEFCW is not effective.

The issues of public profile and representation of providers' interests are explored elsewhere in this report.

4. Contact and dealings with HEFCW

Changes in interactions in the last two years



Figures in brackets show the base number of respondents for each question.

Ease of reaching staff has most improved

While the majority of respondents felt that their experience had stayed the same for each type of interaction, 3 in 10 (30%) felt that the ease of reaching relevant staff had improved. This was the most improved interaction for both partners and institutions.

Administrative burden and timeliness of official requests had worsened for many

A greater proportion felt that the administrative burden on institutions (24%) and the timeliness of office requests (14%) had deteriorated, compared to 8% and 5% that felt it had improved respectively.

In each type of interaction, a greater proportion of partners said that things had stayed the same when compared to institutions. When excluding 'don't know' responses, almost half of institutions (47%) felt that the interactions around administrative burdens had deteriorated.

Working relationships with HEFCW staff and the level of engagement has most improved

Online survey respondents were asked to provide more details about areas they felt had improved in the last 2 years (Q13). Most responses related to the relationship between the institution/partner and HEFCW, and included the following themes:

- **Engagement**, including an improvement in engagement events and stakeholder involvement via committees and consultations and engagement with the sector in policy initiatives.
- **Closer working relationships with HEFCW staff**, including the Research and Innovation team specifically; the approachability of senior officers, as well as their willingness to visit in person; and how responsive staff now are.

Other comments highlighted that there had been steps taken to rationalise what institutions were expected to submit; student outcomes and employability; co-creation and recognition of HEFCW as an influencer; clarity of strategy and policy initiatives. We discuss this in further detail later in the report based on responses to the follow up interviews.

Burden created by duplicated information, requests at short notice, and an increase in detail requested

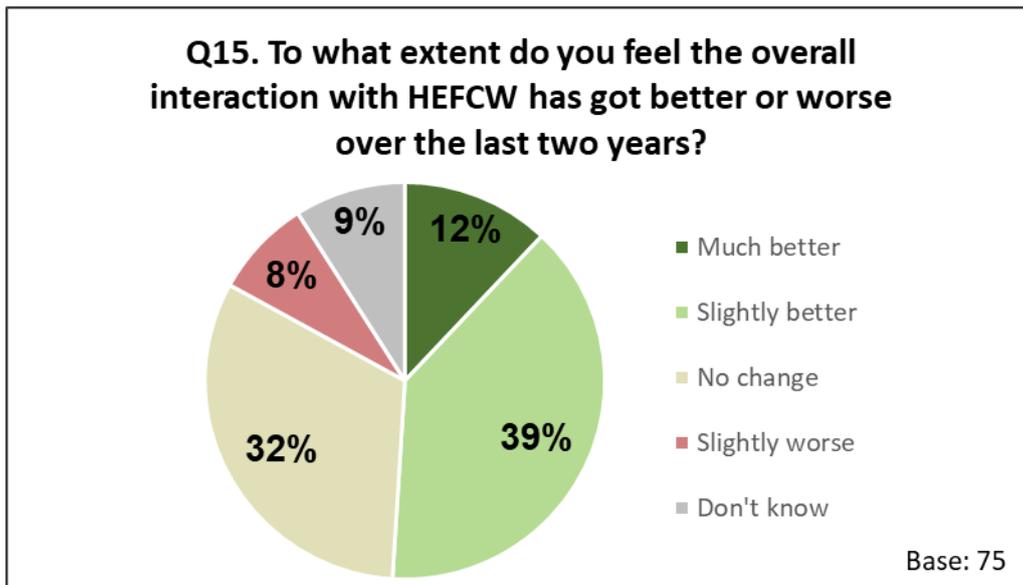
When online respondents were asked for further details about areas which had become weaker in the past 2 years (Q14), almost all responses referenced the increased administrative burden, including the following topics:

- **Duplication**, including having to resubmit information like charitable status and compliance with Financial Management Code, of which HEFCW already has records.
- **Timeliness of data requests and shorter deadlines**, e.g. requests for data at short notice in combination with other compressed deadlines.
- **Increase in compliance burden**, including supplying more details in forms (e.g. fee and access planning)

Other comments mentioned discrepancies with the grants awarded to students without justification, slowness to lobby on behalf of HEIs in the changing HE landscape.

