

Universities for a stronger Wales

Universities Wales' manifesto for the 2026 Senedd Election



Universities Wales is a membership body representing the interests of Wales' nine universities. We develop higher education policy, deliver political and stakeholder engagement and campaign on issues affecting our members.



**Prifysgolion
Cymru
Universities
Wales**

Foreword

The world around us is changing rapidly. From the digital revolution and climate change, to rising inequality and global instability, the challenges we face are complex and urgent.

To meet these challenges head on, it is predicted that Wales will need 400,000 more graduates by 2035¹.

Our future prosperity depends on our ability to nurture talent, drive innovation and equip people with the skills to thrive in a fast-moving world.

Each year, tens of thousands of people in Wales go to university. For many, it’s a life-changing experience, whether it’s a young person leaving home for the first time, or someone returning to education to retrain or pursue a new path.

Graduates are adaptable, creative and resourceful. They are also the backbone of our future economy and the drivers of our future success. Put simply, there will be no growth without graduates.

Welsh universities are worth almost £11bn to the economy, generating over £13 million for every £1 million of public investment². We employ thousands of people across the country, support local supply chains and help businesses stay competitive through our research, training and upskilling.

Our research and innovation turn ideas into impact, helping to tackle local and global challenges – from public health to climate resilience. This in turn fuels economic growth, drives productivity and creates new opportunities across the country.

Wales also leads the UK in graduate entrepreneurship, with the highest number of start-ups per capita.

But our value goes far beyond economics.

We strengthen and support our communities – not only through job creation, but also by building opportunity, driving social mobility, supporting local innovation and providing public facilities. Universities are woven into the fabric of Welsh life, advancing and promoting Welsh culture, and helping realise national ambitions around the Welsh language.

Internationally, our universities build partnerships that bring investment, knowledge and cultural enrichment to Wales, while cementing our place on the world stage.

The story of Welsh universities is one of resilience and ambition. Our strength lies, not only in our tradition, but in our willingness to adapt and embrace the future. Working with government, businesses and communities, we can drive forward an era of national renewal for Wales, tackling today’s challenges and shaping tomorrow’s agenda.

Universities are not just part of the solution; we are essential to it.

When universities succeed, Wales succeeds.



Professor Elwen Evans, KC
Chair, Universities Wales

Introduction

Our manifesto, Universities for a stronger Wales, sets out a bold and ambitious vision for the next Senedd term. Working together, we can build a more skilled, prosperous and confident Wales by:

- Building jobs and skills for the future
- Driving opportunity and social mobility
- Developing solutions to our most urgent challenges
- Supporting Welsh communities
- Bridging Wales and the world



¹ Jobs of the Future - <https://uniswales.ac.uk/demand-graduates-wales-set-soar-2035>
² The economic impact of Welsh universities’ teaching, research and innovation <https://uniswales.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/LE%20-%20Universities%20Wales%20-%20Impact%20of%20Welsh%20universities%20-%20Final%20report.pdf>

Building jobs and skills for the future

In an age of rapid economic and technological change, the skills needed to succeed in the workplace are evolving. From green energy and healthcare to digital technology and advanced manufacturing, Wales’ economy demands a flexible and highly skilled workforce. Through degree programmes, degree apprenticeships, professional qualifications and lifelong learning opportunities, our universities develop high-level skills that empower individuals to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

At the same time, universities underpin business investment in key areas, bringing jobs to Wales. As local economic powerhouses, universities drive innovation by supporting start-up and spin-out companies, partnering with businesses for research and development, and working with local authorities and other key players for job creation and local economic development.

Education and the economy are deeply interconnected. By working together, universities, government and industry can shape an economic strategy that delivers a high-skilled, high-value workforce for Wales. This should consider areas where Wales could be making its own decisions – such as setting salary thresholds for skilled worker visas based on the specific needs of our economy.

The next Welsh Government must place universities at the heart of an ambitious plan to build a more skilled and prosperous nation. As part of this, we call for:

Cross-party support for an independent review of university funding and student support

A sustainable university sector is key to unlocking business investment, productivity and growth, right across Wales.

However, universities are dealing with significant financial pressures. At the same time, they are adapting how they teach and operate in response to evolving demand and rapid technological change.

Inflationary increases to financial support will be essential to maintaining short-term sustainability, but **an independent review of university funding and student support** is necessary to ensure a modern, dynamic university system that continues to deliver for Wales – now and for generations to come.

