

Higher education reconfiguration

Introduction

The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) decided in 2002 that in order for the higher education (HE) sector in Wales to reduce overhead costs, and to attract research investment, it would require reconfiguration. The detail of this proposal is available in the WAG policy document *Reaching Higher*ⁱ. In the same year, in response to *Reaching Higher*, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) launched the 'Reconfiguration and Collaboration' (R&C) fund to support the reshaping of the sector in the interests of achieving major performance gains and enhanced competitiveness.

During the first phase of this fund, 2002-04, the fund supported the merger of Cardiff University with the University of Wales, College of Medicine, in 2004. In 2004 the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning reiterated the WAG's commitment to the reconfiguration of the HE sector. Following an appraisal of the sector's performance, HEFCW launched the second phase of the R&C fund, to run from 2004/05 until further notice.

In reporting to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Committee in 2006, HEFCW voiced concerns about meeting the targets set by the WAG in *Reaching Higher*. Specifically targets relating to reducing administrative costs and attracting more research fundingⁱⁱ.

Recent progress on the reconfiguration agenda has included the merger of Merthyr College and the University of Glamorgan, a strategic alliance being formed between the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and the University of Glamorgan, and the establishment of several research and enterprise partnerships.

Progress since 2002

Successful Merger

On 1 December 2004, Cardiff University and the University of Wales, College of Medicine formally merged into one institution with more than 5,000 staff, 22,000 students and an annual turnover of £300 million.ⁱⁱⁱ

Future of 'Post-92' Higher Education in South East Wales Report

On 11 May 2005, HEFCW published a major report on the future of 'post-92' higher education in South East Wales. The report was commissioned from independent consultants, Professors Sir Ron Cooke and John Bull, both recent vice-chancellors of York and Plymouth universities respectively. The report offered a vision of how the University of Glamorgan, the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC) and the University of Wales, Newport, working together and building upon existing strengths, could develop distinctive and ambitious teaching-led provision.

Breakdown of Merger Discussions between the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff and the University of Glamorgan

HEFCW commissioned a review of the terminated merger discussions between the University of Wales institute, Cardiff (UWIC) and the University of Glamorgan (UoG)^{iv}. The review concluded that:

"The UWIC/UoG proposed merger was based on sound principles which would have brought significant benefits to learners and to the people of Wales in accordance with WAG policies. The opportunity to create a large post-1992 institution in Wales was viewed by all parties to be a major step forward in order to remain competitive in the UK and international higher education arena. It is disappointing to note that the termination of the merger discussions did not occur because the principles which led to the initiation of discussions were proved to be unsound but because the institutions found themselves unable to agree on deal breakers and on points of detail, and because, at strategic level there was a mutual breakdown in trust and confidence between the two institutions. The UWIC governing body saw these issues as fundamental enough to justify the termination of merger discussions."

Merger of the University of Glamorgan and Merthyr College

The merger of Merthyr Tydfil College with the University of Glamorgan was effected on 18 May 2006^v. It was the first merger between a further education college and a higher education institution in Wales and follows a long history of close co-operation and merger discussions between the two institutions. The aim of the merger is to enable the College to benefit from the staff expertise and resources of the University of Glamorgan and is intended to allow the joint development of quality provision. It is intended that this merger should facilitate a smoother transition from further education to higher education.

The success and impact of this merger will be monitored by the WAG over the next three years in partnership with the HEFCW.

Research Reconfiguration and Collaboration

On 8th February 2006, Jane Davidson, AM, Minister for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills announced financial support of approximately £16million over 5 years for 2 significant proposals for support for research under the reconfiguration and collaboration strategy^{vi}. These two proposals approved are for the establishment of:

1. Research and Enterprise Partnership – University of Wales Aberystwyth and the University of Wales, Bangor^{vii}

The Research and Enterprise Partnership will ensure that international quality multidisciplinary research is strengthened in two institutions, the University of Wales Aberystwyth and the University of Wales, Bangor, securing a long term research base in mid and north Wales. Central to the development of the Partnership will be the establishment of a Joint Research Management Board and the appointment of a Director to oversee the collaboration and research strategy development.

The Partnership will initially develop four joint research centres. These are:

- ◆ the Centre for Catchment to Coast Research,
- ◆ the Centre for Integrated Rural Environment Research,
- ◆ the Centre for Advanced Functional Materials and Devices Research and
- ◆ the Institute for Mediaeval and Early Modern Studies.

The Joint Research Management Board will also identify further subject areas for a second phase of research collaboration and integration between the two institutions.

2. A Wales Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience

The Institute is being created by drawing together and building on existing excellence. The development of the Institute will bring together the existing 5* rated psychology departments at University of Wales, Bangor and Cardiff University with the 4 rated Department at University of Wales, Swansea. By integrating existing groups at the partner institutions, the Institute will draw together a current total of 246 academic/ research staff and PhD students with significant grant capture.

Strategic Alliance between the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and the University of Glamorgan

The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (RWCMD) and the University of Glamorgan have formed a strategic alliance. The alliance has succeeded in winning almost £13 million Reaching Higher funding to invest in performance and rehearsal facilities and will ensure the RWCMD's long term financial sustainability.

Useful links

HEFCW – www.hefcw.ac.uk

Higher Education Wales – www.hew.ac.uk

Further information

For further information on any aspect of higher education, please contact Alun Davidson, Members' Research Service on ext. 8639 alun.davidson@wales.gsi.gov.uk

ⁱ Welsh Assembly Government, *Reaching Higher: higher Education and the Learning Country, A strategy for the higher education sector in Wales*, March 2002 <http://www.hew.ac.uk/downloads/hestrategy.rtf>

ⁱⁱ National Assembly for Wales, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills committee, (ELLS(2) 11-06 paper 5), *Higher Education Reconfiguration*, 5 July 2006

<http://www.wales.gov.uk/cms/2/EducationLifelongLearningAndSkillsCommittee/AgendasPapersTranscripts/6ae324d6acc02a51cb49a85bf6fe2a38.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ University of Wales, College of Medicine website

<http://www.uwcm.ac.uk/>

^{iv} HEFCW statement, 8 October 2004

http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/SectorManagement_Docs/HEFCW_statement_on_Review_of_the_Terminated_Merger_Discussions_Between_UWIC_and_University_of_Glamorgan.pdf

^v National Assembly for Wales, Minister's Report to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills committee, ELLS(2) 09-06(p1), 7 June 2006 <http://www.wales.gov.uk/keypubassembledlearnskills/content/0906-paper1-e.htm>

^{vi} Welsh Assembly Government, Press Release, £16 million funding for major research developments in Wales, 8 February 2006

http://www.wales.gov.uk/servlet/PressReleaseBySubject?area_code=37D4D35C000B6B0C000005D400000000&document_code=N00000000000000000000040783&p_arch=null&module=dynamicpages&month_year=2|2006

^{vii} National Assembly for Wales, Minister's Report to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills committee ELLS(2) 03-06 (p1), 8 February 2006, http://www.wales.gov.uk/servlet/EducationAndLifelongLearningCommittee?area_code=39EEFDE30004A6480000713800000000&document_code=N00000000000000000000000000000000040588&p_arch=post&module=dynamicpages&month_year=2|2006