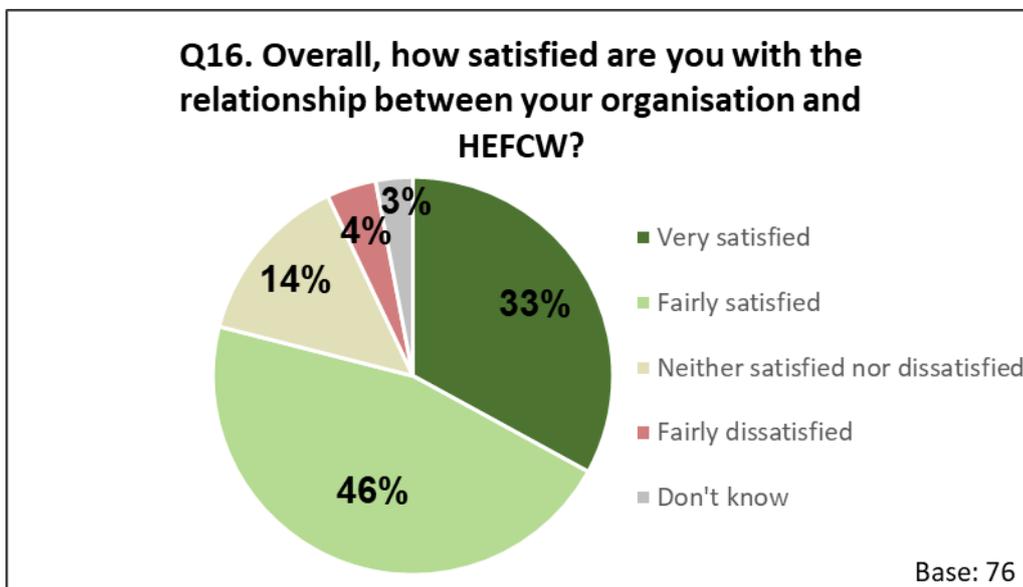
Administrative burdens were covered in more depth in follow up interviews and are discussed in more depth later in the report.

Most said interactions with HEFCW have improved, a few felt it has deteriorated



Around half (51%) of respondents felt that their interactions with HEFCW had become better in the last two years, including nearly three fifths (57%) of institutions and around two fifths (42%) of partners. Around a third (32%) felt that there had been no change, while less than 1 in 10 (8%) determined that they had become slightly worse.

High levels of satisfaction with the relationship with HEFCW



More than three quarters (79%) of respondents were satisfied with their relationship with HEFCW overall, while around 1 in 20 (4%) were dissatisfied. Results were similar between both partners and institutions.

Improvements in engagement with HEFCW

In the follow up interviews, participants were asked for their opinions on how contact and dealings with HEFCW have changed in the last two years. Having identified in the online survey that staff are more easily reached, accessible and understanding of the needs of providers, we explored these experiences in more detail.

Many have seen better engagement but some would like more at lower grades

Many respondents noted that they agreed there had been improvements in interactions and access to staff.

Comments suggest specifically that staff are more visible and present at sector meetings and they have had more face-to-face contact in general. Staff have been easy to reach and are approachable. Some, however, commented that this could be further enhanced at lower grades.

“I would endorse that thoroughly. The key people there are available, some of them aren’t afraid to travel down and have discussions with institutions. It has been an upward trajectory. It didn’t start from a poor base to be fair, it’s always been reasonably okay, but there’s been an upward trajectory over the last few years definitely.”

