

**Developing a Regional Dimension to the  
Planning and Delivery of Higher Education (HEFCW Circular W10/06HE)  
Response from Higher Education Wales  
March 2010**

**1 About Higher Education Wales**

Higher Education Wales (HEW) represents the interests of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Wales and is a National Council of Universities UK. HEW's Governing Council consists of the Vice-Chancellors of all the HEIs in Wales. HEW provides an expert resource on the Welsh Higher Education sector.

**2 About this response**

This response seeks to provide views on the principles and processes required to successfully establish a regional dimension to the planning and delivery of higher education. It also provides some relevant context on the regional dimension. It does not seek to comment on the position of specific higher education providers, or to unnecessarily repeat important points raised in other submissions. We note HEFCW's involvement in discussions about regionalism at the Strategic Dialogue Conference on 18 March and have not provided, therefore, a verbatim note of those discussions in this response.

Given the limited period for consultation, some additional detailed and informed work is likely to be required. HEW would note that radical change must be based on robust evidence and confidence amongst partners as to the likelihood of success. If it is not, Wales could pay the price of failure for years to come.

**3 Regional coherence (Q1)**

How to achieve regional coherence has been debated throughout this consultation process (ref. Professor Mike Woods' presentation to the Strategic Dialogue Conference, 18 March, annex A). There appears to be a consistent view that, whatever approach is taken to the administrative boundaries for regional strategy submission, the concept of 'relational' regions must be adopted in respect of activity and strategy development. This approach recognises that regional development is likely to be based on a series of relationships, rather than geographical specificity.

Such an approach would have multiple benefits. It would:

- Recognise the international HE system of which our universities are a part - if we do not work within that context then the investment value of our universities will decline
- Support the development of regional plans in the context of the range of other priorities being pursued by providers at national, UK, and international levels
- Reflect the diversity of mission of providers and what they are able to contribute to regional strategies
- Not unnecessarily hold up existing and productive developments between partners
- Recognise that not all partners would be involved in every activity
- Support collaborative activities with a limited number of partners within administrative regions
- Allow the impact of population size and spread on effectiveness to be assessed
- Accommodate All Wales collaborations and partnerships, and cross border collaborations
- Accommodate other strategies and bodies, beyond those identified in the consultation circular, and which fall outside the remit of HEFCW e.g. Economic Renewal Programme, professional bodies
- Accommodate existing and diverse regional structures with which providers are active, for example:
  - Spatial Plan areas
  - Health Boards
  - Local authorities
  - Police authorities
  - Local Service Boards
  - Reaching Wider Partnerships
  - FE regions.
- Focus on effectiveness over and above structures, avoiding the pitfalls of 'forced marriages'
- Reflect the full diversity of the HE system operating in Wales.

Most importantly, the approach would accommodate providers which are not geographically located in the administrative region but deliver within it. These partners might not only deliver activities within a region but be full partners in the development of more than one strategy.

Some further work to identify the key characteristics of a successful region and how higher education can contribute would optimise the effectiveness of a regional approach.

#### **4 Assessing need and meeting demand (Q2)**

The difference between 'need' and 'demand' is well understood, and has been articulated in other submissions to the Circular.

Our universities are already highly responsive to market demand from individuals and from individual employers. Good practice material, already available to HEFCW, provides evidence of how responsiveness is being improved through regional collaborative arrangements. It is worth registering that improved demand for higher learning, particularly in areas such as STEM, is likely to be dependent on the success of increasing demand at lower qualification levels.

HEW would caution against a simplistic approach to indicators of nugatory competition and local duplication. Similar subjects may cover different discipline areas and, crucially, may serve different markets. Attempting to rationalise may result in the loss of discipline areas and significant disadvantage to certain groups of applicants. There are likely to be complicating factors relating to cross departmental provision and staffing. Due regard would also need to be given to the national and international dimensions of subject provision, and to subject involvement in Centres of Excellence. Whilst obvious, it is worth articulating the fact that regional competitiveness, at least in relation to HE, is highly dependent on being competitive in the global market.