Did you know?

Wales will need more than 400,000 extra graduates by 2035.³

³ Jobs of the Future - <https://uniswales.ac.uk/demand-graduates-wales-set-soar-2035>

This independent cross-party review should address:

- The balance of student, government and business contribution to university funding.
- The incentives available to encourage Welsh students to study and work in Wales.
- Part-time, flexible and lifelong learning. Wales has provided strong support for part-time learning and this will need to continue into the future.
- Funding for globally competitive research and innovation.
- The capital funding requirements of universities.
- The funding of expensive, strategically important subjects.
- The investment needed to support universities to modernise and adapt.

An independent review of the degree apprenticeships system

Degree apprenticeships are an important component of the higher-level skills pipeline in Wales, widening access to higher education for those less likely to undertake a traditional degree course. Universities currently partner with industry to deliver degree apprenticeships across the available frameworks: advanced manufacturing, engineering, digital and construction.

However, the existing system, which relies on Welsh Government resource for its development, is not currently agile enough to respond to the rapid changes in technological skills demanded by Wales’ evolving economy. As awarding bodies, there is no reason why Welsh universities could not be given greater freedom to design and deliver apprenticeships in partnership with businesses.

Expanding degree apprenticeships beyond the current frameworks will enable them to play a more significant role in meeting the future skills needs of Wales. There is appetite from students, universities and professional bodies to expand into areas such as health and social care, teacher training, professional services and management, and childhood and youth studies.

Increased engagement with all forms of higher education is vital for upskilling the nation to meet demand. As such, universities are calling for an independent and transparent review of degree apprenticeships.

Driving opportunity and social mobility

Universities drive opportunity and social mobility across all our communities. They provide routes into skilled employment and create pathways to better life outcomes and job satisfaction for graduates. Through lifelong learning opportunities, degree apprenticeships and flexible study, universities support people in Wales to re-skill and adapt throughout their lives.

By adapting, innovating and introducing new, flexible modes of delivery, our universities can provide more people with the opportunities they deserve to reach their full potential. Yet, more still can be done. As a sector, we are asking ourselves difficult questions about the changes we need to make to better meet the needs of our students and our communities. Similar questions will need to be asked by the next government.

We are currently seeing a worrying decline in the percentage of Welsh 18-year-olds who choose to go to university. In an era of rapid transformation and mounting global challenges, we cannot afford to keep rehearsing old arguments that a university education does not matter. Higher education is a cornerstone of opportunity, innovation, and national resilience. If we fail to communicate its essential role in shaping future prospects, we risk leaving the next generation less equipped, less qualified, and with fewer pathways to success.

To support universities to widen their reach and to deliver for current and future generations, we ask the next Welsh Government to:

Establish an independent commission on the participation of our people in higher education

Understanding and reversing the decline in higher education participation in Wales could unlock the potential of thousands of people, upskilling the economy and driving social mobility. The next Welsh Government should establish an independent commission to:

- Take a whole-education sector approach.
- Assess the impact of existing policy interventions, such as the student support package and the Seren programme.
- Consider new measures to boost the number of people applying to higher education in Wales. This includes providing better support for part-time and flexible study and improving opportunities for lifelong learning.



Developing solutions to our most urgent challenges

Welsh universities carry out world-leading research and innovation that tackles global challenges and benefits people, business and public services, both here in Wales and across the world. Cutting-edge research is translated into practical applications – from new medical treatments to clean tech and smart infrastructure – and the economic and investment opportunities for Wales stemming from university research and innovation are far-reaching.

At the same time, universities play a vital role in advancing blue-sky research, which may not have immediate applications, but is essential to shaping the breakthroughs of tomorrow. This dual focus ensures that Wales is not only responding to today’s urgent challenges, but also laying the groundwork for future discovery.

To support university research and innovation and its growth potential for Wales, we ask the next Welsh Government to:

Commit to sustainably fund research in Wales

Quality Related (QR) funding is responsible for much of Wales’ research excellence. It provides flexible and strategic support to research infrastructure and talent, and enables universities to go on to capture other competitive sources of funding. Along with an increase to the Research Wales Innovation Fund (RWIF), increased investment in QR funding is critical to future-proofing research excellence in Wales, safeguarding the reputation and success of our universities, and driving competitiveness and progress locally, nationally and internationally.

Did you know?

70% of assessed Welsh university research has a direct impact in Wales, improving lives through healthcare, education and public services⁴.