“I’ve felt consistently that they have been easy to reach and to talk to. I think at the next level down it could be a bit better. It has got better in the last six months. There have been some staff changes which have helped. I think there remains room for improvement at the junior level.”

“HEFCW send representatives to the FE network meetings, there’s good interaction, good dialogue, there’s a heads up on new information that’s about to come out.”

A few others felt that although they haven’t noticed a change, this is not a negative view because interactions have always been good. Others have not been in post long enough or have relatively low levels of contact with HEFCW so were unable to comment on any change.

“It hasn’t really gotten any better in the last two years; it’s always been fairly good as far as I’m concerned.”

The willingness to have conversations, be flexible and provide support is a strength

Many respondents said that they felt that HEFCW’s open-ness is welcomed. The ability for stakeholders and partners to pick up the phone and be able to discuss any issues or concerns or gain clarification is a major strength of the way in which HEFCW operates. If staff are unable to give a response there and then, they will also find out and respond.

“From my point of view what has improved is not necessarily the written communication, which can sometimes still be slightly obscure and obtuse, but what’s improved immensely is that if you just phone through to them or ask to speak or arrange a conversation, at whatever level, at my level in terms of management or colleagues who are dealing with the detail, then HEFCW has become extremely good at talking things through with people and coming to arrangements and discussing what is actually needed and so on.”

“I think the staff there are what make it. It’s not just yes or no answers. If they don’t know the right answer, they’ll take it into consideration and come back, there’s also that kind of follow up as well. It does feel very conversational and constructive.”

“It is the ability to contact someone and discuss where perhaps they can’t meet a deadline, or we need some advice about something they have asked for. A couple of things that I have experienced that I couldn’t meet a couple of deadlines and they came back and said we are fine with that as long as we agree this date instead. There is a bit of flexibility and the ability to contact them.”

Additional support, adapted to the circumstances, is on hand when needed

A few respondents commented specifically that HEFCW respond according to the needs of the stakeholder. The level of contact and support is flexible with additional support and interaction put in place when needed and eased off when it is not. This applies particularly to institutions and how HEFCW interacts as a regulator.

“Adaptive and responsive and they need to scrutinise where there are issues but then once things are resolved they need to move on and let us get on with it.”

“They’re now far more open to have dialogue and having conversations in which you might have been a bit more guarded with them previously. I think that goes back to the trust in the organisation; the recognition that this is not a body that’s here to make institutions fail, because that’s not in anyone’s interests, it’s a body you can actually talk to and engage with and I think some barriers have come down.”

Some noted that new staff have had an impact on this improvement

Some respondents suggested that new people have changed the dynamic of and levels of interest. They have brought a new approach and positive and engaging attitude to their dealings with stakeholders and partners.

“The turnover of staff has helped to improve the contact and dealings with HEFCW.”

“What’s changed are the people, the people I used to have contact with were fantastic so it’s not a slight on them but the new people, they’re new into HEFCW so they’re clean, they’re young, they’re bright, they’re open to listening to new ideas. They aren’t jaded by having tried and failed many times which I suppose may have happened to the others that have moved on or retired, I don’t know. I think it’s the people, we had a great Chair of committee before, but [the new Chair] has a slightly different approach and [has] given them the confidence and autonomy to go off and do things.”

Administrative burdens: issues and areas for improvement

As the administrative burden felt by institutions, and to a lesser extent partners, was highlighted as an issue and an area for improvement in the online survey, questions about this were explored in further detail during follow up depth interviews.

The greatest burden is the fee and access planning process

Unsurprisingly, the most frequently mentioned administrative burden to those who deal with it is the fee and access planning process. Details on the issues have been outlined earlier in this report which outline although the process is necessary, many feel it could be improved, particularly institutions.

A few others refer to the Strategic Planning and Engagement Document (SPED) which has also been considered quite onerous although necessary.

