



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Y Pwyllgor Archwilio
The Audit Committee**

**Dydd Mercher, 21 Ionawr 2009
Wednesday, 21 January 2009**

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cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee.
In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

Aelodau Cynulliad yn bresennol
Assembly Members in attendance

Lorraine Barrett	Llafur Labour
Eleanor Burnham	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Chris Franks	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Janice Gregory	Llafur Labour
Lesley Griffiths	Llafur Labour
Irene James	Llafur Labour
Bethan Jenkins	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Huw Lewis	Llafur Labour
David Melding	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Welsh Conservatives (Committee Chair)
Darren Millar	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Dr David Blaney	Cyfarwyddwr Datblygu Strategol, Cyngor Cyllido Addysg Uwch Cymru Director of Strategic Development, Higher Education Funding for Wales
Jeremy Colman	Archwilydd Cyffredinol Cymru Auditor General for Wales
Paul Dumblebee	Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru Wales Audit Office
Ian Gibson	Dirprwy Bennaeth, Uned Llywodraethu Corfforaethol, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Deputy Head, Corporate Governance Unit, Welsh Assembly Government
Yr Athro/Professor Phil Gummett	Prif Weithredwr, Cyngor Cyllido Addysg Uwch Cymru Chief Executive, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
Dr Dennis Gunning	Cyfarwyddwr Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau, Adran Plant, Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Director for Lifelong Learning and Skills, Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, Welsh Assembly Government
Yr Athro/Professor David Hawker	Cyfarwyddwr, Adran Plant, Addysg, Dysgu Gydol Oes a Sgiliau, Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru Director, Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, Welsh Assembly Government
Gill Lewis	Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru Wales Audit Office

we are discussing today is crucial to the future of Wales, not just for our education system, but for Wales as an economy.

[8] **Professor Gummatt:** Good morning, I am Phil Gummatt, chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. I have my colleague Dr David Blaney with me. Chairman, is it in order if my three colleagues sitting behind me slide forward a note from time to time, to ensure that I inform the Committee properly?

[9] **David Melding:** I am sure that you are properly briefed, but unless I see something disruptive I am unlikely to comment on it.

[10] **Professor Gummatt:** Thank you.

[11] **Dr Blaney:** I am David Blaney, director of strategic development at the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

[12] **Dr Gunning:** I am Dennis Gunning, I am director of skills, higher education and lifelong learning within David Hawker's department.

[13] **David Melding:** Welcome, gentlemen. Some of you are well acquainted with the operations of this Committee and the way we work. We have agreed a range of questions that cover the various issues, and establish or build on the evidence within this report. We can then issue our own findings. We will work around the Members, and I may ask someone to come in with supplementaries. Some of the questions are to all the principal witnesses, some are to one or the other. If you attract my eye and have something that adds to the evidence, I will bring you in as necessary.

[14] I will start with my general question. Please do not drill into too much detail, as that will be done as the session progresses. Professors Hawker and Gummatt, can you state your general reaction to the auditor general's report?

[15] **Professor Hawker:** First of all, we welcome this report. It gives us a balanced view of how the reconfiguration collaboration fund has operated—its successes, some of the barriers and problems that it has encountered, and some helpful suggestions for the way forward. What we need to bear in mind are the remarks that the Chair made earlier. Higher education institutions are autonomous. Neither the Welsh Assembly Government nor HEFCW can direct autonomous institutions to do what they do not want to do. What we can do is explain policy direction to them, and use funding levers to try to ensure that, where we do have an influence, it supports the direction in which policy needs to go.

[16] The process of investing through the fund was very much a process of dialogue between institutions and groups of institutions to try to look at how they can collaborate more effectively together, academically, in research and in administration. The report clearly bears out our own view that there have been some successes but that, equally, there have been some issues. Those are largely down to a number of things concerning institutional autonomy and, in some cases, relationships, vision and purpose. One of the conclusions in the report about the need to look at wider levers to effect change is a valid point, as is the issue of clarity and transparency. I will leave it there for the time being and invite your questions.

[17] **Professor Gummatt:** We welcome the report. It is an important area, one that we take seriously, and it occupies a lot of our time in the funding council. It is pleasing to see a number of positive comments in it. It is salutary to see a number of more critical comments. It is important to recall why this fund was established in the first place, as David Hawker has reminded us. It is not because collaboration is thought to be good in itself; it is thought to be an important means to the end of improving the performance of the higher education sector.

That is the goal toward which we are striving. I believe that we have made progress in that direction, and I look forward to supporting that proposition in the detailed questioning. I accept that there is more to do, as indicated, and we have already begun to act in light of the report. I will be happy to elaborate as we proceed.

[18] **David Melding:** Thank you for your introductory remarks.

[19] **Janice Gregory:** Good morning. In my question, I will refer to paragraph 1.3, and then move on to paragraph 1.4 to 1.22. Paragraph 1.3 states that £38.5 million had been dispersed from the fund by the end of March last year. Paragraphs 1.4 and 1.22 set out the benefits accrued from the merger and collaborative projects supported by the fund. Professors Hawker and Gummatt, do you think that the fund has delivered value for money, and could more have been achieved?

[20] **Professor Hawker:** Thank you for the question. It is always a difficult one to answer when you ask whether a particular investment has given value for money. Sometimes the benefits of that investment are not immediately apparent from the outcomes of the work. Looking at what it has done, certainly the three substantial mergers that have been achieved would not have been achieved without that investment. The support that HEFCW was able to give through the fund was absolutely crucial. Those three mergers are all important steps forward for the higher education system as a whole in Wales. The other collaborations that have produced a benefit need to go further, and will produce further benefit in the future. The point about the investment is that it has triggered a new way of thinking, in institutions working together. It is a slightly difficult question to answer from that point of view, but I think that the answer is positive in terms of how it has got the sector moving.

9.40 a.m.

[21] **Professor Gummatt:** Similarly, judging value for money on a matter where the benefits will come over a lengthy period of time depends on the point at which you stop the clock and have a look. It is reasonable to say already that where we have done one significant evaluation—on one of the oldest of those processes, although only four and a bit years, namely the merger of Cardiff University and the University of Wales College of Medicine—the outcome of the independent evaluation was extremely positive. It showed that much of the targets were passed or surpassed.

[22] If you look at the overall record since the fund began to operate, we have now had three mergers. That includes the HE/FE one between the University of Glamorgan and Merthyr Tydfil College of Further Education. We have got significant activity in south-west Wales, referred to, that is possibly unique—I do not know of anything like that anywhere else in the UK. We have had a quite modest rationalisation of subjects in the Swansea area as well as between Swansea and Cardiff. We have had a fairly significant amount of research collaboration—that is probably where most of the activity has taken place, other than the mergers. There has been some Wales-wide activity, such as on Welsh-medium provision and pay modernisation.

[23] In terms of value for money, interestingly, yesterday I was at a meeting with the chief executive of the Medical Research Council. We were discussing the future of medical research in Wales and what can be done to improve it. The theme of the meeting was collaboration, and how we can achieve a greater capture of grant funding from the Medical Research Council by encouraging more collaboration between the main players in medical research in Wales. He spoke in relation to the recently published results of the periodic review of research—what we call the research assessment exercise, which takes place every so often and is a major review, subject by subject, in all universities. One point that he made, quite unsolicited, was that people in the Medical Research Council and in the London universities

who regard themselves as dominant in the field of neuroscience had noted the performance of Cardiff and other Welsh universities. He said that people at University College London ‘gasped’, since they regard themselves as absolutely the top dogs in that area.

[24] In terms of your question, that is an area in which we invested a few years ago, by bringing together Cardiff, Bangor and Swansea universities in a Welsh Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience. It is always hard to prove cause and effect with such matters, but it was, nevertheless, encouraging to hear that statement about the dominance of Wales in that field, contrary to the expectations of many others.

[25] **Darren Millar:** One of the issues raised in the report is that the fund was established, in part, to deliver significant administrative efficiencies through collaborative working. Paragraph 1.27 says that the only project that has been designed specifically to deliver administrative efficiencies was the south-west Wales higher education partnership project. Despite that, there have been some efficiency savings through some of the other projects. That can be seen in other paragraphs.

[26] Professor Gummett, given that that was one of the specific issues flagged up to be looked for as an outcome through the fund, and one of the main reasons why it was established, why have you not done more to look for opportunities and to encourage applications to the fund for this specific sort of efficiency saving?

[27] **Professor Gummett:** I can see absolutely why the report says what it says and is phrased as it is. Other than one or two very small things, it is indeed the case that, under this fund, this is the only significant project taken forward where the headline statement explains that its purpose is to secure administrative savings. However, embedded within other projects, there is a great deal more aimed at securing administrative savings; it is just that people are not shouting about it and selling it in those terms. One reason for that is that using administrative savings to sell a new approach is not necessarily the most successful way of getting academic communities to rally around it.

