



Submission on the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill 2021

16 December 2021

The Society welcomes the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill, and we hope that the legislation will provide a strong and sustainable framework for the tertiary education and research sector of Wales to respond and adapt to the various changes, challenges, and opportunities it will face in the next decades.

Higher education institutions play a critical role in the research ecosystem of Wales and it is vital that the research sector is primed and ready to benefit from the UK Government's increase in investment. We believe that the Bill is an opportunity to move the sector in Wales into a stronger position to benefit from the R&D levelling up agenda.

In recognition of the importance of research, we would like to see a stronger commitment to supporting research activity on the face of the Bill, in line with the intention and ambition set out in the Explanatory Memorandum for the Welsh HE sector to deliver world-leading research. We would also like to see within regulations an expectation that the Commission and the Research Innovation Wales Committee would have an observatory function to work to identify areas in which to build capacity.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Learned Society of Wales is grateful for the opportunity to provide initial comments on the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill. The Society is Wales's national academy for arts and sciences and has contributed to discussions about higher education, research and innovation policy during the last decade, including the 2016 Hazelkorn review and the subsequent consultations.
- 1.2. The Society welcomes the Bill, and we hope that the legislation will provide a strong and sustainable framework for the tertiary education and research sector of Wales to respond and adapt to the various changes, challenges, and opportunities it will face in the next decades. The proposed Commission should facilitate the delivery of excellent teaching and learning, quality in research and knowledge transfer, and effective and meaningful engagement between higher education and wider society.
- 1.3. Research from Welsh universities is having a transformational effect on society as well as the economy. Universities in Wales carry out research into a wide range of areas including bilingualism, culture, policing, flooding, climate change, dementia, childcare, mental health, public housing, renewable energy, community violence, poverty, transport management, cancer and agriculture.

- 1.4. These activities are making a vital contribution to the goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act. The significance of research and innovation goes beyond economic impact – research from Welsh universities generates ideas and inventions which make a difference to people’s lives in Wales, the UK and the rest of the world.
- 1.5. Our comments consider the aspects of the legislation most relevant to research.

2. Context

- 2.1. The research funding landscape is complex and rapidly changing; some levers fall within the remit of the devolved government others are reserved and the sector in Wales occupies a space which has to negotiate these different planes of policy and funding.
- 2.2. The 2020 [Research and Development roadmap](#) outlined the UK government’s vision and ambition for science, research and innovation. This has since been supplemented by a UK [Innovation Strategy](#), and a [Research and Development People and Culture strategy](#).
- 2.3. The [HM Treasury’s Comprehensive Spending Review 2021](#) recently made the commitment to increasing R&D funding to £20 billion by 2024-25, a 35% increase on current funding levels. The forthcoming UK Government White Paper on Levelling Up will also outline a plan to ensure that an increased proportion of government spending on R&D over the next three years is invested outside the Greater South East of the UK. If achieved, this will see several billions of pounds of additional funding outside the golden triangle and go a long way to addressing the previously identified deficit, as noted in Thomas Forth and Richard A.L. Jones’s [The Missing 4 Billion: Making R&D work for the whole UK](#) report for Nesta, 2020.
- 2.4. The Nurse Review of the research, development and innovation organisational landscape will also likely prompt further shifts in UK government research funding policy and new or expanded schemes within UKRI.
- 2.5. Higher education institutions play a critical role in the research ecosystem of Wales. It is vital that the research sector in Wales is primed and ready to benefit from this increase in investment and we believe that the Bill is an opportunity to move the sector in Wales into a stronger position to benefit from the R&D levelling up agenda.

3. Timeframe and implementation

- 3.1. The developments at a UK level outlined in paragraphs 2.1 – 2.5 above will require input from the regulator in Wales to help shape UK-wide schemes and policies and ensure that they are appropriate to the needs of the Welsh sector as HEFCW do at present. It is important that there is adequate provision to ensure that there is a strong voice for the Welsh HE sector in critical discussions regarding developments in UK wide research funding schemes, and that HEFCW’s knowledge, influence and good working relationships are maintained.
- 3.2. Staged implementation of the work and function of the Commission would be welcomed, and it is important that arrangements are made to ensure sufficient capacity to deliver both a smooth transition and a continuity of provision and representation.

- 3.3. There is never a 'good' time to introduce reform as a degree of disruption is unavoidable. However, this legislation has been years in development and as the tertiary education and research sector recovers from the disruption of the past two years, it is an opportune moment to work to future-proof the sector. It could be a catalyst to strengthen the research base and further advance knowledge, increase provision of apprenticeships and life-long learning opportunities for a workforce that will face many changes, and nurture collaborations to provide the society and economy of Wales with better resources and greater resilience to face future challenges.
- 3.4. Wales can, and must, invest now, to ensure that the sector can be more competitive and sustainable in the near future.
- 3.5. We do not expect any cost impact, as we expect that funding would not be diverted from research budgets to establish and set up the Commission.

