



## Universities as Global Communities

### 13 February 2020 – Event summary

On 13 February 2020, the Learned Society of Wales hosted the third event in its *Wales and the World* series at Bangor University.

Coinciding with the development of the Welsh Government's International Strategy, the series aims to expand the discussion and deepen our understanding of Wales's "soft power" assets.

This event (organised in partnership with Universities Wales) explored the contributions made by higher education and research to Wales's international profile – including student recruitment, research collaboration, international campuses, and the benefits of global connections to communities in Wales.

The event was structured around four key questions. This report summarises the contributions of speakers and participants to answering those questions.

#### 1. What is the Welsh sector's position within UK and global contexts?

**Professor Iwan Davies** (Bangor's Vice-Chancellor and the Chair of Global Wales) opened by giving the view from Wales. He noted that the essence of universities is international – they are globally networked institutions which should be ambassadors for Wales. Our institutions perform strongly in certain areas, but have had less time to develop than those in England, Scotland and the USA. Our research and development base is small; we are developing it with a 'triple helix' model of collaboration between public, private and higher education sectors. Global Wales already brings together Universities Wales, British Council, HEFCW and the Welsh Government to deliver the sector's international mission, but government funding is critical to maintaining this position (especially post-Brexit). Welsh universities have a unique opportunity to work collaboratively across all institutions, and this will help to address the challenges.

**Vivienne Stern** (Director, Universities UK International) noted that Wales is very successful in transnational education, and its HE sector has features to be encouraged elsewhere – e.g. fewer small institutions, and a unique international projection through Global Wales which has strong appeal in some countries (e.g. Vietnam). Brexit presents considerable challenges (and retaining access to Horizon and Erasmus is vital) but Wales could take advantage of the UK's reshaped global position. Due to lobbying by the sector, there have been important changes to the visa system; the UK government increasingly recognises the strength of HE as an export sector (with total educational 'exports' being worth £21bn) and of outward student mobility. It is now asking the question "What should we do to make HE work better internationally?" The challenge for the sector is to provide bigger and better answers.

In the discussion that followed, participants noted the danger of omitting values from a discussion that is often dominated by numbers and economics. There are challenging questions to consider when, for example, universities work with autocratic states.

It was also noted that alumni are an under-used resource in terms of recruitment, international placements, employment opportunities and diplomacy. There is considerable potential for alumni to reflect and promote contemporary Wales in other countries, and this may be harnessed through developing a Wales-wide alumni association.

## 2. How can the sector develop a more distinctive international image?

**Professor Simon Haslett** (University of Wales Trinity Saint David) outlined the strategic context for the international projection of Wales. The Welsh Government's new International Strategy emphasises Wales's key ambitions as well as its core values. The HE sector features in several areas of the strategy, but emphasises recruitment of international students with little reference to outward mobility from Wales (whereas the UK government's International Education Strategy does cover this aspect). However, the International Strategy is only one part of a national policy context that also encompasses the Well-being of Future Generations Act (WFGA), the development of low-carbon technologies, and the Welsh Government's declaration of a climate emergency. To better project Wales, it would be helpful to unify the messages coming from Global Wales, Visit Wales and other key players.

**Dr Gavin Bunting** (Swansea University) summarised the WFGA, noting its international recognition and close links to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Wales's universities are conducting internationally leading research in these areas and are disseminating this worldwide; but doing so is complex and requires an interdisciplinary approach. There is an opportunity to project an international narrative about Wales addressing global challenges, with the WFGA providing a legal framework. But we need to do more than promote our work – we also need stronger collaboration to develop new technologies, infrastructure and behaviours; and our teaching needs to reflect this approach. If we seize these opportunities, Wales can help to shape global discourses.

In their discussions, participants noted that the greatest priorities for universities are often seen as league tables, TEF, REF and the capture of research funding. This is particularly important in light of the Welsh sector's under-funding compared to England. Equally, potential students, especially from abroad, are influenced by these factors. However, it is a mistake to see such 'tangible' goals as separate from 'intangible' dimensions of identity, behaviours and values. The latter are a significant part of the soft power that universities can exercise.