[28] To take an example of a recently secured restructuring, what we are calling ‘a strategic alliance’ has taken place between the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and the University of Glamorgan. Again yesterday, in a conversation with the principal of the college, we were hearing about the state of play with their exciting plans for capital development on North road, where a new concert hall and other facilities will be built. We have been clear for some time that the college was in a difficult competitive position, because many conservatoires across the UK were re-equipping in all sorts of ways and ours was not, and that is a significant issue when it comes to attracting students. When considering how to help to move this forward, we faced an essentially administrative problem—and I would say that it related to administrative capacity rather than administrative savings.

[29] With a very small-scale higher education institution—and in saying that, I mean no disrespect to anyone involved—it is a bit like rebuilding a school or major capital development within one, in that it happens only once in a blue moon. It is therefore not surprising if the authorities in the school do not have a lot of experience of doing that. What we have been looking for is a way of placing a much stronger administrative arm around that college, so what is now being taken forward is very manageable indeed. For Glamorgan university, what we are talking about is not difficult.

[30] We now have a position in which the administration of the college is, essentially, in the hands of a much larger operating unit and administrative cash savings will come from that. However, I would contend that the more important thing is that it is now possible to significantly improve performance by being able to take forward a very important project with real safety, which we would previously have been unable to do.

[31] I could go on. If you look at Glamorgan university and Merthyr Tydfil College, which was a college that was not without its difficulties, you see that they are now running on a very different basis. I could say that what is going on between Lampeter and Trinity College, Carmarthen is similar, because it is significantly driven by the need to address very important administrative issues.

[32] I am sorry that this is a slightly lengthy answer, but the other thing that I would say, which takes me back to my starting point, is that selling significant change using the message that it will bring administrative savings is not an easy way to mobilise the troops in a higher education context.

[33] There are a lot of other things going on that are addressing administrative savings, so the question of which is the best way to address them and which channels are the most appropriate becomes a live one. For example, in Wales, we have the Wales International Consortium, which does a great deal of collective work on international student recruitment. Previously, that was not the case; it was done individually by institutions, and not as well as it needed to be. Separately from this fund, we have brought the institutions together and, for several years, we and they have co-funded a unit that does a lot of the preparatory work and marketing. Although cause and effect are hard to prove, the evidence suggests that international recruitment has gone up dramatically since that group was in place.

9.50 a.m.

[34] There is also the Welsh Higher Education Brussels office. Again, instead of each institution going in individually, we have an organisation that does it on behalf of the whole sector. We do a lot UK wide to seek administrative savings, and so it is not through collaboration solely within Wales. The student recruitment process or the IT infrastructure—a massive operation—is done on a UK-wide basis, with significant savings made in comparison with doing this individually. I could say more.

[35] **David Melding:** I suspect that the Member wants to say more, so I will give him the opportunity to do so.

[36] **Darren Millar:** I am afraid that you seem to be quite complacent about this and yet, as the report indicates, there may be significant opportunities to make savings on the back-office functions. I appreciate that, within other projects, savings are coming forward, and the report contains examples of those, but, given that this is a low-hanging fruit for some of the institutions to grasp at, should you not be doing a better job to try to sell this? I appreciate that you are saying that this is not a sales pitch, but, while that might be easy for some academics to grasp, I find it astonishing. It seems straightforward—merge some back-office functions, make some savings, and invest them in education and learning. Why can they not grasp that, and why are you not doing a better job of selling it?

[37] **Professor Gummatt:** I hope I do not appear complacent, as I certainly do not feel complacent. My response would be that the fruit hangs lower in certain areas. It is easier to mobilise the troops if you say, 'We will improve our research performance by working together with others, and, by the way, we will make some administrative savings while we are doing that', than if you say to them, 'We are having a wholesale campaign to reduce our administrative costs'. That is just how it is. People will be more excited about the possibility of improving their research performance or their delivery of teaching than they will be about being told to make administrative savings. We will get there; the only question is which route we take.

[38] **Darren Millar:** I would simply suggest that, if savings are being made, it will be

possible to invest them back into research facilities anyway. It would seem to me that you can still sell that message on the back of back-office function and administrative savings. However, I think that you have made your point.

[39] **David Melding:** I would say from the chair that you did give a long answer to the initial question, but a lot of the examples that you cited were not related to the fund. They were about the culture of HE rather than the actual use of this fund to encourage that sort of collaboration.

[40] **Professor Gummatt:** I agree that they were not. The point that I was trying to make was that there are other ways to skin this cat. Given that this fund is limited, we have to prioritise. We have many more proposals than we can afford to take forward, so the question will always be which are the most cost-effective and appropriate in raising performance. That is the main point.

[41] If you look in detail at our criteria—and let us take for example a research collaboration—you will see that we ask about administrative savings. It is an explicit element of the proposal. We will be asking them how they intend to save money and what they will do as a result of that saving. It is in the process, but we are coming at it from a different direction. We are also doing a lot of other things about administrative savings, although I will not give you further examples. The question relates to the balance of priorities within the overall portfolio.

[42] **David Melding:** Right, we will move on.

[43] **Lorraine Barrett:** Thank you very much. This is a question to Professor Hawker. Paragraphs 1.29 and 1.30 suggest that the fund can only be used to support projects in collaboration within the HE sector, despite the potential benefits of higher education institutions collaborating with bodies from other sectors. I am thinking particularly about the Assembly Government's 'Making the Connections' commitment here. Could you say something about why support from the fund was limited to collaboration between HE institutions rather than looking at other opportunities, as suggested in paragraph 1.30? This relates particularly to the merger of the University of Wales, Newport's libraries with those of the city of Newport, and the merger of various NHS bodies with other HE institutions.

[44] **Professor Hawker:** Yes, this is very much the flavour not just of the month but of the year. We are definitely moving closer to cross-sectoral and cross-regional collaboration, which brings together the benefits of a number of different areas of work into a whole. This has been growing and, when the fund was first initiated, that message was probably not as strong as it is now. You are right to pick up on it, and we are looking to broaden the scope of the criteria for the use of future funds of this nature so that we target exactly that. It is valid in relation to where it comes from.

[45] It demonstrates an evolution in thinking, not just within the educational sector but across a number of areas of public service. We know that the benefits of cross-sectoral collaboration far outweigh the institutional silo mentality that has characterised things in the past. I welcome this as a development and a step in the right direction, but you are right that that needs to be made more explicit in the criteria than it was in the first place, perhaps. I wonder whether my colleague, Dennis Gunning, would like to say something about the transformation programme, launched at the end of last year for the post-16 sector as a whole, which touches on higher education.

[46] **David Melding:** The point on the criteria was quite interesting. Let us focus on that.

[47] **Lorraine Barrett:** Yes, I was going to ask whether you would be amending the

criteria and whether you will make it clear to HE that you have done so and are allowing this.

[48] **Dr Gunning:** I might touch on that, Chair. I have a meeting next week with the council of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, at which we will discuss the transformation agenda.

[49] **David Melding:** This is the subject of another question, so let us stick to the criteria for cross-sectoral approaches.

[50] **Dr Gunning:** The other point worth mentioning is that collaboration is emerging between FE and higher education institutions particularly, and we encourage that. There are discussions around the proposed university for the Heads of the Valleys, relating to structural collaboration. Changes taking place that you will have heard about involve the Welsh College of Horticulture, as its assets are being transferred to Deeside College and Glyndŵr University. That is again, structural.

[51] There are also large numbers of collaborative arrangements at a curriculum level. The University of Glamorgan works very closely with a whole range of FE colleges on curriculum development. A further example would be Airbus UK's collaboration with Deeside College and Glyndŵr University, which provide very high-level training for Airbus. The climate has moved on since we set up the criteria, and these things now happen as a matter of course, so it is appropriate that we now review them.

[52] **Michael German:** May I move onto the next section and look at an area in which the collaboration fund has not achieved the objectives that you set? While I am aware of the background covered in the report, the back end of paragraph 1.33 contains some implicit criticism that the fund was not perhaps best used to achieve the objectives originally set. I am not certain whether the new strategic collaboration board receives funding from this fund or whether it comes from the internal pot of the Welsh Assembly Government, but I wonder whether Professor Hawker could tell us what the current state of play is. What are the strategic collaboration board's objectives, what will it seek to achieve, and what progress has been made?

[53] **Professor Hawker:** I will field that one to Dennis.

[54] **Dr Gunning:** You are absolutely right. This is an example of the use of the fund not achieving the objectives that we would have liked it to. It is also a good example—and the report picks this up—of the balance between strategic collaboration for Wales as a whole and the interests of individual institutions. It is a difficult balance to strike.