“The fee and access plan is long and complicated for less and less money. Actually, it’s gone up a bit this year. As I say, you can get asked for the same targets in different papers and woe betide you if you mess them up and get different answer in different places. With the fee and access plan I’m doing the one for 2021 and it’s only 2019. I don’t understand why I’m doing that so far out as you keep on having to go back and revise it because things change.”

“The fee and access plan is by far the most difficult. There is an appropriate raising in the level of evaluation and feedback, which I think does need to happen, but it does raise the administrative burden.”

“It has been our Strategic Planning and Engagement Document. That is now coming to an end. Other than that, I don’t consider it to be a major burden at the moment. “Burden” is quite a pejorative word. There are things we have to do, and the Council has to account for public funds in an efficient way. At the moment, it is relatively efficient, and I am conscious that they have tried to minimise the calls on us.”

The level of detail, volume of information and timescales are the biggest issues

Again, mentioned earlier, the level of detail and volume of data required are particular issues which institutions in particular find a burden, and some feel it may be unsustainable moving forward. However, the timing of requests and managing short deadlines are also problematic for many particularly if it requires involvement at board level.

“There is an increasing focus on detail in the questions they’re asking, and fee and access is a forecast for two years’ time. I think the expectations of the levels of detail we are able to provide funding for particular sort of groups within the university and all the rest of it isn’t appropriate, we simply can’t, we don’t know that sort of detail this far out.”

“It’s the need to respond to short deadlines and funding requests in an intelligent way, that’s the one that’s really tricky.”

“All universities in Wales have schedules of board meetings and sometimes they are seeking documentation that requires broad signatures in periods when we don’t have

board meetings. It is important that they communicate early with us so that we can put in place the mechanisms to deal with the requirements.”

One respondent in an HE institution suggested that the timing of ‘official visits’ may be worthy of review. They suggested that this could be timed to fit better with other reviews conducted at UK level so that all parties would gain more benefit from the process. They would like to see triennial visits from HEFCW timed to take place at a mid-point between the 6-yearly QAA visits so that all could gain the best value from the review process.

However, some respondents commented that they don’t see any major problems as far as administrative burdens go. They also point out that some things which have increased administration tasks and responsibilities are outside of HEFCW’s control, for example, compliance with GDPR, the Welsh Language Act and Ministerial requests.

Forward planning, reviewing procedures and simplification would be welcomed

As mentioned earlier, having better communication and a yearly forward plan could help institutions in particular to prepare for upcoming requests for information. Consideration of the timing of requests in line with the academic calendar and early notification to raise awareness would also be helpful.

Furthermore, simplifying the processes for any requests for information to reduce duplication and streamline the information needed would also be a big step forward. Some query if information already provided, for example in the student record, could be used as a data source rather than requesting it directly from institutions. Reviewing information requirements and processes, they acknowledge, would mean that Welsh Government may also need to be involved in order to reduce the administrative burden, particularly relating to Ministerial requests.

“Grant awarding bodies or organisations like HEFCW should at least be aware that universities do receive lots of queries for information. Anything that generally helps reduce administrative burden whilst meeting reporting requirements would be much appreciated.”

“Sit down and think about what’s needed at what point in the year, for what purpose, and ask for it in a more structured way, and only once. That also means managing Ministerial expectations. It’s very much dependent on the minister’s civil servants and advisers as to how that can be communicated. It needs a very good close working relationship between HEFCW and those.”

