

Wales-Ireland relations – Senedd Inquiry 2023

Supporting paper in advance of the evidence session with the Senedd Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee

Universities Wales and Welsh Higher Education Brussels

Universities Wales represents the interests of all universities in Wales. Our mission is to support a university education system that transforms lives through the work Welsh universities do with the people and places of Wales and the wider world. Immediately prior to the pandemic Universities Wales had been in discussion on developing closer collaboration with Irish counterparts including meetings in Dublin supported by Welsh Government and the British Irish Chambers of Commerce.

Welsh Higher Education Brussels supports Welsh universities in their European engagement through facilitating and co-ordinating activities, promoting Welsh higher education in Brussels and gathering and disseminating intelligence to the Welsh higher education sector. Ireland is a key contact for work undertaken by both the Welsh Government office in Brussels and by Welsh Higher Education Brussels as an important Member State with close links to Wales. There are good relationships with Irish organisations represented in Brussels including the Permanent Representation of Ireland to the EU, the Irish Regions European Office and Enterprise Ireland. WHEB has organised events with the Irish Regions European Office on Ireland Wales Interreg projects.

Senedd Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee Inquiry into Wales – Ireland relations

This paper provides input from Universities Wales and Welsh Higher Education Brussels to the Senedd Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee Inquiry into Wales – Ireland relations and specifically the following themes identified by the Committee:

- Wales-Ireland relations post-Brexit
- The Ireland-Wales Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan (2021-2025) as an approach to international engagement.
- The funding of future cooperation and collaborative projects between Ireland and Wales
- Priority areas for cooperation between Ireland and Wales

Wales-Ireland relations post-Brexit

1. Ireland has always been an important partner for Wales in higher education and research and this partnership has strengthened in recent years, supported in part by European programmes and funding. We value the Irish students studying in Wales recognising that they can continue to benefit from home fee status. We would be concerned if any new barriers were put in place that would limit the exchange of students in future. With Brexit meaning the end of Structural Funds including the Interreg programme, that provided significant resources for research and innovation work in Wales, it is even more important to ensure existing research collaborations and connections are maintained and developed further. This may include a potential focus on collaboration through Horizon Europe with our partners across Europe with a particular focus on Ireland as our closest EU Member State.
2. Universities in Wales and Ireland have had access to the EU research and innovation programmes that have provided a framework for research co-operation and collaboration. In the previous [Horizon 2020](#) programme there were a number of projects involving participants from Welsh universities and Irish universities but the data suggests that Wales has had more collaborative links with some other similar-sized partners such as Flanders than with Ireland. There was also no strong thematic focus for Horizon 2020 collaborations involving Welsh and Irish universities.
3. The 2014-20 Ireland Wales Interreg programme has provided €100m funding for collaborative work with €79m from the European Regional Development Fund. Twenty-three projects have received funding through the programme and 19 of these projects have involved Welsh universities and many have also involved Irish universities and Institutes of Technology. The programme has had three thematic areas focused on Cross-Border Innovation, Climate Change Adaptation in the Irish Sea area and Cultural and National Resources and Heritage. A number of other Welsh and Irish organisations have also been involved in these projects including local authorities, businesses and research organisations.
4. Given the strong thematic focus provided by the Ireland Wales programme and the significant involvement of Irish and Welsh universities in the programme projects it potentially indicates that Interreg funding provided resources for a number of research collaborations rather than Horizon 2020. As Interreg funding is concluding it will be important to build on the investments made by the Ireland Wales programme to enable Welsh researchers to be considered as useful project partners for relevant Horizon Europe proposals involving Irish research organisations. In this context it is relevant to consider how to align Welsh research activities and areas of strength with Irish research priorities in areas of the Horizon Europe programme such as Oceans Mission and the Climate Change Mission where we share the same geography and challenges. This strategic approach could potentially enable a greater level of collaboration between researchers in Wales and Ireland.

The Ireland-Wales Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan (2021-2025) as an approach to international engagement.

5. We welcome the emphasis on the Wales- Ireland relationship provided by the Welsh Government's International Strategy, published in January 2020, that outlines Wales' international ambition following the EU referendum. The International Strategy stresses the importance of Wales current relationship with Ireland and prepared the policy rationale for the Joint Action Plan. The Ireland Wales [Joint Action Plan and Shared Statement](#) was published in March 2021. It is encouraging that education and research is identified as one of the six key focus areas in the Plan.
6. We are supportive of this approach which provides a framework for activity between the two countries and it is appropriate that education and research are included within the framework. Reflecting the history and breadth of connections the Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan is probably the most detailed outline of bilateral activity between Wales and another country or region. We look forward to update on the Joint Action Plan including education and research activities later this year.

The funding of future cooperation and collaborative projects between Ireland and Wales

7. We were disappointed that the UK Government decided not to participate in the current Interreg programme period running from 2021-28. The Welsh Government together with a number of other organisations around the UK have undertaken work in their geographical regions to maintain important cross-border connections with relevant close partners in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland. Following a period of discussion and consultation with stakeholders the Welsh Government published its [Irish Sea Framework](#) as part of its wider [Agile Cymru](#) work in February 2023 outlining its approach to building on previous programmes to maintain collaborations in the Irish Sea Space. The Framework has three thematic areas: sustainable blue economy, innovation strengths and communities and culture. Welsh researchers have been involved in the discussions and consultations around the development of this Framework and are supportive of its aims and thematic focus as well as its flexibility and links to the Ireland Wales programme. However, it is currently supported by very limited funding compared to the funding available through European programmes in previous periods. We anticipate a funding call shortly for further projects within the Irish Sea Framework.
8. In 2021/22 the Welsh Government ran a call funded through its SCoRE Cymru strand focused on Horizon Europe engagement and increasing Irish Sea co-operation. Based on the budget available, 15 of the 24 applications were selected for funding. Of these, nine projects with a grant value of c.£36,000 involved direct cooperation with Ireland and c.70% of supported projects with a value of around £25,000 were led by Welsh universities.

Priority areas for cooperation between Ireland and Wales

9. The priorities identified in the Irish Sea Framework build on the priorities of the [Ireland Wales programme 2014-20](#). This approach should enable existing connections to be maintained and developed further but there may be other opportunities that we need to be positioned to respond to in areas such as the [Horizon Europe](#) programme and multilateral engagement with Ireland as part of wider Atlantic Area or other geographical and thematic networks. If the UK associates to Horizon Europe this may be easier but even if we remain a third country using these research connections will be even more important to enable researchers based in Wales to collaborate and network with partners in Ireland and across Europe. The level of investment in research and innovation in Ireland coupled with Ireland's success in securing competitive research funding is significant and the development of a number of new regional and applied universities that will receive significant funding, both national funding and European funding, over the next few years will strengthen Irish research further.

There are a number of areas to consider in relation to the relationship with Ireland:

- *As Wales transitions from using Interreg funding to support a number of research collaborations with Irish universities it will be important to build on these connections to work together in the Horizon Europe programme in particular in areas such as the Oceans and Climate Change Adaptation Mission.*
- *It will be important for the sector in Wales to consider how a range of sector-led initiatives in research collaboration and international collaboration can contribute to strengthened Wales – Ireland relations in higher education and research.*
- *It may also be useful to explore education policy issues with counterparts in Ireland including the civic mission dimension, widening participation and language/ culture issues.*