[55] As far as the current position is concerned, you will be aware that we set up a new board recently to return to the issue and see whether we could make progress. We appointed Professor Deian Hopkin, the vice-chancellor of London South Bank University, to chair that board. The board is made up of the vice-chancellors of the three institutions and representation from the department, with Deian Hopkin in the chair. A number of proposals for collaboration are now being discussed by the councils of the three universities, particularly a proposal on shared services, which takes us back to the administrative issues that were mentioned earlier, a proposal on collaboration on the university of the Heads of the Valleys, which is something that has already happened, but we are encouraging further collaboration on what is described as a social learning space, which is about sharing facilities—particularly access for students to IT—and collaboration on a campus in Barry.

10.00 a.m.

[56] So, there are specific proposals that have come from that board that are now being

developed and discussed by the councils. We have not funded those, in that they remain proposals, although we have funded the board for their meetings. If there are proposals that emerge from that discussion that need lubrication funding, if I can call it that, we would be very interested to look at that. What we are looking for now from the institutions is a business case for each of those proposals.

[57] **Michael German:** There is some interest here in the methodology that you have used to trigger and develop collaboration. The fund did not work, it was probably too directive, too centralist, and now you are looking at something more organic. You have excluded HEFCW from that board—perhaps you will explain why—and now you have returned to what Professor Gummett was just talking about, namely development that has come from the institutions themselves. Would that have been a better model to have followed in the first place and why have you excluded HEFCW?

[58] **Dr Gunning:** It might well have been. In a sense, it is a case of being wise after the event, but having reviewed the situation in south-east Wales, though we are very conscious of the fact that the first round did not achieve much progress, we felt it was worth another go. It is one of the most pressing areas for progress and an obvious one to tackle.

[59] As for membership of the board, we discussed this internally and felt that a very small board, comprising largely of vice-chancellors of the institutions, would recognise the need for progress and come up with suggestions on how to make progress. So, we kept it effectively as a vice-chancellors board, but with Deian Hopkin, a very well recognised vice-chancellor, as a neutral chair. You are right, it is an alternative approach and, who knows, if we had had other examples where the fund was not a sufficient incentive, we would have had to try other ways to make progress.

[60] **Michael German:** Presumably you would choose the fund if you find progress being made in this way.

[61] **Dr Gunning:** That is possible. Equally, there are things that we might fund ourselves from the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills. We will discuss that with Phil and come to the best conclusion as to how to fund them.

[62] **Professor Gummett:** On the exclusion of HEFCW—picking up directly from Dennis—to the extent that what emerges from this initiative is proposals to the reconfiguration and collaboration fund, we will be having to act upon those according to our normal processes. Therefore, it is arguably better that we are not part of this developmental process, because if we were, we would be making judgments on proposals to which we were party.

[63] **Michael German:** Let us move to the next section of this report, which deals with the merger between Lampeter and Trinity College. This is a different approach, it has resulted in collaboration at a high level, but will result in a development that is still the smallest in Wales. Is small a problem, or can you live with small?

[64] **Professor Hawker:** We can live with small if small is also efficient and provides value for money. There is nothing against small per se, but there is obviously an issue of critical mass and of maintaining and retaining quality. There is also the issue that Phil referred to earlier of the capacity to carry out large, strategic investment programmes and so on. It is not that small is necessarily wrong, but you need to recognise that with small size comes all those issues. You have to be credible in the way you deal with those issues.

[65] What we do not want is for the Welsh HE sector as a whole to go backwards in relation to international competition because it is based on a lot of very small units. If those

small units can collaborate effectively, and if they are high-quality units in their own right, they have a strong future. We also have to look, in the context of south-west Wales, at what Lampeter and Trinity have to offer and whether that offer makes sense in its own terms, as a self-standing institution independent of anything else. Clearly, the picture may change and there needs to be ongoing collaboration with the other HEIs in that area and indeed other HEIs across Wales that offer similar things—especially Welsh-medium higher education, which is a particular issue—and we need to look at those ongoing collaborations. On institutional autonomy, small does not necessarily mean bad. We need to look critically at the ability of those institutions to thrive.

[66] **Michael German:** Does HEFCW have the same view?

[67] **Professor Gummert:** Yes. This is a subject we are giving a lot of attention to at the moment, not least because of the responsibility we took upon ourselves to provoke the situation we now find ourselves in. Having become concerned with the situation at Lampeter, having agreed with the university that we would send in consultants to look at strategy and management, having had the conclusions from that and then having seen the governing body at Lampeter take some very rapid decisions about its senior management and then move into discussion with Trinity College Carmarthen, where we now have a very active discussion under way about the feasibility of merger, it is something that is very much at the front of our minds.

[68] It would still be a very small institution, you are right, but it is a step forward; we are moving in the right direction. It would not be the smallest in the UK, by any means, it would be a similar size to Winchester, Chichester and York St John—these are thriving institutions in England of a similar scale to what a combined Lampeter/Trinity College would be. Nobody is raising any questions that I am aware of about the viability of those institutions. So, if well managed and all the things David said, it should be okay. The other thing that we are saying to both Lampeter and Trinity, recognising that it will still be a very small institution, is that we want to see proposals that show how that new university would operate within the framework of the south-west Wales partnership.

[69] **Lesley Griffiths:** I will refer specifically to Glyndŵr University. As the report states, it has not entered into collaboration or merger with any other HE institution and has not been able to engage in any of the projects supported by the fund. Some have suggested that, because of its geographical position, it could collaborate with an institution over the border in England. How realistic do you think that is, given that we are a devolved nation?

[70] **Dr Gunning:** I pay tribute to Glyndŵr, because, from the position that it was in a few years ago to where it is now is a real sea change; the vice-chancellor, Mike Scott, has made significant progress on a number of fronts and it is now in a position where, with university status and a collaborative spirit, it has the possibility to be free-standing. We would have no problem with cross-border collaboration—we welcome that—and there are examples elsewhere of that happening, but we would have to say that Glyndŵr would want to be sure that it is self-standing in Wales as well and that collaboration is about enhancement, not about survival.

[71] One way forward that we are encouraging it with is in the context of the Welsh College of Horticulture, where it is one of the partners with Deeside College. It is interesting because that gives it access to the discussion between the four FE colleges in north-east Wales under the transformation agenda. We have the possibility of four high-quality colleges strongly connected to the local university and, given that that university has a strong mission towards vocational and applied higher education, there really is an exciting prospect there for north-east Wales. Not only is there a very vibrant and carefully linked strategic vocational mission, but also, geographically, a very powerful entity. The example that I gave earlier of

Deeside and Glyndŵr linking with Airbus UK, one of the biggest employers in Wales, gives them a very exciting future.

[72] **Lesley Griffiths:** Leading on from that, do you think it is capable of standing alone? The link with Airbus UK is one reason it might be able to survive so well.

10.10 a.m.

[73] **Dr Gunning:** It is strongly linked to the last question—with the transformation agenda, we are trying to discourage higher and further education institutions from seeing themselves as being in a little box of their own. There is a strong case for small institutions, FE or HE, if they are going to be small, to be very well connected. That means connected to employers, to further education and to schools so that there is a sense of a local size beyond the university itself and it will create a catchment area for the university. The university will still want to attract students from across the UK and internationally, but having a strong home area is crucial for a university like Glyndŵr, and it is approaching that position. For Wrexham, being a university town will be a very satisfactory outcome.

[74] **Professor Gummatt:** May I start by endorsing what Dennis said about the achievements at Glyndŵr? Now that it has a university title, it is in a much stronger competitive position than previously. One of the worries was over the title of the institute. The title was fine when it was established, but it has become increasingly surrounded by English institutions—Mike Scott once told me he has 12 English HE institutions closer than his nearest Welsh neighbour. It is in probably the toughest competitive environment, geographically, of any higher education institution in Wales. Having university title is very important because it puts it on the same footing, in status terms, as the University of Chester, which again was not a university until relatively recently.

[75] Going forward from that position, if the issue of cross-border collaboration arises, the position is reasonably straightforward. We have had discussions with the Higher Education Funding Council for England and have talked this through in relation to another case where there has been dialogue between two universities, one on each side of the border. We are very clear that we see no structural impediments. We have legislative requirements to abide by, but those do not present barriers. We can only fund higher education activity in Wales and the English council can only fund higher education activity in England, but we can each fund our own institution in a collaborative arrangement so that the funding is properly applied within the legal frameworks within which we operate. If, in so doing, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, fine—we see no structural impediment to working across the border.

[76] I might add that there is now a range of cross-border activities—not involving us, interestingly—but some universities, particularly Cardiff and Swansea, latterly, have announced two or three collaborative activities with universities in Bristol, Bath and Exeter in particular. Those are drawing upon various forms of UK funding and have encountered no particular problems. The key things are good, sound ideas and a demonstration of the benefit that will come from the investment that could be made.

[77] **Lesley Griffiths:** How viable do you think it could be as a stand-alone university?

[78] **Professor Gummatt:** It is tough and it is going to get tougher, because of that very competitive environment. However, it has survived a long time in that competitive environment without university title and if it is well managed and stays nimble and agile, it is better placed than it was. It will continue to need nimble, agile, skilful leadership in order to survive, but that is true of other institutions as well.