Assessing need presents a different set of challenges. Needs are likely to be diverse and conflicting, and will raise issues relating to their place in a hierarchy. There is a significant risk that we will expend time, energy and funds pursuing approaches to needs assessment which have previously failed to produce impacts, simply because no new or effective methods can be identified.

HEW is cautious about the development of extensive provision, which is not backed up by evidence of need or demand, and for which a future demand cannot be identified with a sufficient degree of certainty. The cost to benefit ratio will be paramount here.

The proposals on needs assessment made in the circular are helpful but are not extensive. There might be some scope for developing a real needs based response by working through the supply chains of major employers within regions, and with clusters of local businesses. These would take some time to develop, however.

Expertise in relation to needs assessment should be applied, before guidance is offered. At present we lack a sound basis to proceed.

## **5 Regional strategies (Q3)**

As already discussed, tolerance of imperfect modelling within regional strategies will be required in order to secure real delivery. Give and take will be required in order to facilitate regional working. Regional priorities will differ, and so an overly prescriptive approach to what should be included in strategies should be avoided. Unrealistic expectations will also need to be managed. An action-orientated approach, which is light on paperwork, is likely to yield most benefit. An increase in administrative costs is also anticipated.

Regional strategies should, however:

- Reflect the national, UK and international impacts on regional provision and the benefits
- Ensure that the highest quality provision is offered within a region
- Clearly articulate a number of key outputs
- Reflect the overlapping relationships and activities that deliver the regional, or even local, dimension, including distance learning
- Be cognisant of the existing dynamic of the student market for different providers and regions
- Reflect existing regionally focused activities – we must not reinvent wheels
- Demonstrate the resources aligned to fund activities within the strategies
- Minimise bureaucracy in both their development and delivery
- Support economic development
- Support widening access, including cold spots assessment
- Address progression routes from FE to HE, where progression within a region and area of provision is required
- Demonstrate responsiveness and flexibility.

The approach to developing regional strategies need not be the same in every case, but should include:

- A key group of partners, but also reflect a diverse range of other partners, deliverers and activities as appropriate
- Assess the cost to benefit ratio of any proposals i.e. provide value for money

- Where relevant, an assessment of the impact of other policy objectives, both related and unrelated, on delivery and timescales – some partners are likely to be driven by a set of objectives outside HEFCW’s remit. Some overarching benchmarking of other WAG initiatives might be required
- Identification of how strategies are to be managed and led
- A broad focus on the potential of collaborative activities e.g. franchising, shared services (although universities are likely to wish to take a systematic approach here, and already buy into pan-UK services in a number of areas)
- A transparent approach to approval and evaluation processes at the outset. Regional outcome statements (similar to an approach adopted in Scotland) might be worthy of consideration, linked to the identified key output measures
- Recognition that some activities will be easier to initiate than others. Delivery is likely to be staggered, therefore
- An assessment of the opportunities, risks and consequences of proposals at an early stage.

A nationally-led best practice initiative to support strategy development might be helpful. A number of initiatives within Wales might provide good models and HEW has already supplied HEFCW with details of many of these. We must not ignore the opportunities which may flow from best practice sharing from outside our sector e.g. health and from outside Wales, e.g. Higher Education Regional Associations in England.

HEW would be interested in examining the potential benefit of UK Budget announcements of additional higher education funding to the development of regional strategies, if replicated in Wales.

It should be noted that success will require time, energy and cost. HEFCW will wish to consider the cost implications of running partnerships.

Some consideration of the support which could be provided by the Coleg Ffederal in relation to Welsh medium to regional developments might be helpful, as would the support which could be provided through European Convergence and other funded projects.

## **6 Timescale**

The timescale for drawing up regional strategies is extremely tight, and is unlikely to deliver the best result. A ‘building blocks’ approach to their development may yield better outcomes in the long term and would allow for opportunities, risks and consequences to be properly considered.