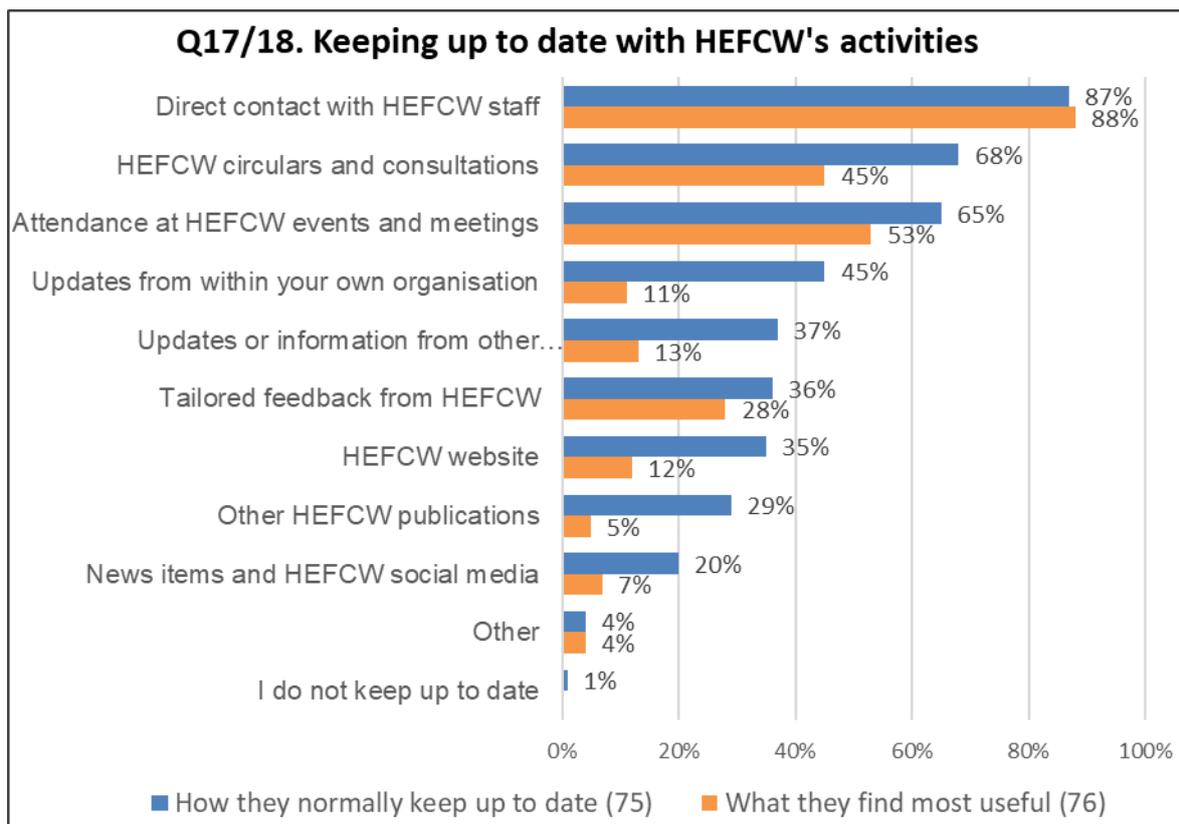
“They may fit, they may not, but a consultation over the summer prior to the start of the new academic year is not ideal. It is important that they communicate early with us so that we can put in place the mechanisms to deal with the requirements.”

Alternative providers also note that they are subject to the same administration requirements as larger institutions but do not have the same resources in place to respond due to their size. This is likely to be an ongoing and unsustainable resource problem unless a different approach could be considered for smaller organisations. Alternative providers would like to see a process and associated administration requirements which reflects their situation in terms of the level of funding and number of students involved. One did suggest, however, that this resource issue is not unique to Wales and that English counterparts have an even more difficult challenge.

“The administrative burden and the requirements that we are having to meet, will eventually mean that aren’t going to be able to continue. If the requirements continue to increase, as they have done over the last couple of years, then that would be a massive loss for Welsh education. We all struggle, because we have to have one person specialising and doing the work in lots of different areas. So whilst we have fewer students, and that is obviously less work than the universities, we have to have the same amount of knowledge as these universities and the things that we have to meet, the legislation and all the rest of it, but all of that lies with one or two people whereas the universities, you’d have different departments dealing with all of those things; people specialising in different areas. At the moment I’m dealing with a QAA review coming up, ensuring all the policies are in place, making sure that our budgets are in place, funding strategy, overseeing the management of buildings, all of that. It’s the same for all the alternative providers. However, if it’s any consolation, we know alternative providers who’ve found England worse to deal with than Wales.”