[79] **David Melding:** May I just clarify one point? I infer that you are saying that

institutions across the border could not merge—that would not be an appropriate model—but that they could do anything else. They could share back-office functions—administration, recruitment, payroll, even teaching and research—but there would still have to be some institutional identity at, let us say, Wrexham. How far could it go if it really worked?

[80] **Professor Gummatt:** It would be an interesting challenge, would be the short, but also quite serious, answer to that question. The prospect has not arisen, so I freely concede that it is not something to which we have given serious thought. We have been giving serious thought, however, to the prospect of a very substantial integration of elements, rather like in some of our research collaborations within Wales, but across the border instead. We do not see any problem with that.

[81] On one level, I think that it would be possible to have a cross-border institution. We would have to think carefully about how we manage accountability, about the flows of funding from the Welsh Assembly Government and from the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills in London. With ingenuity and care, I do not see why we could not manage that.

[82] **David Melding:** Dr Gunning has been indicating that he wishes to come in.

[83] **Dr Gunning:** It was on an entirely different point, on Glyndŵr University.

[84] **David Melding:** In that case, I will bring you back, but we will first move to Dr Blaney.

[85] **Dr Blaney:** The key to this is to secure good-quality provision for north-east Wales, and the institutional structures that underpin that is a separate issue, although closely related. The key, however, is to get good provision for the communities of north-east Wales, as for the rest of Wales. If that gives us difficult structural challenges, we are all for trying to address those.

[86] **David Melding:** Those were tentative but quite helpful answers. Let us return to Dr Gunning.

[87] **Dr Gunning:** I was going to say, building on my earlier comment about connectedness, that Glyndŵr University is also connected through the University of Wales network and so, given the changes in that network, I imagine that Glyndŵr will play an important and growing role in the University of Wales. We look forward to its being very active there.

[88] **Chris Franks:** I now move on to part 2 of the WAO report. I refer specifically to paragraph 2.7, where there is significant criticism of the assessment criteria, which came from three post-1992 institutions. Has the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales been applying different criteria to applications to the fund by rejecting applications that do not fit with the Government's view that the three institutions should be merged?

[89] **Professor Gummatt:** On the contrary. The reservations that appear to have been expressed by the institutions, as reported here, arise precisely because we have been applying the Assembly Government's policy, not because we have not. I would maintain that we have been applying consistent criteria—within the limits of human judgment. We have a panel and a process, and we work extremely hard to try to be consistent. We have an independent member who has no vested interest in anything in Wales to help us, and we take independent advice and so on.

[90] In respect of the three in south-east Wales, there is a particular dimension to this.

Following the attempts at merger between the University of Glamorgan and the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff and the ending of that process in 2003, as you will see in summary in the report, we conducted an audit review of what happened. We then commissioned work by Professors Bull and Cooke to look at the prospects for south-east Wales, and they made various recommendations. In the context of the discussions after that report was published, there was a clear statement from the First Minister that he expected the three institutions in south-east Wales, by which he meant Glamorgan, UWIC and the University of Wales, Newport, to plan their futures together. I think that I have it verbatim and I could send it on for the record, if you wish. Therefore, whenever we have had proposals from any of those three subsequent to that point, we have always asked how they satisfy the requirement that they plan their futures together.

[91] This is why I say that we have been applying Assembly Government policy. It is arguable whether that is adding further tests to those institutions that do not apply to others. I can see why they might say that. That point apart, we have been applying exactly the same criteria to them as we have to everybody else.

[92] **Chris Franks:** So, why has it not happened?

[93] **Professor Gummatt:** Why has what not happened?

[94] **Chris Franks:** Why have they not merged?

[95] **Professor Gummatt:** With respect, that is a different question.

[96] **David Melding:** That is slightly subjective.

[97] **Professor Gummatt:** We have been applying the criteria to the proposals, and the point that has been made in paragraph 2.8 was that we have been criticised for applying different criteria. We are saying 'No, we are not'.

[98] **David Melding:** I think that you have said that you are applying different criteria.

[99] **Professor Gummatt:** In that one regard.

[100] **David Melding:** It was a very clear answer. Do you want to pursue that point with Professor Hawker?

[101] **Chris Franks:** Yes, please. Is the Assembly Government still totally committed to the tripartite merger?

[102] **Professor Hawker:** Between the three institutions, do you mean?

[103] **Chris Franks:** Yes. For the sake of clarity, I am talking about Glamorgan, UWIC and Newport.

[104] **Professor Hawker:** When this process began, that is how the Assembly Government saw it: it wanted to see a merger of the three institutions. Clearly, that was not going to happen, for a number of reasons. The board that has now been set up is to ensure that, short of institutional merger, which can be done only by the individual boards agreeing to it, the three post-1992 institutions in south-east Wales will work very closely together in collaboration on academic work, research and regeneration activity as well as on administrative support. That is the thrust of the policy at the moment. If they subsequently came back to us and say, 'Yes, we would like to bring about a merger', we would be happy to look at that further, because that is where we started from. It is not, however, the Assembly Government's position to

instruct autonomous institutions to merge. We can persuade and discuss and look at the issues with them. We can encourage them to work very closely in collaboration, and we can have all those discussions about critical mass and mission and so on, which are essential, but we cannot tell them to merge.

[105] **Chris Franks:** No, I understand that. Can I tackle the question of money? Presumably, the Assembly Government is a substantial funder. There is a phrase, 'He who pays the piper plays the tune', so why is the Assembly Government not being more assertive?

[106] **Professor Hawker:** The Assembly Government can use its funding to support closer joint working on projects that take Wales forward. It is treading a fine line between something that is philosophically and mission-based to something that requires a particular institutional solution. We have to be very careful not to cross a line that impinges on the proper decision-making of properly constituted governing bodies. Having said that, yes, we have funding that we want to apply to help them to move towards much closer collaboration. I think, however, that that is as far as we can go in policy terms; otherwise I suspect we would be stepping over a line that we should not be stepping over.

10.20 a.m.

[107] **Chris Franks:** Okay. Is there an element of the institutions protecting their turf? Is there an element of their putting their interests above those of the students?

[108] **Professor Hawker:** That is a difficult question to answer. There is always a temptation in any organisation to close in and protect what you have. The whole thrust of our policy is to make them open up, work collaboratively and realise that the threats are more real if they close up than if they open out—in all sorts of ways. We are having that discussion, but we are working with people who occasionally feel threatened, and we need to work through that.

[109] **Darren Millar:** This question is directed at Professor Gummatt. An issue with any bid that comes forward to the fund is that it takes time, resources and a great deal of effort from the institutions involved to prepare their applications for submission. One issue that the auditor general has, rightly, picked up on is that lots of the institutions are suggesting that there is very little feedback on what constitutes a successful bid and why certain bids are rejected. They say that there is insufficient communication when a bid has been successful about the components that made it successful, and there are all sorts of problems communicating back to the institutions some of the lessons learned where a bid has been implemented and is now in the operational phase. Do you recognise that that is a problem that needs to be addressed? If so, what are you doing to address it so that, in the future, we do not find that a great deal of time, resource and effort has been lost?

[110] **Professor Gummatt:** I recognise that we can do better to explain what has happened and what we require. The report is quite positive about the explanations that we give about what we require. There are some very positive statements about the preparatory phases. The comments were more about what happens after decisions have been made. I accept that we can do a better job there. As for extracting lessons and so forth, we have built a programme of evaluation into all these projects. So far, that applies only to two—a plant has to have a little time to grow before you can pull it up and look at its roots. We have done two so far and, when we have published the results of more of those, it will then be appropriate to look at the general lessons emerging from them. With only two so far, however, and with very different characters, it is too early to do that.

[111] We give a lot of advice about what we require and the report is reasonably positive about that. The concerns are about clarity over the complete list of what has been funded. I

accept that, until recently, that has not been easily available. It has all been public information, but I agree that it has not been easily available in one place, so you could not easily go to one place and ask to see a list of everything. It is now available on our website. We have already acted in response to the concerns expressed in the report. We have looked at the material on our website in light of information about what has and has not been funded, and also to give clarity about what we are looking for in a good proposal and the indicators of a poor proposal. We have gone to some trouble to lay this out. As an illustration, we have a table on our website that specifies the criteria—they have always been in the public domain, as we have had public circulars out. All the institutions have them and they have always been on our website in an identifiable location. As well as these criteria stated in formal terms, we have now published a list of things that we would find reinforcing and positive and a list of things that we would find negative and undermining. For example, under the list of what is undermining, we say:

[112] ‘A bid for funding with no real sense of strategic priority to all partner institutions’.

[113] In other words, some seem rather more committed to this than others, and it is not very compelling if we see that. Another is:

[114] ‘No real sense that proposal will deliver greater benefits than partners operating individually, as a limited partnership or as a loose network’.

