

David Blaney
Chief Executive
HEFCW
Linden Court
Ilex Close
Llanishen
CARDIFF
CF14 5DZ

16 April 2015

Dear David,

Widening Access programme of action consultation, 16 April 2015

On behalf of the members of Universities Wales, I welcome the opportunity to provide our comments on the development of HEFCW's draft Widening Access programme of action. This letter covers the key messages from the sector on widening access. Individual universities will be providing independent responses to the specific consultation questions.

Universities across Wales are committed to widening access - increasing opportunities for people from a diverse range of backgrounds to higher education - and firmly believe that every person, regardless of circumstance, should have the opportunity to access a higher level learning experience that is appropriate, relevant and valuable. I am therefore pleased that the Welsh Government has committed to continue working with the sector in a genuine partnership through HEFCW to achieve the ambitions for Higher Education and learners in Wales.

Universities in Wales are already performing very well in widening access. Recent figures show that:

- Wales' universities continue to have higher proportions of students from the most underrepresented groups compared to the UK as a whole.
- Over 92% of young FT UG entrants to Welsh HE were from state schools or colleges.
- The proportion of young FT UG entrants from low participation communities was over 13%.
- Over 20% of FT UGs were mature. Nearly 15% of these had no previous HE experience, and were from a low participation community.
- Over 10% of PT UG entrants had no previous HE experience, and were from a low participation community.
- The proportion of FT UG students in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance was over 7%.

The success in Wales on widening access to date has grown from the talent, drive, determination and expertise in our universities. The substantial and wide-ranging initiatives that are being delivered by universities across Wales include workshops in the community, programmes for primary school children, school science activities and science for adults sessions, support for care leavers and foster parents and mentoring for new students. Recognising our success and keen to build on the positives and push forward this agenda, we look forward to the outcomes of the Wales Institute of Social and Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD) work on widening access impacts when they are published and considering how these outcomes can be used to add value to our work in widening access.

Reaching Wider

The Wales-wide Reaching Wider initiative was established to break down perceived barriers and widen access to learning. It aims to increase HE participation from groups and communities in Wales by raising aspirations and creating new study opportunities and learning pathways to HE. It engages with people of all ages who are currently under represented in HE and involves partnerships between all HE and further education institutions in Wales, and others, including local authorities, schools, voluntary sector, Open University in Wales, and Careers Wales.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) reviewed the Widening Access and Reaching Wider strategies of Wales' HE institutions in 2012. The review underlined a range of areas of 'excellent practice', and highlighted where Wales is ahead of the UK and leading the way with developments, particularly with Partnerships and work with looked-after young people. Welsh universities are generous in their support of this initiative by working with all pupils, regardless of where they may go on to study, because they recognise the benefit of widening access to higher education to all. We welcome the renewed funding of the Reaching Wider Partnerships in order to support this valuable work.

Schools Partnerships

Universities across Wales have increased their work with schools and formed meaningful partnerships with the aim of raising standards and aspirations e.g. in preparing skilled and confident teachers and working with FE partners to provide a greater choice of learning pathways. Universities Wales have recently worked with Cardiff University to develop proposals for a pilot mentoring scheme across four of our universities, where HE students studying Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) go into schools to mentor school pupils. Using undergraduates as mentors has the benefit of conveying an enthusiastic and positive message about HE as well as the specific discipline, whilst also giving them the opportunity to gain experience, enhance employability and increase their personal development.

As part of our commitment to raising the personal expectations, aspirations and ambitions of school pupils to succeed in future learning, the workplace and later life, Welsh universities are also investigating their role as partners in the Schools Challenge Cymru 'Pupil Offer'. We will explore the possibilities of working more closely with Pathways to Success schools to identify the opportunities to contribute our skills, knowledge, and expertise to help them provide for example, planned interactions that will widen pupils' horizons.

Open Educational Resources

Universities Wales agrees with Welsh Government that traditional models of campus based delivery are changing. Developments in open and online learning offer the opportunity for the sector to engage with a wider audience, including school age pupils, those living in low participation communities, as well as academic and business communities across the globe. Wales' universities are embracing the opportunities presented by new technology and flexible provision. In 2013, Wales' university sector signed a declaration of intent which outlines the way in which the sector considers Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practice (OEP). Universities across Wales are using open and online resources in a number of ways to bring the experience of HE material directly to non-traditional learners. In parallel to this, the all Wales Learning Platform - the Hwb - is being developed and will host a national collection of resources to support learning and teaching for learners aged 3 to 19. There is scope for further partnership working between schools, colleges and HE institutions that needs to be explored to support the Hwb's development.

Future Work

The initiatives mentioned above are only a snapshot of the broad range of Welsh universities existing widening access activities. Individual universities are preparing their own responses to the consultation and are keen to provide you with a host of information demonstrating these interactions that they are already engaged in. However, Universities Wales recognises the extent of HE WA work is not always widely known within institutions, regions or by policy makers. We recommend that more should be done to promote this existing work in addition to capturing it through the proposed audit.

Universities Wales strongly believes that widening access also encompasses all-age provision and lifelong learning. Welsh universities provide access to a university education to people from 19 to 99 years old, and have been a bridge to formal education for adults who may not have thrived in a school environment, delivering stimulating teaching in a wide range of settings in the heart of our rural and urban communities. Wales' universities will continue to provide an appropriate offer to people at all stages of life through a variety of programmes, through a flexible and dynamic delivery system that meets students' expectations and needs.

Funding

Although universities are performing well on widening access, (Welsh universities outperform UK in recruiting from underrepresented groups) the uncertainty around the funding environment makes the future unclear. Financial cuts have forced universities to reconsider how they distribute their funds across a raft of different areas. Although universities are comparatively well placed under existing fee plan arrangements to use fee income to continue to support widening access activities, there is a danger that increasing demands are placing potentially onerous requirements on institutions without the supporting funding. Specific areas that are of concern to both universities and the National Union of Students in Wales include the implications of cutting the Financial Contingency Fund on student support, and the possibility that the allowance for students with disabilities in Wales will also be cut following the recently announced Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs) cuts in England. Additionally, the Access and Retention premium that is awarded for students from areas of low participation in HE, and students from Communities First areas, was removed for full time students in 2014/15. It will continue in 2014/15 for part time students, but may be subject to an efficiency gain. It is essential that

efforts in recruiting and retaining all of these students are not harmed by the cuts and removal of the premium, and universities will be working hard with you to find innovative solutions that will meet the ambitions set out in this consultation.

Finally, Universities Wales supports collaborative activity within and across the sector to support the widening access programme of action. Joint activity can be particularly effective in delivering policy objectives in this area and universities continue to devote very considerable resources to support these areas. However, the lack of grant funding at sector level unfortunately makes collaborative and sector level action harder and this should also be considered when developing new approaches.

We look forward to welcoming you to our Committee on 21 April to discuss these matters further.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Colin Riordan".

Colin Riordan
Chair, Universities Wales