“If they were representing us to the Welsh Government and our situation, as with all the alternative providers, were taken into account when thinking through policy, I think it would be sensible to make the requirements proportionate to what we deliver.”

Keeping up to date



Currently, almost all (87%) of respondents keep up to date via direct contact with HEFCW, and an almost identical proportion (88%) identified this type of contact as the most useful they receive.

While HEFCW circulars were the second most common way of keeping up to date (68%), attendance at HEFCW events and meetings were seen as slightly more useful (53%, compared to 45%).

Updates from within their own organisation (45%) and from other organisations (37%) were also common ways of keeping up to date but were only seen as the most useful way of doing so by around 1 in 10 respondents (11% and 13% respectively).

When asked what aspects of HEFCW's activities they'd like to know more or less about, the following topics were mentioned by multiple online survey respondents:

- **Transparency in decision making**, including how information provided by institutions is shared with the Council and the Council's decision-making process.
- **Funding**, including more information on Innovation and Engagement fund, funding formulae and grant allocation
- **Shaping policy and working with Welsh Government**, including what profile-raising activities for the Welsh Education Sector HEFCW is undertaking with Welsh Government, Government strategy working with HEFCW, and current policies being worked on
- **HEFCW's role in future**, such as communication about priorities with the CTER and future planning for PCET.

How could HEFCW improve how it keeps you up to date?

In the follow up depth interviews, we asked what HEFCW could do to improve how it keeps stakeholders and partners up to date about its activities or sector developments.

Many feel well-informed, HEFCW should keep up with communications in general

Some felt they that they are already quite well-informed by HEFCW's communications and know where to go for information should they need it. Additional information may lead to 'overload' perhaps. Several said that they expect HEFCW to continue to communicate in the way they already do.

"I don't think so, I'm very busy and I get regular circulars through from them and invitations to conferences and things and regular meetings from them, and if they gave me any more I probably wouldn't have the bandwidth to absorb it so I think they get that balance about right."

"If we're in touch through our groups, for those events, if they come and speak at those events I think they are doing what they can at the moment to communicate."

"No, circulars we know where they are. No, no changes needed to meet our needs."

Some would like more or improved information

Others would like further communications and mention specifics such as:

- A brief and informative e-newsletter
- Easier navigation round the website to find what they are looking for
- More communication with Chairs and Councils
- Programme of work for the year
- Improved circulars – easier to review in terms of length and style
- Communications briefly summarising discussion points and actions in Council and Committee meetings
- Briefings for trade unions

The comments below outline these points in more detail but were made by individual respondents in the depth interviews:

"They could...put out an occasional newsletter. Just a once or month or so about what's on their agenda, what forums have they engaged with in the sector. I think that would be useful. It needs to only be one or two pages. There are the HEFCW circulars of course, but I've not seen anything beyond that. We could share with our senior teams within the organisation or it could go to the communication officers within the universities."

"I don't know whether they issue some newsletter. Even if it was just two or three times a year on what is going on in their organisation, introducing their new staff (they have had quite a few). It can be hard when you are remote to keep track of who is doing what. They email us to share job vacancies, but it would be helpful to have that update every now and again."

“The circulars are quite hard to read but they come out at the appropriate time. Sometimes, if I’m honest, I read them very fast and I can miss the critical points. The critical points aren’t highlighted quite clearly enough because they’re in what I’m going to term ‘civil service speak’. That might be me just reading too fast. We misinterpreted a financial figure; we thought we were going to be getting a sum of money every year for three years when actually it was an amount to divide between three years. I’m not the only person who made that mistake and it’s a specific example of that.”