[115] That has been a characteristic of a number of the proposals that we have either rejected absolutely or sent back, with the invitation to come back to us, if they want to, having done further work. The further work, however, would need to satisfy us in respect of that particular point, namely that what would be achieved by it is more than could be achieved by getting on with working together in a loose partnership without any further action or funding from us. Quite a number have been like that, and we have said that we are not sure what the value added is from it, which is why we are not prepared to take it forward. We have not necessarily rejected it, but we have said to them, ‘If you want to, come back,’ but, very often, they do not.

[116] **Darren Millar:** The auditor general mentions the fact that you make available the broad criteria and you encourage people to make applications, but suggests that there may not be specific examples of the sorts of projects that might make successful bids, and that perhaps that is why there was an issue of clarity with some of the institutions that provided evidence to the auditor general. You say that you have taken action and that you have improved your website, for example. Are you now finding that you are receiving better-quality applications, or are you still rejecting the same number of applications? I appreciate that they may be few and far between but are they, by and large, of better quality?

[117] **David Melding:** The fund has been going since 2002, has it not?

[118] **Professor Gummatt:** Yes.

[119] **David Melding:** So, presumably, some experience has been built up.

[120] **Professor Gummatt:** Yes, but this report has not been published for very long. We have had to think about what to do and we have done it. Not very much time has elapsed, so the honest answer has to be that it is too soon to say. Perhaps in a year’s time or so, we will have a better sense.

10.30 a.m.

[121] **Darren Millar:** However, you have focused purely on developing the web materials,

so that people are able to access information and data about how to make a good quality application that is likely to be successful, rather than disseminating information in any other ways.

[122] **Professor Gummett:** We find that this is one of the most effective ways to disseminate information to universities. We make sure that vice-chancellors' offices and central offices know that that is where the material is. People regularly walk up to me and my colleagues at all kinds of meetings and say, 'We're thinking of starting such-and-such, is this something that could be considered?'. We will talk about it very informally, then say to them, 'Here is where you get all the information in one convenient place'. It is a very important mechanism for communicating with institutions. I do not mean to underplay it in any way at all. I would contend that putting it there is actually putting it in a very helpful place.

[123] **Dr Blaney:** The other dimension, when it comes to sources of advice, is talking to the officers at HEFCW. The report indicates that that mechanism is working effectively. We would expect—

[124] **David Melding:** At the pre-application stage, the report says that you are not in anything like as good a shape.

[125] **Dr. Blaney:** The point is about helping institutions to understand how to frame a good application. The most effective way of doing that is to have an iterative process with us, talking about their ideas and exploring those. They do indeed do that very effectively. It is important for a number of reasons: not only for them to understand what we are looking for, but also for us so to get a round understanding of what their proposal is about and where it sits contextually. We have had dialogue in the past where we have received expressions of interest that are far from convincing, but the problem has been not the project or the proposal but the way in which it is written. Having a dialogue is the most effective way of moving these things forward.

[126] **Darren Millar:** In addition to the web-based data that you have now made available—which seems to be a step in the right direction—what have you done to address the points in paragraphs 2.11 and 2.12, where four institutions said that they were unclear what constituted a bid that HEFCW would recommend to the Assembly Government? In paragraph 2.12, six of the nine institutions that answered the relevant questions considered the feedback that they received about unsuccessful applications to be either poor or very poor. They are pretty damning statements. What are you doing to give direct feedback to institutions that make a bid that is unsuccessful?

[127] **Professor Gummett:** We talk to them about it. I am interested in the opinion in 2.12, which says to me that we are going to have to talk more directly and, in some cases, possibly be a bit less polite when we give our feedback. If I would plead guilty to a particular charge, when I look at some of the feedback that we have given, it is that we have been too polite. So, I think that we sometimes need to be much sharper in what we say about the reasons why.

[128] There is a complex point to be made when it comes to talking about rejections. We do not reject vast numbers outright, in the sense of saying, 'Never darken our doors again'—although there are some in that category and at different stages. However, very often what we say is, 'We are not convinced by that proposal; if you want to come back, the kinds of issues that you have got to be able to satisfy us on are the following'. We can redouble our efforts to try to clarify what we are saying when we say these things and we will do that. Very often, things stop there and institutions decide that it is too difficult. After all, one of our criteria is that we want to see significant structural change. We do not want a loose coalition. If I take research as an example, we do not want people in two or three universities carrying on doing what they were doing before but with a little bit—

[129] **Darren Millar:** However, the question is how you relay that message back to the people making unsuccessful bids. What is clear from the auditor general's report is that that is not happening at the moment, and that you need to clarify and sharpen your message to make sure that it hits the mark. I think that you accept that, from what you say, but you have not yet planned any specific action to deliver it.

[130] **Professor Gummatt:** Yes, I have planned specific action, with respect—

[131] **David Melding:** To be less polite.

[132] **Professor Gummatt:** To be less polite and much more direct in what we say. That is the specific action. I cannot think what else to do, other than be as plain as we can.

[133] **David Melding:** We can reflect on that. The facts have been established.

[134] **Professor Gummatt:** If I may refer to paragraph 2.11, because the question was also about that, it is, in a sense, the discussion that we were having a few minutes ago, with the addition of Lampeter to the list of those that are not content with us. I do not find it hugely surprising that those whose proposals we turned down are not very delighted with the arguments that we gave to them.

[135] **David Melding:** Thank you, we will move on. Huw Lewis, you have the next question.

[136] **Huw Lewis:** Thank you, Chair. My question arises from paragraphs 2.17 to 2.24, which are all about the range of barriers that exist in terms of further collaboration in the HE sector. I am sure that you will agree that it is worrying reading. What occurred to me, while reading it, is that I have a great deal of sympathy for the work that you are undertaking, because, in many cases, you are herding cats, are you not? This is the feeling that I get, after six years of operating the fund and the rate of progress that we have seen. Without having to read between the lines of the report, it strikes me that the received opinion and the psychology of many of the institutions is a primary problem. If you have a refusal even to accept, on the part of most institutions, that there is such a thing as a Welsh HE sector—they are not comfortable with that idea—we really are starting from a problematic starting point.

[137] Furthermore, do you not think that the fund, in that context, is operating as a carrot, and that we do not have any kind of stick in terms of encouraging collaboration? What would you advise the Welsh Assembly Government to do? You have a HE sector that is in denial about its contribution to the Welsh public realm while, at the same time, it is happy to trouser the money from the Welsh public realm. It strikes me that this report has winkled out something rather fundamental, in that there is a dislocation, which has been the case for a minimum of six years, between the primary, fundamental aim of the Welsh Assembly Government and its desire to see HE serving the Welsh public and the attitude of HE itself towards that strategic priority. It has not moved forward.

[138] **Professor Hawker:** It is slightly difficult for me to answer that question, because I have only just recently arrived. The perception that I have is that a lot of good work has happened but, on the macro or strategic level, it has fallen short of what the Welsh Assembly Government really wanted to see happen. It raises the question, which is one of the recommendations in the auditor general's report, about the funding lever that we have through this fund. It is quite small compared with the generality of the core funding that the university sector receives. We need to look at how we apply the core funding in terms of the missions of individual higher education institutions being aligned with the strategic direction in which the Welsh Assembly Government wants to move. We will have to have some discussions about

that with Phil and his colleagues in the light of this report. I think that you have put your finger on a very important issue; it is something that we clearly need to address.

[139] **Dr Gunning:** To be fair to the institutions, they are in an interesting position in the sense that their governing bodies are charged with being dedicated to the interests of the institution, if I can put it that way. Therefore, we have a delicate balance, and want to work with the institutions as a sector. Higher Education Wales—the collective body for universities—works closely with us and with Phil and his colleagues. I discovered the original ‘Reaching Higher’ document in a filing cabinet today, which discusses the purpose of reconfiguration and collaboration. It states:

[140] ‘We envisage a multitude of inter relationships...a series of networks of excellence’,

[141] but talks about not being prescriptive. We are trying to work with institutions, particularly where they see a shared objective, and seeking to develop a sense of trust between them.

10.40 a.m.

[142] In some fields, for example in attracting international students, they continue to be very competitive, but getting them to work together, whether on shared services, as Phil mentioned for south-west Wales, or on things like research—for example, the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences that has been set up between Bangor and Aberystwyth universities—is slow. It is about building trust between institutions when they work together, to the point that they will then contemplate further moves.

[143] **David Melding:** Professor Gummatt indicated that he wishes to respond to Mr Lewis’s forceful point that splendid isolation is somewhat eroded by the public purse.

[144] **Professor Gummatt:** It does feel like herding cats; if you have not seen the video, then Google it, because it is a treat.