Invest in innovation and commercialisation

Wales has established a strong foundation for commercialisation activity and pan-Wales collaboration in the shape of programmes like the Wales Innovation Network, which works to improve collaboration in research and innovation and bring greater investment to Wales.

Universities Wales is calling for increased investment in university research and innovation through the Research Wales Innovation Fund (RWIF), which empowers Welsh universities to deliver high-impact research, innovation and civic engagement. RWIF funding continues to lag significantly behind equivalent funding in other UK nations. A significant increase in RWIF, with its focus on commercialisation, would enable long-term planning and investment, support pan-Wales collaboration and help institutions respond to national priorities such as net zero, digital transformation and health equity.

We are also calling for greater support for commercialisation and scale-up. For example, an extended role supporting university commercialisation for the Development Bank of Wales would strengthen investment for new and existing businesses. This additional support could be transformational in boosting the sector’s economic impact and unlocking productivity and growth across all parts of Wales.



⁴ The impacts of research from Welsh universities: A comprehensive review of the REF 2021 impact case studies - <https://www.learnedsociety.wales/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/The-impacts-of-research-from-Welsh-universities-Final.pdf>

Supporting Welsh communities

Wales’ universities are anchor institutions at the heart of their regions; they are critical hubs driving economic growth, supporting public services, and shaping the places where people live, work and thrive.

As major employers and economic engines, universities sustain thousands of jobs, stimulate local supply chains, and attract investment into towns and cities across Wales. Partnerships with councils, schools, NHS trusts, businesses and charities foster innovation and deliver tangible benefits to communities – from public facilities and cultural programmes to workforce development and lifelong learning.

Universities also play an important role in the cultural life of Wales; strengthening Cymraeg through teaching, research and cultural activity, and helping ensure its continued relevance for future generations.

By embedding research, education and enterprise within local communities, universities help build resilient regional economies and create opportunities that reflect the unique strengths and needs of each part of Wales. The impact is not just felt in lecture halls, but in high streets, industrial parks, and community centres right across the nation.

We ask that the next Welsh Government supports the critical role that universities play in their communities by:

Securing strategic regional investment funding

Long-term regional investment funding, that universities can fully access, will be vital to supporting universities’ roles as regional anchor institutions and encouraging private co-investment.

There is an interdependency between a region’s economic growth and the development of its skills base, so policy must be devolved appropriately to cater to local opportunities and needs. However, distribution of funding at a local government level – as with the Shared Prosperity Fund – can be too fragmented and risks excluding universities, which largely operate at a regional and national level.

Regional distribution of funding, channelled through the Welsh Government, is critical to maximising local impact.

⁵ The economic impact of Welsh universities’ teaching, research and innovation <https://uniswales.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-10/LE%20-%20Universities%20Wales%20-%20Impact%20of%20Welsh%20universities%20-%20Final%20report.pdf>



Bridging Wales and the world

Universities are global institutions with a proud history of placing Wales on the international stage and welcoming the world to our nation. As we adapt and respond to rapid global changes, the ability of universities to look outwards to the wider world has never been more important.

Universities are also central to Wales’ inward investment proposition and have a key role to play in supporting an economic strategy with global reach and ambition. As trusted partners to industry across key sectors, universities have strong international networks and are exceptionally well placed to support the next government’s ambitions for growth. Recognising this crucial role in future international strategies will be essential to unlocking Wales’ full potential.

To support our universities to continue looking outwards and foster global connections for the benefit of Wales, we ask the next Welsh Government to:

Implement the recommendations of ‘Wales Beyond Borders’

Wales needs a dynamic, forward-thinking strategy for international education and research to secure economic growth, support innovation and amplify its global influence.

‘Wales Beyond Borders’⁶ offers a series of recommendations to strengthen Wales’ global standing in international education and research.

The report calls for national support for the marketing of our universities through the ‘Study in Wales’ brand. It identifies clear interests for Wales in the Horizon Europe and Erasmus+ programmes and calls for closer working between the UK government and devolved governments to deliver future association. It also calls for an International Education Champion for Wales and a more considered approach to immigration policy to better serve Wales’ skills requirements. There are also specific calls around research, including an opportunity to revive the Sêr Cymru programme⁷.

⁶ Wales beyond borders: A future approach to international tertiary education and research <https://uniswales.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/Wales%20beyond%20borders%20FINAL.pdf>

⁷ Sêr Cymru <https://www.gov.wales/ser-cymru>



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