“A twice-yearly briefing for the trade unions so they could share with all trade unions that work in the sector what was happening, and areas they are concerned about, that sort of thing. The reality is the next 5 years are going to be quite turbulent I suspect, in terms of HE, and I think having that twice-yearly meeting with the trade unions to come and listen to HEFCW’s views about development in the sector, I think that would be extremely helpful.”

“On their council and committee, possibly a brief report about what was discussed. It doesn’t have to be minutes, just what was discussed, and what actions were taken as a result, shared with the sector would be really helpful. It is done regularly in other bodies and institutions.”

“There might be room for improvement here. I as a Chairperson receive very little directly from HEFCW. On one hand that’s fine, circulars and things like that are fine that they go straight to the Secretary of the university, and I wouldn’t want to interfere in that. But on the other hand, it would be good, now and again, if there are any messages that need to be addressed to the Chairpersons and the Councils of universities, if they could pull that out and communicate that to us then that would certainly be of benefit to us. Something that is more specific to university Councils and the Chairs.”

“What I struggle with is sometimes the website and information on the website. I struggle with navigating my way around it. Recently I did a paper ... and I ended up finding the information on the Office of Students website which obviously is from the old HEFCE website so it should be the same information but it was easier to navigate around the [that] website and find the information I needed than the HEFCW website.”

What does HEFCW do well?

Understanding of industry, relationships with staff and effective engagement most valued by respondents

In the online survey respondents most commonly mentioned HEFCW's engagement and contact as things they do particularly well, in addition to friendly, knowledgeable, approachable and readily available staff.

Respondents valued HEFCW's quick and accurate responses and provisions of information; face-to-face interaction in network groups; effective consultations; being kept updated on strategies and activities and feeling that HEFCW takes their relationship seriously.

Additionally, respondents valued HEFCW's good knowledge and understanding of how the Higher Education sector 'works', and its perceived role as a 'buffer body' or intermediary between the sector and Welsh Government.

A similar question was posed in the follow up depth interviews. Many of the comments re-echoed the points made in the online survey above and elsewhere in the depth interviews.

Additionally, some respondents commented on HEFCW's ability to provide a tailored approach to engagement based on an understanding of the institution or partner involved. Others commented on recent developments on student outcomes and mental health as positive developments.

"I think what they are good at is dealing with us as individual institutions and not a block. I would commend them for that. I have always found them able to differentiate between what the needs and priorities are as institutions depending on what their place in the sector is and what the nature of their student body and mission is and to be sensitive to that in their dealings."

"Being able to access the right people at the right time."

"I think what I find really valuable is that they are good at looking at what's going on in strategic and policy terms within Wales and thinking across to the wider UK, but particularly in Wales, but I have found that their insight about the things that we need to address as universities are extremely valuable."

"They held a meeting recently on mental health and wellbeing of students, so I do think that they provide good support."

"I think the newsletters, in terms of what's going on, has been very helpful. I think they've done a good job in consultation with the Reid review and getting funding reinstated, that obviously is very important. I think whenever we're provided with opportunities to showcase our success stories that's always valuable."

What should HEFCW's priorities be in the future?

Due to the number and variety of responses to this open-ended question in the online survey, responses have been classified according to a standardised code frame. This approach helps ensure consistency when classifying different comments and the resulting codes represent themes that have been repeatedly mentioned in a quantifiable manner.

The responses provided by a respondent to a single text question may present a number of different points or arguments, therefore in many cases the overall number of coded comments counted in a particular question can actually be higher than the number of people responding to that open-ended question (i.e. each respondent may have made comments about two or more different topics).

The future of funding and the new regulatory body are key priorities

Q21. "In your view, what should be HEFCW's key priorities over the next two years?"	Responses	%
Funding/financial stability	13	32%
Work towards/keep sector informed of future changes (e.g. CTER)	13	32%
Access considerations	6	15%
Strategy/policy/governance	6	15%
Reducing burden on institutions/simplifying/streamlining requests	4	10%
Promoting the Welsh HE sector (internationally/in relation to England)	3	7%
Student success	3	7%
Continue/keep up current standards	2	5%
Co-production/partnership working	2	5%
Other	3	7%

Base = 42

Comments about future funding priorities/financial stability and the transition to the commission to oversee the higher and further education sector. Most respondents referred to this as PCET (Post-Compulsory Education and Training), rather than CTER (Commission for Tertiary Education and Research).