[145] There are two points to make on this. First, I would, with respect, go back to what I said at the beginning, which is that there has been progress. I listed the kinds of things that have happened in Wales and I could sharpen that a little bit by saying that I do not know of any region in England that has done as much in the past five or so years by way of collaboration, integration and merging between institutions as has happened in Wales; I say that in all seriousness. If anyone could show me a region of England that has done more than we have seen in Wales in the past five years, I would be grateful to be informed of it. So, it is not fair to say that there has not been progress. It is perfectly reasonable, on the other hand, to say that we might have wished to have seen more, but, relative to the UK, and certainly to England, there has been substantial, significant progress.

[146] Secondly, what is said in paragraph 2.22 needs some unpicking. I do not deny for a second—indeed I recognise—some of the statements here about rivalry and so forth, which is right. When some people say that they are unwilling to acknowledge the existence of a Welsh HE sector, I suspect that what they mean is a Welsh HE sector that is distinct from the UK, by which they mean that the market in which they work is a UK market. So, it is problematic if you are operating in that market to see a sort of wagons-in-a-circle, Welsh sector that is somehow distinct from the UK sector. That does not mean, on the other hand, that they are not responsive to local agendas; there is plenty of evidence that they are responsive to local agendas. We could develop that point.

[147] Finally, came the question of sticks and carrots, and if the carrot is not big enough or is not working, what about the stick? We have another important process going on at the

moment, which is the Jones review of the future of higher education in Wales. None of us can know what will emerge from that when the report is produced at the end of March, which I believe is now the deadline, and we cannot know what the Assembly Government reaction to it will be later on in the year. It would be surprising if it were not the case that part of that process would be to try to develop steps towards specifying more clearly the relationship between what the higher education sector delivers for Wales and the money that it gets from Wales. I do not doubt that it is possible to make that case, but there is a tension here in relation to the positioning of the Welsh higher education sector within the UK framework. That tension centres on having to demonstrate that the money that comes from the Welsh purse is being used in ways that are responsive to the aspirations of Wales. However, every pound that is spent in that way must also be spent in a way that maintains the competitiveness of those institutions on the UK platform—if not wider. There is a tension in managing that, and I suspect that some of the language was probably not very adroitly chosen by institutions in speaking to the persons doing the review and that has come forward in this way.

[148] **David Melding:** I will now go back to the Member. I know that some witnesses feel that they could add a bit more; we will not leave this sensitive area until you have had the opportunity to respond further if, after Huw's supplementary question, you still want to add something.

[149] **Huw Lewis:** I think that these are honest answers. I acknowledge—as we all would—that there has been progress. However, many of us, as Members, would continue to be alarmed at the level of cosiness surrounding the debate. There is, among all the institutions that I can think of, an absence of any sense of urgency in putting these things right. I take on board the point you make about us outstripping the regions of England in terms of this way of working, and that is a good thing. I would also say, 'So we should be.' There is a problem of institutions understanding the reality of devolution and what it has meant; it still has not dawned on them. We should be aiming for a mentality in the higher education community that is more akin to that in the Scottish HE sector than to any of the regions of England. That does not disbar us, or them, from fighting on a UK platform in terms of competition. The Scots are doing very well, and they have had this mentality for 100 to 200 years. It goes back quite a while. So, part of the problem here is that we have an HE sector that is living in a pre-1999 universe, while Government has moved on.

[150] **Dr Gunning:** Phil mentioned that the Minister set up the review of higher education in Wales with Merfyn Jones in the chair. The review has looked at the developments in Scotland, which I think are very interesting. They are also considering the issue of carrots and sticks, or stick-shaped carrots, or whatever combination we might put together. Your question is at the heart of why we needed to refresh 'Reaching Higher' as a strategic document. I do not want to pre-empt a later question but it is interesting that, having issued the transformation document as one of the follow-up actions to the review of the skills strategy for Wales, we are now discussing potential mergers with a number of further education colleges. So, sometimes a new strategic document does trigger a new level of discussion and debate on these issues. Clearly we hope that the Jones review will do that.

[151] **David Melding:** Do any other witnesses want to respond to the very direct charge that you are too complacent on this agenda? The Minister said, in 2004, that you could start to use the core grant to accelerate this process and get institutions to think about it seriously, but it has not happened yet.

[152] **Professor Gummatt:** First, this is a very serious discussion and we take this point seriously. I recognise the undertones of the 'pre-1999' charge. I am not trying to deny that, but I also think it is fair to say that there has been a lot of movement, and also that the picture is patchy. It varies from one institution to another, and from one part of an institution to another part. However, that is not to say that there is not more to do. That is where the Jones

process will be important, because one of my hopes is that what ultimately emerges from it is a very clear statement of what the Assembly Government requires from higher education, against which we can then map delivery. I do not think that we are as clear as we could be about that, and that is partly why we have these discussions—because we sometimes talk across each other, in terms of what people think is being delivered compared with what particular expectations there are. Hopefully, we can improve on that.

[153] Secondly, in relation to Dennis's reference a moment ago to the agenda for transforming education and training, part of the evidence that will decide whether or not higher education institutions have moved on will depend on precisely how they respond to that document. I know that colleagues in the department, and we ourselves, are collecting information from institutions about how they intend to respond to it. I can say that there is significant activity being proposed by higher education institutions in relation to that agenda. Therefore, that seems to be an indication that we are moving on to a post-devolution Wales.

[154] Thirdly, Chair, I turn to your important reference to the requirement on us to use our core grant. We have been doing that—I will explain how in a second—but I must make the preparatory point that we have always to be conscious of balancing our existing commitments to students, particularly within institutions. When we alter funding, we do not want to do it too abruptly. That is not to say that we must not change it, but if we do it too abruptly it could be quite destabilising. Using small institutions—which we discussed earlier—as an example, that sort of behaviour can cause serious problems for them. If we shift funding around rapidly, they will not have time to plan how they can deal with it, bearing in mind that a full-time undergraduate degree lasts three years.

10.50 a.m.

[155] So, what have we been doing with our core grant? We have been gradually moving funding. The numbers are small but they are beginning to pick up a little, and we are moving towards the establishment of a strategic development fund. That fund has been driving some of the other activity that I referred to earlier—some of the collaborative things, for example, and some things within individual institutions. It was that fund that we used, for example, to support what was then the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, and is now Glyndŵr University. The fund was used to get it to the point where it was given its degree-awarding powers. Things were taking longer than we hoped and we were concerned about its competitive position, so we took a deliberate strategic decision that something needed to be done to strengthen certain aspects of the institution. We do a number of things with that fund, and the intention is to continue to increase it, but in ways that do not destabilise existing provisions. There is a balance to be struck in this. However, I would say we have moved—modestly, I concede—in that direction.

[156] **David Melding:** Huw, do you want to come back on that?

[157] **Huw Lewis:** No, I think that we have explored the issues quite well.

[158] **Chris Franks:** I would like to follow on from Huw's comments about the effective spending of our limited resources. I have been looking at the histogram on page 15 of 'Collaboration between Higher Education Institutions', which shows institutions' income in 2006-07. I was intrigued to see relatively small figures for the University of Wales, Newport, and for the University of Wales Institute Cardiff. However, there is what I would call a 'substantial spend' for University of Glamorgan. Is it not the case that Glamorgan can see that, sooner or later, it is going to be able to swallow up these institutions? So, why go for a merger? Also, are these two institutions afraid that they are going to lose out? I am not talking about the students, but the senior staff. They are going to lose out, so they will resist and, the whole time, we are spending public money without giving priority to the students in this very

small geographical area. Looking at the map on page 14, it can be seen that these three institutions are very close together. You have already been advised by one Member that you need to be more robust. Is your lack of robustness letting down our students?

[159] **Professor Gummatt:** Your question presumes that it is, but the substantive question here is about the relative scales of these three institutions. First, it is a matter of fact—and public record—that the University of Glamorgan has supported the proposition of a merger. It is not opposed to it. It is the only one of the three that has said that it is prepared to move, but it wishes to move quickly and not go into lengthy deliberative processes. That has been its position for several years. From its perspective, it has not wanted to get caught up in processes of debate that might or might not lead somewhere. It has said that very plainly. It is the other two that have reservations.

[160] Reference was made earlier to autonomy, but the other thing that I think is important here is the question of judgment. There are governing bodies that have legal responsibility for managing these institutions, and the question here is one of judgment and vision. Reasonable people can differ in the view that they take when they are presented with the facts about the changing world around them. That is the situation we find ourselves in. Our concerns about the issues of scale here are to do with the capacity of the higher education sector in Wales—and I do use that phrase myself—to remain competitive. Part of what that means is that they have to be innovative, and part of what that means is that they must be able to afford to take risks. Not everything will work. Our concern about the institutions to the right-hand side of that histogram is that they have much more difficulty in taking risks, because the consequences of something going wrong, of a new scheme not working, can be much more significant.

