

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Date:	Wednesday 20 April 2005
Venue	National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff Bay
Paper:	National Union of Students (NUS) Wales - Welsh Medium Strategy for Higher Education

Background

NUS Wales has long championed the cause of bilingualism. Devolved in 1974 from NUS UK, NUS Wales' bilingual policy was noted for its radical yet equitable approach to both Welsh and English.

Today NUS Wales continues to fight for a fully bilingual tertiary education sector, where students can study any subject, either entirely or in part, through the medium of Welsh.

NUS Wales is pleased to note progress in the areas of Welsh medium teaching provision at higher education level. Nevertheless, such progress needs rapid acceleration if it is to reach acceptable levels.

NUS Wales has policy calling for a Welsh Federal College, and is clear in its interpretation of this policy: a sophisticated distance-learning network that would make full use of specialisms and limited resources, and ultimately allow students studying at any FEI or HEI to learn any given subject entirely through the medium of Welsh, should they wish.

This is an ambitious, long-term goal, and one that NUS Wales is keen to work with the National Assembly and other stakeholders to achieve.

NUS Wales believes there are a number of key steps to reaching this goal, which start from the baseline of current provision and progress to full bilingualism in education.

Supply & Demand

There is an obvious link between supply and demand for Welsh medium teaching. Nevertheless the 'blame culture', whereby students ascribe lack of demand to lack of supply, and where HEI's claim the reverse, will ultimately fail to provide Welsh medium teaching for students, regardless.

NUS Wales believes that the political will in the National Assembly as a whole is such that with close

collaboration between all stakeholders action can be taken to hyper-stimulate the supply-demand cycle.

NUS Wales identifies three parties of specific importance for Welsh medium provision in HE: students, HEI's and teaching staff.

Currently there is a subsidy for HEI's providing courses partly through the medium of Welsh. There is, however, no such subsidy for students studying entirely through the medium of Welsh.

Moreover, there is no specific incentive for students or for teaching staff to work through the medium of Welsh. NUS Wales believes this is wrong.

Logistics

In spite of good will and political will being evident amongst all parties concerned there has been a failure to advance significantly towards the creation of a Welsh Federal College in recent years.

NUS Wales recognises that different political groups or stakeholders have different visions of a Welsh Federal College, and that in fact the logistical arrangements for such a body are what has divided the campaign, more than anything else.

NUS Wales would reiterate its vision of a sophisticated distance-learning network, and would gladly discuss specifics. NUS Wales would also call upon the Assembly Government to, where possible, secure cross-party agreement for a template and then begin to implement the creation of a Welsh Federal College immediately.

NUS Wales understands the political sensitivities involved but believes that any Welsh Federal College could evolve and improve once 'off the ground'.

Core Subject Provision

The tertiary education sector is constantly evolving and offering a variety of subjects that could not have been predicted even a decade ago.

Whilst it is NUS Wales' fervent hope that Welsh students will ultimately be able to study any subject through the medium of Welsh, our initial concern is increasing the base-level of provision.

There are a number of core subjects that should be available, at a top-level, through the medium of Welsh. NUS Wales believes that provision for core subjects would be the first step towards drilling down to more specific or specialised study areas.

NUS Wales calls for a strategy specifically examining which subjects are 'core' and how they can be

most quickly provided through the medium of Welsh.

Specialisms In Provision

Just as not every FEI or HEI offers courses in any given subject, NUS Wales acknowledges that it is unrealistic, in the short term, to expect provision of courses through the medium of Welsh in all subjects and at all institutions.

Therefore it is NUS Wales' belief that in the short term it is acceptable for students to have the option to study individual subjects through the medium of Welsh at perhaps a limited number of institutions.

Institutions that are currently specialising in specific subject areas are credible candidates for offering the same subject through the medium of Welsh, whilst non-specialist areas might be available in Welsh at other institutions.

In short, NUS Wales believes that it is a massive, positive step for all core subjects (ultimately expanded to all subjects) to be available in at least one institution in Wales. Whilst this does not offer individuals choice of institution initially, it at least affords them the choice of studying through their chosen language.

Moreover, any limitation of choice for the student should be further mitigated through the Welsh Federal College, that would enable distance-learning between institutions.

Postgraduate Students & Research

NUS Wales welcomes the recent decision to award funds specifically to postgraduates undertaking their research through the medium of Welsh, and would continue to push for an increase in such funding as demand is stimulated.

Nevertheless current levels of research undertaken through the medium of Welsh are inadequate to provide significant advances in an acceptable number of subject areas.

NUS Wales believes that affording specific training for academics who are able to speak Welsh, but who work through the medium of English, is an essential early step in increasing output of research through the medium of Welsh.

Further Education

There is a dearth of Welsh medium provision in the FE sector. No significant gains in provision can be made in the HE sector whilst commitment to providing courses through the medium of Welsh in FE is low.

NUS Wales believes that there should be an additional, specific strategy for increasing Welsh medium teaching provision in FEI's, and through the Welsh Federal College explore options of linking with 6th Forms that offer courses through the medium of Welsh.

Moreover, NUS Wales has specific concerns over provision of Welsh medium teaching for vocational subjects. It is crucial that there is an equitable approach to providing bilingual education between academic and vocational learning.