

TEACHING AND LEARNING ISSUES IN WALES

Wales has thirteen Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of differing sizes and profiles. With the exception of the University of Glamorgan, all of these are part of, or associated with, the University of Wales. The average number of full-time equivalent students per institution in Wales is about 5,900 compared with a UK average of about 8,500. Whilst the HEIs are small compared with those in England, the sector plays an important role in the economic and cultural life of Wales.

WIDENING ACCESS

Although Welsh HEIs have a higher proportion of undergraduates from under-represented groups than the UK as a whole, there remains a great disparity between the numbers of students admitted to HE from privileged and from disadvantaged homes. The cultural and logistical barriers to widening access that operate in the UK apply equally in Wales, and are compounded by the fact that Welsh HEIs are widely dispersed with relatively poor transport infrastructure. Distance-learning through ICT is likely to become an increasingly important factor to encourage participation in HE from geographically isolated communities. Some 6,000 Welsh HE students currently study in FE colleges under franchise arrangements, and HE and FE institutions are working together to strengthen widening access partnerships to ensure a seamless progression into HE.

FUNDING OF HE IN WALES

HEIs in Wales receive funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (ELWa – HEFCW) on both a *per capita* and initiative-led basis. The cost of HE in Wales is high compared to other parts of the UK because the sector consists of a relatively large number of very small, widely dispersed institutions (see below). Funding problems affect facilities,

infrastructure and staff/student recruitment and retention. The introduction of tuition fees and the abolition of the maintenance grant are affecting recruitment and retention rates throughout the UK but are likely to have a particular impact in Wales with its high proportion of socially deprived areas. We are already seeing an increasing number of students having to work part-time whilst following full-time courses. This restricts the benefit that they derive from HE and leads to missed classes and higher drop-out rates. To retain such students, we need to provide support and flexibility in learning through IT access to lecture material and on-line opportunities to network.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The past year has been a time of frustrating uncertainty with respect to quality assessment procedures in Wales. HEFCW's plan to adopt the QAA's UK-wide proposals for the next round of quality assurance reviews was suspended in March 2001. Because at that point it was several years since most Welsh HEIs had engaged in an external review process, interim measures were introduced and each institution undertook up to three 'engagements' at subject level during 2002/03 in order to re-familiarise themselves with QAA practices and expectations. The QAA is now working with HEFCW to finalise a framework for institutional review in Wales similar to that adopted in England with effect from 2003/2004.

WELSH-MEDIUM EDUCATION

Delivery of HE through the medium of Welsh accounts for less than 2 per cent of the total, despite the growing number of Welsh speakers emerging from secondary schools. The University of Wales and the University of Glamorgan have jointly established a Board for Welsh-Medium Teaching, which has set a target of three modules in every course to be offered through the medium of Welsh by 2007.

THE FUTURE?

The recent policy review of HE by the National Assembly for Wales questions whether the Welsh HE sector is sustainable in its current form. Wales has a disproportionate number of small institutions, all of which have to meet certain fixed costs and offer competitive salaries. There is a danger that less popular and least cost-effective disciplines will be dropped, regardless of the skills needed in Wales, and students will have to leave Wales if they wish to study certain subjects. Increased collaboration between geographically clustered institutions is being strongly encouraged and eventual merger is a possibility. It will be a challenge for HEIs to continue to deliver high quality courses during a period of major disruption in the sector.

Dr Sue Assinder
School of Biological Sciences
University of Wales, Bangor
s.assinder@bangor.ac.uk

DO YOU TEACH PARASITOLOGY?

Olivier Sparagano is the LTSN Bioscience Discipline Consultant for Parasitology. If you are eager to share and exchange ideas about teaching parasitology why not contact Olivier who would be very pleased to hear from you.

Dr. Olivier Sparagano, School of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, King George Building, Kings Road, Newcastle NE1 7RU. Tel: 0191 222 5071 email: olivier.sparagano@ncl.ac.uk