[161] I would say that what we are doing is offering a vision and an awareness of threat. However, the governing bodies of the institutions are perfectly within their rights to respond to us by saying, ‘What is wrong with what is happening at present? Are we in financial difficulties? No, we are not. Are we failing to recruit? No, we are recruiting fine. Are our students getting jobs? Yes, they are. So what is wrong with us as an institution?’ I am trying to give you a sense of the nature of the dialogue. We might say to them, in shorthand language, ‘You are okay now, but look 10 years down the line.’ That is the nature of the discussion, and that is where we can have different views. That is why this is such a difficult area to move forward in. Reasonable people are taking different views.

[162] **Bethan Jenkins:** I want to pick up on that particular point. I have missed some of the debate because, unfortunately, I had to pop out. You have said that other regions are not working together as strongly, but I wonder whether that is the case. Obviously, in the rest of the UK, there are different funding formulae. Therefore, different universities do not have to work together as much because they compete against each other. That is what is happening worldwide. So, does that not contradict what the Welsh Assembly Government is trying to propose in saying, ‘We want you to work together, but the main reason we want this is that you are not competitive enough in the global market’? If that is the main concern, do you believe that you should change the funding formula across the board to reflect that agenda? Also, should you be frank with the universities and say, ‘The reason we are doing this is that we need to make sure we can market you around the world as an institution’? This is what you need to do to reach your aims. It seems to me that this pot of money is working in a silo on its own and not reflecting what is happening in the rest of Wales. You are not being honest about that reality.

[163] **Professor Gummatt:** We cannot argue, on the one hand, that we are not making progress and that the reconfiguration fund is not making a difference, and then on the other hand say, ‘It is only because we have that in Wales that we are doing things, and that is how we explain the relative lack of reconfiguration activity in the regions of England’. Either it is

having an effect or it is not.

[164] More importantly, we are saying those things. It is also the case that these things are happening in England and, quite dramatically, in Scotland. Huw Lewis rightly made the point that there has been a lot of movement in Scotland in terms of research collaboration, but not in mergers. The penny is increasingly dropping within universities across the UK, and it has certainly dropped in Wales. You see it happening in England, but in more modest ways. For many purposes, institutions have got to increase their scale. That may mean mergers, or it may mean other forms of relationships. They are recognising that fact and beginning to do things about it. My earlier contention was that I think we have made more progress than any region of England, but that is not to say that we have done all that we could or all that we need to do.

[165] You talked about honesty. I would say, in all honesty, that we are giving that message very plainly. For example, a question was asked earlier about south-east Wales. We have had two meetings with the governing bodies of those three institutions, and we have clearly laid out our view of their position. We also hold annual sessions for the governors of higher education institutions. They are essentially training sessions for new or relatively new governors. One of the things we do in those sessions is to give them what we see as the facts of life about higher education in the UK, and what the competitive position is for Wales. This report has the implicit challenge, ‘What more could we do?’ One of our further responses to that is to ask ourselves, ‘What more can we do to get across to governing bodies information that will help them to understand better—better than, in our view, some of them do at present—precisely what the realities are?’ This is so that they can be better informed as they make difficult judgments about what is the best thing to do for the future of their particular institution.

11.00 a.m.

[166] **Bethan Jenkins:** The final question touches on what was said earlier on partnerships with people outside the HE sector. Paragraph 2.27 refers to the announcement by the Welsh Assembly Government on encouraging local providers and post-16 education providers to be included in the collaboration process. This question is to Professor Hawker: to what extent did the recently announced proposals to encourage increased collaboration between all providers of post-16 education effectively supersede the narrower proposal of the reconfiguration and collaboration fund, which only supports collaboration between HE institutions?

[167] **David Melding:** Professor Hawker deferred to Dr Gunning earlier before I deprived him of his hour of fame, but it has now arrived.

[168] **Professor Hawker:** Indeed. Would you like me to hand straight over? This comes back to what I said earlier.

[169] **Dr Gunning:** The new proposals complement rather than replace the current ones—I think that that is the correct way to describe it. I welcome the chance to mention again the transformation agenda because it comes from a need to fundamentally rethink how we deliver post-16 education, or indeed post-14 education.

[170] Briefly, there are two challenges: creating the breadth of pathways needed to support 14 to 19-year-olds under the new 14-19 learning pathways programme. We do pretty well on academic pathways for young people, but we do much less well on vocational pathways and we need to transform that.

[171] The second challenge, as you will all know from the statistics, is that people in employment in the future will largely be those who are in employment at present because we

have diminishing numbers of 14 to 19-year-olds. So, there is an enormous challenge to upskill and retrain the existing workforce. The layout of providers at the moment is not ideally suited to that. We need much more choice for students and much less duplication of provision—there is a lot of duplication where providers in close proximity to each other offer the same courses. That needs to be addressed. In the future, we do not need individual excellent providers, because we are quite well-off in that regard in Wales, but excellent networks of providers, planning and working together. If that happened, and we have been talking a great deal about the money available in the system, we would put more of our resources into the classroom rather than into running administrative units. So, transformation is about saying to schools and the FE and HE sectors that they need to lift their game and work together to provide for the needs of an area.

[172] The reason I said ‘complement’ in relation to higher education is because, as Phil mentioned earlier, the sector has a wider mission, UK-wide and internationally, but it also has a great responsibility locally to work with schools and the FE sector to support the pathways for young people, which will get us to where we want to be. It will be essential that Merfyn Jones, in his review of HE that will soon be reporting, takes account of this new agenda, which brings schools and the FE and HE sectors closer together. They will always be distinctive, but that does not stop them collaborating for the future of Wales.

[173] **Bethan Jenkins:** So, do you think that there will be change beyond 2010 and would you include some of the core funding, potentially from the new student finance measures that the Minister will put in place?

[174] **Dr Gunning:** There are some interesting changes, for example, to FE funding that were presaged in ‘Skills That Work for Wales’. It talks about investing in a sector priorities fund so that some of the money will be directed towards particular employment sectors and not just in global terms. We must still have an element of global funding because we can never predict wholly accurately—I think that Stalin tried and failed—all the local demand from every employer. Merfyn Jones, in his review of HE, must consider whether that type of approach, where there is a little more direction towards key sectors, might be appropriate in HE, and we look forward to his recommendations.

[175] **David Melding:** Thank you. That concludes the questions that we wish to put to you this morning. We are grateful for your help with this inquiry and for the evidence that you have provided. You will all be sent a transcript of the evidence to check it for its accuracy. I always emphasise to witnesses that you cannot change anything that you have said, but if there is an error in the transcription, you will have a chance to put that right.

11.04 a.m.

**Ystyried Ymateb Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru i Adroddiad y Pwyllgor
Archwilio ‘Adolygiad Dilynol—Gwasanaethau Ambiwylans yng Nghymru’
Consideration of the Welsh Assembly Government’s Response to the Audit
Committee Report ‘Follow-up Review—Ambulance Services in Wales’**

[176] **David Melding:** Jeremy, you have given us advice. Jeremy’s letter is before us. Do you want to emphasise anything? It is quite a serious subject and your letter raises some quite profound issues.

[177] **Mr Colman:** Thank you very much, Chair. I will begin by making a statement that will be well known to members of the committee, but which I should say for the record. In advising the committee as I have, I am of course not taking any particular view on how the outstanding issues relating to the Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust should be resolved,

such as what its revenue budget should be for this year or what capital programmes should be approved. I have no opinion about that as the Auditor General for Wales.

[178] We are in a situation in which the Assembly Government's response, although it has accepted all the recommendations of the committee, is not entirely satisfactory. The reason that I say that it is not satisfactory is that subsequent to the Audit Committee's hearing another committee of the Assembly took evidence from Alan Murray, and that evidence and the subsequent developments—or maybe I should say 'the lack of some subsequent developments'—suggest that this committee might wish to seek further information from the Assembly Government about matters that were of concern back in July and which still seem to be uncertain.

[179] The first of the four that I mention in my letter is the budget for the current year. It is very late in the current year and it is not clear whether the Assembly Government has agreed a revenue budget this year for the ambulance trust. Secondly, a number of business cases for capital expenditure have been presented, and Ann Lloyd's evidence in July more than suggested that the Assembly Government would be seeking an early decision on those. However, those business cases are still outstanding, as the response makes clear. Thirdly, there is the issue of efficiency savings. I would never say a word against public bodies in Wales seeking efficiency savings, but I think that it is a matter for concern that the Assembly Government's reply makes quite a lot of possible efficiency savings from fuel prices. We all know that fuel prices go up and down quite a lot, and if the ambulance trust is to make savings whenever the price goes down, the question then arises about what is to happen when the price goes up. That is an issue on which further information might be helpful. Finally, everyone understands—certainly members of this committee understand—that handover times at accident and emergency departments, particularly in Cardiff and Newport, are a serious problem. The Assembly Government has announced targets for handover times, but the response is not very detailed on what specific actions need to be taken to help the ambulance trust to achieve those targets.