The UK higher education brand is well respected worldwide, so Wales must capitalise on this reputation (and there is a need for better political cooperation between Welsh and UK governments). Wales and its HE sector also have distinct characteristics, which can be highly beneficial when articulated effectively on the international stage.

What are these characteristics? Participants noted that:

- Among international students, Wales has a reputation for a strong sense of community – a welcoming place with good relationships; a place in which people can thrive
- Wales is a small nation, meaning that many alumni feel a sense of connectedness to the nation as a whole (which is not the case in England); there is the potential to work with other small nations to develop this theme
- We have expertise in working bilingually and multilingually, with the Coleg Cymraeg reflecting our universities' shared goals in this area

- The WFGA gives Wales the ability to tell powerful stories about addressing climate change and translating UN goals into action; there is potential to develop the idea that when students come to Wales, they ‘live’ the values of the WFGA then take them back to their home countries
- While Welsh institutions will inevitably compete with each other, they also – due to the sector’s small size – have a unique opportunity to work collaboratively to develop international partnerships

Global Wales offers a powerful vehicle to promote Wales’s distinct nature alongside the excellence of its institutions. Its work could be extended to create a wider collaborative space, with institutions uniting behind the ‘collective competitiveness’ of Wales. This will require a maturity of approach, recognition that every institution has something to offer, and a shared vision. The GW4 consortium model (Cardiff, Bath, Bristol and Exeter) may provide some inspiration.

Universities can also do more to capitalise on the value of their international students. They should be seen as active partners and involved in everything universities do. Consulting students on their experiences of Wales, and on the messages that resonate with them, will help to differentiate the sector’s promotion in international markets.

Visit Wales uses an annual theme (e.g. Adventure) to promote Welsh tourism, and there is potential for the HE sector to do so too – or perhaps to unite with Visit Wales to agree a common theme. There may be useful lessons from similar initiatives in Scotland.

### **How can Welsh institutions work more effectively with international partners?**

**Professor Phil Stephens** (Cardiff University) outlined Wales’s success in international research collaboration. Wales ‘punches above its weight’ in terms of research outcomes, but it is an ongoing challenge to recruit the best researchers to work in Wales. This leads to better papers, higher income and increased impact. To achieve this, we need to choose our international partners carefully and invest in these relationships so that they enhance both parties’ reputations. We also need wider strategic partnerships, encompassing city region deals and other stakeholders. As a small nation, institutions in Wales can take advantage of their closeness to government and national institutions, as well as the strong potential for whole-population studies.

**Mark Cadwallader** (University of South Wales) noted that effective international partnerships take time to develop, and should be seen as long-term ventures. There are several factors involved in making a university attractive enough to be a ‘partner of choice’ for institutions overseas. Mutual aims must be identified, trust and confidence established, and a shared purpose articulated. USW’s Dubai campus is one example of where this approach has been fruitful. There is the potential to expand such partnerships so that the Welsh side of the partnership represents collaboration between several institutions.

Participants noted that again, Wales has distinctive features that should prove attractive in international partnerships. We are well placed to collaborate with other small nations and perhaps be a hub for relevant funding proposals; and our experience as bilingual nation is important.

It would be helpful to join up universities’ work with the Welsh Government’s trade and investment strategy. The potential for joint working is strong, given the Government’s relatively small size. Universities should also take advantage of Welsh and UK Governments’ international offices and missions. The British Council, which has 120 offices worldwide, can provide excellent access to local networks.

To make the most of these opportunities, there is further scope for collaboration between universities on several levels – for example, a combined public relations hub for all institutions, or a shared funding system for international engagement. However, it could provide difficult to balance the different strengths and priorities of the eight universities; and there can be conflict between institutions’ desire to collaborate and their need to pursue individual international activities. Global Wales can capitalise on these opportunities, but pursuing closer collaboration will require Vice Chancellor level support in all universities.

Several other practical points were raised. There is a need for better administrative support for the details of international partnerships, such as visas, travel and housing requirements. Mentoring of those new to international work, by those experienced in this arena, can be helpful. Institutions should also be mindful of the ethical questions raised by international partnership working, and may need to establish ‘ethics panels’ to address this.

Finally, it would be helpful to have a better picture of current international working. An audit of joint publications would help develop a list of strong international partners both within and outside Europe. Other data sources, such as staff insurance requests, can also help to build a picture of where university personnel are active. And the QS international league table provides testimonials which can help institutions understand how others view them.