4. Strategic duties

- 4.1. We broadly welcome the strategic duties as listed in the Bill and appreciate that HE research and innovation is woven through many of them, both explicitly and implicitly.
- 4.2. We are pleased by the inclusion of the promotion of civic mission, as there is scope for more strategic activity in that field, with significant potential for more place-based research and innovation which could benefit local economies and communities. We also see potential within the duties for further development of Wales Studies.
- 4.3. However, we would like to see a stronger commitment to supporting research activity on the face of the Bill, in line with the intention and ambition set out in the Explanatory Memorandum for the Welsh HE sector to deliver world-leading research.
- 4.4. **We recommend that the addition of a specific strategic duty to support and fund research would demonstrate a strong commitment to, and recognition of, the importance of research to the economy of Wales and to Wales's image as a 'small smart nation'**. It would also function to further protect research funding within the Commission (see section 6).
- 4.5. A strategic duty for research and innovation, potentially covering fundamental or basic research, would also ensure that the Commission and the Research Innovation Wales Committee are able to encourage and support research activity, which could catalyse developments in various areas of scholarship.

5. Academic freedom

- 5.1. We recognise the progress within the section on academic freedom since the Draft Bill. However, further development is needed as in its current form the duty seems to extend to higher education provision and does not explicitly mention research and innovation. We appreciate that this is likely an oversight but feel that it should be addressed in order to strengthen this responsibility and commitment.

6. Funding for Research and Innovation

- 6.1. Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a critical role in the research ecosystem of Wales. HEIs will have a significant role in delivering the ambitions of the UK R&D Roadmap, and the R&D aspects of the levelling up agenda, including bringing together industry and others to develop and deliver regionally-based excellence-driven innovation, skills training, and knowledge creation.
- 6.2. The Commission and the Research and Innovation Committee will have an important role in developing research capacity in the tertiary education sector. It will distribute the un-hypothecated Quality Related (QR) block grant funding stream as part of this function, as well as the Research Innovation Wales fund.
- 6.3. QR funding provides the foundation on which the competitive, project-based funding streams from other sources depend. A strategic duty on research and innovation, potentially covering fundamental or basic research, and a balanced funding duty would function to recognise and protect this funding.
- 6.4. The QR block grant is a basic building block for research activity across all disciplines and is part of the crucial 'dual support' system enabling universities and researchers to compete to access large grants from UK and European Research Councils. It is an investment that helps to ensure that Welsh universities can be strong fit and agile to compete with universities across the UK for a share of research investment equivalent to the annual budget of the Welsh Government, and to bring that back to Wales.
- 6.5. An unintended consequence of the creation of the Commission could be that the existing emphasis on and recognition of the importance of QR could be diluted. The QR fund must be protected in line with the recommendations of both the Diamond and Reid Reviews, and attempts should be made to increase the funding in line with developments in Research England to ensure that the sector in Wales can remain competitive, as importantly, QR provides universities with the platform to secure a greater share of competitively awarded research funding.
- 6.6. QR also provides vital support to research within subject areas in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) and STEM, from English literature and history to theoretical physics and mathematics.
- 6.7. Research in HASS shapes the way we address significant economic, social and environmental challenges, informing policy and practice and we welcome the recognition of the role of HASS research. Parity of esteem is important, and needs to be monitored.
- 6.8. The Bill provides for research priorities to be identified by Ministers and the Commission, which could lead to research funding being diverted to mission / directed projects. While these mission based funding schemes do have an important role, we would argue that these should be developed in addition to the core unhyphothecated research grant.

7. Promoting Research activity

7.1. [Research from Welsh universities has a transformational effect on society as well as the economy.](#)

These activities make a vital contribution to the goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act. The significance of research and innovation goes beyond economic impact – research from Welsh universities generates ideas and inventions which make a difference to people’s lives in Wales, the UK and the rest of the world.

7.2. As such we welcome the expectation that the Commission must promote awareness and understanding in Wales of the research and innovation activities it funds. Recent work by the [Campaign for Science and Engineering \(CaSE\) in this area](#) outlines how “research is everywhere – its products are in every home and office, and its producers found in towns, cities and field sites across the UK. Research is on people’s doorsteps”. However, research activity can be seen as elitist, abstract or remote and its significance can be little understood by the wider public.

7.3. The experience of being witness to the development of vaccines during the coronavirus pandemic has potentially started a shift in understanding, as people have seen research in action. As public funding is hopefully increased in research activity in Wales in line with developments at a UK level, there will be more public scrutiny, and a greater need to advocate and explain how research makes our everyday lives better. The Commission will have an important role in helping the sector to better promote why research matters, and to showcase the wide range of opportunities available within the tertiary education sector to facilitate careers in research within universities, industry and the public sector.

8. Opportunities

8.1. We would like to see within regulations an expectation that the Commission and the Research Innovation Wales Committee would have an observatory function to work to identify areas in which to build capacity. A long-term strategic view is needed, not solely based on student choice, market demand and immediate research priorities, in order to ensure that an awareness of the needs of the knowledge base is maintained.

8.2. Sustaining healthy, innovative and evolving disciplines will help to meet national skill and knowledge needs, within both further and higher education and the research base and increasing funding for research would benefit the quality of life of the people and future generations of Wales.

8.3. Given the scale and scope of the proposed reform, monitoring and reviewing progress of the work, capacity and effectiveness of the Commission will be essential. Evaluation research of the organisation and its structures should be commissioned from the very start to better ensure that the Commission is able to adapt to needs. This evidence-based research would be invaluable to assess the work and function of the Commission, and for transmitting its successes to tertiary sectors beyond Wales.

policy@lsw.wales.ac.uk