[180] I am sorry that this is rather a long remark. Finally, I draw attention in my letter to what you might call some longer-term issues, where it is not clear that short-term action has been taken that would be helpful. Those longer-term issues are to do with culture, the spatial plan and, to use words from the Assembly Government's response, 'intelligent targets'. The Assembly Government's response clearly recognises—it might be 'rightly recognises'—that the culture of the ambulance trust is an area that needs to be improved. This committee drew attention to that issue. Changing the culture of an organisation is not something that you can do overnight and everyone understands that too. However, equally, if you do nothing, it will never change. There could be a question about what action should be taken and what action is being taken that will have beneficial effects on culture. On the spatial plan, the Assembly Government's response accepts the recommendation about the need for the ambulance trust to be much more closely involved in the spatial plan, but it was very thin on detail. Finally, on intelligent targets, who could be against a concept called 'intelligent targets'?

11.10 a.m.

[181] What it means in this context is that the performance of the ambulance trust, particularly with regard to emergency services, is intimately connected to the performance of the rest of the NHS and, to some extent, social services. An intelligent target is one that takes account of the fact that, for improvement to occur, the whole system needs to work more effectively. The question is: what action has been taken to promote effective working through the whole system?

[182] Some of these matters will be covered in a study that I currently have under way on the subject of unscheduled care. The Assembly Government's response refers to that, and the

ambulance trust is working with us, as is the Assembly Government. Relatively soon, the committee will have an opportunity to look at the topic of unscheduled care. The question now is whether, in advance of that—it is still some months away—the committee wishes to seek further assurance from the Assembly Government.

[183] **David Melding:** The auditor general's response is weighty and considered, and it is significantly more qualified than some of the Government's past responses to our report. I suggest that our secretariat and the Wales Audit Office prepare a draft letter that covers these points for me to send on behalf of the committee, perhaps with the proviso that some of the points may come under the work on delayed transfers of care. I feel that further action is required. I am not one to suggest that we write to the Government again on minor matters, and I am not sure that I have done this before on Members' behalf. We can usually pick these issues up in six or 12 months of their being brought to us if we need to, but I feel that a more immediate response is called for on this occasion.

[184] **Darren Millar:** I suggest that, given the auditor general's response and the continuing concerns about many of the matters raised in our report, and given that the Assembly Government has accepted that there were problems, as this matter is of such concern to Assembly Members and members of the public, we ought to have another evidence session to which we can invite witnesses and cross examine them on the outstanding issues rather than simply write a letter. That would be far more useful to us. Given that some work in this regard is ongoing, the evidence session can be used to feed into that with regard to unscheduled care issues. That would be a far more satisfactory arrangement than to send another letter highlighting concerns.

[185] **Janice Gregory:** I do not know that I totally support Darren's call for another evidence session, as that would delay the process even more, whereas a letter would reach the Welsh Assembly Government quicker.

[186] I want to get something off my chest. I understand what Jeremy is saying about it taking a long time to change the culture of an organisation. We should say that those who work at the coalface of the ambulance service, those who are delivering services on the ground, are doing a tremendous job, but they are clearly hamstrung by decisions that are taken higher up the chain. The ambulance service cannot just say, 'Nothing to do with us, ref. We didn't do this; this is not our fault'. The culture in the ambulance service should have changed by now, given that we have been discussing this issue under subsequent Ministers for health, and we are still at the stage when Alan Murray is still saying, 'It's nothing to do with me. It's the Welsh Assembly Government's fault'. I am not saying that there are not difficulties in that regard, but it is unfair to shift all the blame onto the Welsh Assembly Government because of the budget or anything else.

[187] Before Christmas, I made it my business, as did other Assembly Members, to speak to paramedics. Some changes could be made in the ambulance service that are not quite cost-neutral but which will not have the huge financial implications that we are led to believe that they will have. There needs to be a very rapid change in the senior management of the ambulance trust. With respect to Jeremy, I do not see that that is reflected in his letter.

[188] **David Melding:** On the latter point, Janice, I have allowed you to get it off your chest.

[189] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you, David.

[190] **David Melding:** Although we were very tactful in the way that we put it, our report thought the reverse—we thought that the leadership was in quite good shape and that there would be a danger if there was instability at the leadership level. Jeremy has reflected what

the committee agreed at that time. Politically, this issue has moved on somewhat, and those particular questions have been taken out of our realm. I am not denying that it is appropriate for certain fora in the Assembly to look at that political question. From the evidence that we have received, we have come to a settled view, so I am keen that we do not chase that issue.

[191] I do not want rebuttals at this point, but does anyone have anything to add on how we will progress, given the correspondence from Jeremy? I see not.

[192] **Darren Millar:** I think that Janice has made some very valid points about the issues within the service, and there are questions that need to be asked of Alan Murray and his executive team. If Members are content for a further evidence session to be held, perhaps we could include not only representatives from the Assembly Government but also from the trust, so that we could get a balancing of views. We are not here to necessarily criticise one side or the other but to get the best possible service going forward for the people of Wales, and that is what it must be about. A further evidence session would help us to get that.

[193] **David Melding:** Janice, you started your remarks by saying that you did not think that a further evidence session was necessary immediately.

[194] **Janice Gregory:** Yes.

[195] **David Melding:** Is that still your view?

[196] **Janice Gregory:** If we were going to rehash what we have already done, there would be no point, but if we were going to drill down further, as Darren suggested, I do not know. Given the questions that we asked last time I do not know that the answers will be any different. We would have to ask a completely new set of questions based on the report or on how we feel that things stand on the ground. That will be a question for you, Chair.

[197] **David Melding:** Jeremy, do you wish to give further advice at this stage?

[198] **Mr Colman:** If I may, Chair. Janice Gregory has got there before me. If the evidence session is to be disciplined, it would have to be on the basis of some type of document. You can have your evidence session and your letter, because we could draft the letter in the form of a document that could be the basis of an evidence session. As usual, we would suggest a briefing for the committee to focus the line of questioning on the outstanding issues, such as those to which I have drawn attention.

[199] **David Melding:** It is possible that the response to the letter may be entirely satisfactory to the committee, but I am not sure whether we say in the letter that we may want to take further evidence on these issues, depending on the nature of the reply.

[200] **Mr Colman:** That is not what I was proposing, but that is an option. It is just an option, but I was proposing that the committee could decide to hold an evidence session and that the letter would say that, and also mention the issues in which it was interested in exploring.

[201] **David Melding:** It appears that there are two options. One is that I write on behalf of the committee on the issues of concern and, subject to the reply, we hold an evidence session if we feel that it is necessary, or we could write to the Government saying that we want a further evidence session on the points listed. What are your thoughts on this, Lorraine?

11.20 a.m.

[202] **Lorraine Barrett:** You should write the letter first. We cannot slot in an evidence

session immediately, anyway, so I would suggest that we wait for a reply and base our decision on that.

[203] **David Melding:** That would be the first option, to write and wait to see the nature of the reply, before committing to an evidence session.

[204] **Michael German:** I want to clarify something regarding the role of this committee. We have heard Jeremy's concerns, and the committee is here to investigate such concerns. I thought that we needed Alan Murray to answer on those issues as well as the Government. Writing to the Government is fine, but we will only receive the Government's response. I interpreted Jeremy's original suggestion as being that he would write a letter, to which you would add your signature, Chair, but it would basically be a letter from Jeremy describing the issues of concern that he has laid out to us, and we would invite the Government to respond and to answer questions that we would also ask the ambulance trust to answer. That is what I thought.

[205] **David Melding:** We are focusing on the Welsh Assembly Government's response. I suspect that it can refer, as necessary, to Alan Murray, and we would have to decide, if we had a further evidence session, whether we would want him there. We now need to choose from two reasonable options. The first is to write to the Government, but wait to see the nature of its reply before committing to an evidence session, and the second is to write and say that we want an evidence session, and give the Government the details why, so that it can respond. I would like further indications from Members. Your response was that we should commit now to an evidence session, Mike, was it not?

[206] **Michael German:** That was my view, on the basis of what Jeremy said.

[207] **Irene James:** We need both the letter and the evidence session. It is as simple as that. I think that we must have Alan Murray here, so that we can look with him at the questions that Jeremy has raised that need to be resolved.

[208] **David Melding:** I am getting slightly confusing signals. It now seems to me that we are saying that we want to take further evidence. Therefore, we will take the path that Jeremy originally suggested. It will be a substantial letter, however, because it will serve as the document that we will use as a basis for our evidence session, but we will say that we will be seeking further evidence. Thank you for that guidance.

11.23 a.m.

Cynnig Trefniadol Procedural Motion

[209] **David Melding:** I propose that

the committee resolves to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting in accordance with Standing Order No. 10.37(vi).

[210] I see that there are no objections.

*Derbyniwyd y cynnig.
Motion carried.*

Daeth rhan gyhoeddus y cyfarfod i ben am 11.23 a.m.

The public part of the meeting ended at 11.23 a.m