Comments about funding included ensuring funding mechanisms are 'fair' and reward quality, are sustainable for institutions and value for money for Welsh Government, support teaching/learning and research resources, and that the impact innovation and engagement funding in particular is measured and monitored.

Respondents also mentioned funding in relation to the new commission, specifically referring to the need for fairness in the future balance of funding between FE and HE sectors.

Comments about the CTER were varied, ranging from a desire for more clarity about the structural reform and its implications; communication to and engagement with institutions about the reform, including keeping the sector informed of key staff changes; publicising the positives of the change; and looking further ahead at changes the sector needs to make over the next 15 years.

How can HEFCW help with the transition to establishing a new CTER?

In the follow up depth interviews participants were asked for their views on how HEFCW could help with the transition towards the establishment of the new CTER and what stakeholders and partners expectations are of its role in this.

As plans for the new body are very much in the early stages, many found it difficult to comment in detail on this and opinions were highly varied reflecting the diversity of questions and issues which need to be considered in the formation of the new Council. Some also noted that as Welsh Government are leading the process, HEFCW has a supporting rather than leading role to play in this process.

Stakeholders and partners made the following points, however:

- HEFCW should work closely with the sector and keep communicating and engaging on developments
- A published timeline of proposed activities is needed
- Meaningful consultation would be preferable – not large scale documents to complete. Consultation events and workshops which allow for more dialogue are preferred
- Stakeholders would like to see HEFCW continue to ‘state the case’ for the sector and raised a number of points including:
 - Giving all parts of the sector a voice – covering the range of stakeholders including that the new Council is formed based on a cross section of the sector from universities, FE and alternative providers
 - Stressing the autonomy and independence of HE
 - Ensuring that the FE voice is heard
 - Putting students at the centre to allow for progression between FE and HE and a real consideration of student outcomes and the barriers to this
 - Retaining developments which have already been implemented recently as part of the Higher Education Act 2015 and which ‘work’
 - Ensure that Research and Innovation developments are not ‘lost’ in the transition
- Considering the balance of funding between the various parts of the sector
- More information when available on how the quality assurance process might work given the diversity of the sector

“Outside of the set piece 20-page documents with yes or no answers. Probably more events and workshops to bring the sector together. It’s easy to bring the sector together in Wales, it’s not hard, so it would be helpful to have more face-to-face.”

“So to demonstrate their proactiveness get us involved. Something they could send out so we could help, so it could benefit them and we could feel like we are helping make the case.”

“Of course, no single sector should be dominating, but let’s not forget the university sector is extremely important for the development of Wales as a nation. Of all the education sectors that will be brought together under this new tertiary body, it is the only sector which is truly UK wide and international in how it operates. We mustn’t lose sight of that.”

“I’d like to see an operational plan that illustrates and demonstrates how they’re going to engage with the Government on that route. I’d like to see a publication, it’s probably a bit early days but I think they should but something in the public domain, in terms of a timeline, so that organisations that want to influence and engage in the narrative about the development of that new body know when and where would be an appropriate way to do it. At the moment I have no idea.”

“One of the biggest things, is that they’re looking for a single quality assurance process across all the sectors; HE, FE and work-based learning, and I don’t think that’s feasible. We’re different organisations doing different things. It’ll be interesting to see how that pans out.”

“There needs to be a serious conversation around students in Wales and the barriers they face in achieving a successful outcome. If we are going to really move the dial in Wales, to have better outcomes and achievements for all those who are studying here, we need to make some realistic decisions rather than political decisions and I think that’s going to be a challenge going forward.”