

Centre for Bioscience, the Higher Education Academy
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Annual report 2005

Learning Teaching & Assessment Issues for the Teaching of Biosciences in Wales

Reconfiguration of the University of Wales

In 2002, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) published *Reaching Higher*, a 10-year strategy for higher education in Wales, which questioned the sustainability of the Welsh Higher Education (HE) sector with its disproportionate number of small institutions. *Reaching Higher* committed the WAG to pursuing reconfiguration as a means of ensuring a strong, dynamic HE sector that contributes to the prosperity of Wales. The major outcome from the first phase of funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) was merger between Cardiff University and the University of Wales College of Medicine on August 1st 2004. The merged institution, now operating under the formal title of "Cardiff University", ceased to be a constituent institution of the University of Wales from the date of the merger and joined a new category of 'Affiliated/Linked Institutions'. While the new institution will continue to award University of Wales degrees in medicine and related subjects, students joining Cardiff from 2005 to study other subjects will be awarded Cardiff University degrees.

At the same time, the University admitted four new institutions – the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education in Wrexham, Swansea Institute of Higher Education, Trinity College, Carmarthen and the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama.

Collaboration within the University of Wales

In October 2004, HEFCW announced a second phase of the Reconfiguration and Collaboration Fund, totalling £8 million in 2004/5. Rather than concentrating on the type of full institutional merger witnessed at Cardiff, this funding can be used to support proposals for HE institutions to work together in clusters or networks of excellence in teaching, research and third mission activities. The biosciences are widely taught throughout the Welsh HE sector, and this source of funding presents opportunities to develop and deliver novel research initiatives and joint teaching programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level that draw on the complementary strengths of contributing institutions.

Funding of HEI in Wales

In the latest HEFCW allocations, all of the Welsh Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) saw real terms increases in their grants compared to 2004/05. In cash terms, the average increase for HEIs was 4.95%, ranging from 2.71% to 7.97%. The Council increased the resource for teaching in real terms by 1% over 2004/05 levels and has responded to concerns regarding provision in science subjects by supporting growth of 1.6% in full-time and sandwich student places in a range of science subjects. The allocations are the third under the deal introduced with *Reaching*

Higher, whereby the grant is tied to inflation year-on-year but there is funding above the baseline provided HEIs show their commitment to the twin priorities of the strategy – reconfiguration and widening access.

Funding of students in Wales

Money is always an issue for students, but this year more than most with university funding central to the general election campaign in Wales. The Higher Education Act 2004 transferred powers over the student support and tuition fee regime in Wales to the WAG, putting the Assembly on the same statutory basis as the devolved administrations in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The WAG aims to put in place improved student support, applications, administration and call-centre arrangements through the medium of Welsh and to use the student support system to encourage the uptake of subjects that will benefit the Welsh economy or public services.

The WAG has made a commitment not to introduce variable fees for the lifetime of the present Assembly (at least until the academic year 2007/08). The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning has also given an undertaking that Welsh HEIs will not be financially disadvantaged by this commitment. The Rees Commission, set up to decide whether or not Wales should introduce higher tuition fees after 2007/08, had been due to present its final report a week before the election. However, it is now not expected until early June, with the WAG making its decision on fees later in the same month.

Quality Assurance

Institutional review in Wales is carried out by the QAA under contract from HEFCW. The methodology is detailed in the *Handbook for Institutional Review: Wales*, published in November 2003. The system has been developed to provide comparability of judgements with other countries in the UK, whilst recognising the specific context of quality assurance in Wales, including the requirements of the WAG.

All individual HEIs in Wales will be reviewed over the next six years, but the first review was of the federal University of Wales in May 2004. The University of Wales is the degree-awarding authority for its member institutions. Responsibility for quality, but not standards, is devolved to the individual HEIs. It was of some concern that the review team placed limited confidence in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and of the academic standards of its awards. However, the judgement related to structural arrangements, rather than to the standards of the awards themselves, and there was no suggestion that any of the awards achieved by students pursuing studies through the member institutions were in question.

The relationship between the central University and the Institutions will be re-defined over the next year, with responsibility for both quality and standards being fully devolved and some constituent HEIs applying for independent degree-awarding powers.

Welsh-medium education

In November 2004, the WAG announced £2.9m funding for a collaborative scheme to extend Welsh medium provision in the HE sector in Wales. This essentially consists of two components – a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellowship scheme and a Postgraduate Research Scholarship scheme.

Both schemes are intended to support the WAG's *Reaching Higher* target of 7% of students undertaking some element of their course through the medium of Welsh by 2010.

The Postdoctoral Teaching Fellowship scheme is an extension to the scheme introduced by HEFCW in 2003/04. The Fellowships will be tenable for nine-months, commencing in 2005/06, and up to 18 will be awarded over a three year period. Each Fellow will undertake at least five hours Welsh medium teaching per week and develop new teaching material for a 20 credit module within their subject area. This will enable individual institutions to develop academic staff and to expand the choice of Welsh medium modules for future students. Since these Fellowships must serve the needs of all disciplines in several HEIs and come without any running costs for research, their impact on Welsh medium provision in the biosciences is likely to be limited. The disciplines of the 2004/05 Fellows are Divinity/ Religious Studies, Music, Human Geography, Mathematical Sciences and Physics, and History and Welsh History.

The Postgraduate Scholarship Scheme will provide up to 10 scholarships per year for an initial three-year period, commencing in 2005/06. Each Scholarship will be tenable for a maximum period of five years depending on the duration of the research degree being undertaken. Each Scholarship holder will undertake at least five hours Welsh medium teaching per week from their second year onwards and will develop new teaching material for a 20 credit module within their subject area in their final year. At least some of these Scholarships have been awarded for projects in the biosciences.