### **How do people in Wales benefit from universities’ international connections?**

**Dr Maggie Parke** (Universities Wales) noted that sometimes, Welsh universities do not take full advantage of ‘the destination’ – highlighting the unique attributes of Wales, its history, languages and Celtic connections. Citing the example of Global Wales’ strategy for attracting international students from the United States, she noted the appeal of a ‘Wales first, university second’ approach. Students, staff and alumni all have a role to play in this strategy. The diverse and culturally integrated nature of our university campuses is both beneficial for local communities and attractive as a recruiting tool.

**Professor Cara Aitchison** (Vice-Chancellor of Cardiff Metropolitan University) closed the event with reflections on how universities can use international connections to improve engagement with their local communities. A strongly values-based approach is vital. She noted that international partner institutions played a vital role. It is not enough to simply offer degree programmes in other countries – collaborative events, community projects and student mobility from Wales all contribute to a more dynamic relationship between communities in Wales and other countries. Equally, international students in Wales are involved in local community teaching programmes; and the Universities of Sanctuary programme provides scholarships for asylum seekers in the UK. All of these initiatives can tie in with the image of Wales as a small, resilient, globally responsible nation.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The international dimension is vital to the success and impact of the higher education sector in Wales. Equally, the sector makes a very important contribution to Wales’s international projection.

At an individual level, our institutions must keep developing their competitiveness in an environment dominated by league tables, REF and other measures of excellence. The academic offer remains paramount – in terms of teaching quality, the value of qualifications, research reputation, facilities and more. Stronger collaboration with industry is needed to capitalise on these aspects. It is also important that Wales draws on the strengths of the UK HE brand and makes the most of the UK Government’s international activity.

But we need to do more – building on the Global Wales initiative to produce a compelling, dynamic narrative about the unique attractions of Wales. This should draw on the intangible benefits of life here – the welcome of friendly, inclusive communities; the sense of connectedness to Wales as a small nation; Welsh culture, bilingualism and natural attractions. It should also emphasise Wales’s emerging leadership in addressing the climate crisis and delivering on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The unique Well-being of Future Generations Act is a particular asset here, and can drive international recruitment of the best researchers across many disciplines.

To achieve this improved projection of Welsh HE, several suggestions were put forward:

- The sector should make a virtue of its small size by increasing cooperation between the eight universities – doing more to promote Wales and Welsh interests, jointly alongside the interests of their individual institutions. Specific consideration should be given to greater alignment of funding applications and jointly developed international partnerships.
- International students should be seen more consistently as partners in the projection of Wales. They should be actively involved in all aspects of university life, their experiences taken into account, and their views considered when planning marketing activities in different countries.
- The sector should make better use of UK-wide institutions, such as the Foreign and Commonwealth Officer, the BBC, the Department for International Development, and the British Council’s global network of offices. (Equally, those bodies need to better reflect the distinct attributes of Wales in their work.)
- Further consideration should be given to harnessing the soft power of the alumni of Welsh universities who live in other countries, building on the work of Global Wales in this area. The potential for a collaborative all-Wales alumni association should be explored, as well as opportunities to enrich our sector by bringing talented individuals to Wales for short periods.
- Universities should increase the involvement of international students and researchers in their civic mission activities in Wales.

To inform the above recommendations, a national audit of current international working would be helpful.

All of these proposals are made in the context of the significant challenges posed by Brexit and Covid-19 (which was just emerging as an issue at the time of the conference), on top of existing disparities between the Welsh sector and other parts of the UK. The sector will need to redouble its efforts to lobby UKRI and UK Government for a level playing field for research grant capture, satisfactory arrangements for the proposed Shared Prosperity Fund, and a firm British involvement in Horizon Europe. If the last proves elusive, the Welsh Government should press for Welsh links.

The Welsh Government’s International Strategy and the and UK Government’s shaping of Britain’s new global role provide opportunities for universities to be more proactive. Pressing the objectives will be challenging and is a longer-term venture. But it is desirable, necessary to react to change and should be beneficial. Success will require increased cooperation at many levels, including between governments and with organisations.