

Julie James AS/MS
Minister for Housing & Local Government

Email only

30 July 2020

The University and College Union (UCU Wales) represents almost 7,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians, and postgraduates in universities, colleges, adult education and training organisations across Wales. UCU Wales is a politically autonomous but integral part of UCU, the largest post-school union in the world.

We welcome this opportunity to respond to the Ministers call for inspiration and fresh thought. The Covid-19 crisis poses a double challenge. Beyond the public health emergency, the necessary immediate response has been an unprecedented economic shutdown. Yet that is only the beginning of our difficulties. When the medical emergency passes, we will re-emerge into a shattered economic landscape. The challenge will be to restart – in some sectors, even rebuild – a severely stressed economy, with the risk being that the inequalities of wealth, power and opportunity we struggled with beforehand have been newly amplified.

We require a recovery and reform process in which the value of education and the needs of the community, as well as the imperative to live within planetary boundaries, come before the overweening prerogatives of marketization. The learner’s lifelong needs are addressed through a pathway of seamless progression. New social partnership are forged between institutions and sectors. Parity of esteem is achieved as outdated distinctions between vocational and academic pathways give way to world class-methods that place pedagogy at their very centre.

As Wales moves through the crisis, UCU is committed to harnessing the diverse expertise of its members in delivering Welsh Governments economic, social and environmental ambitions. Informed by the ground-breaking Well-being of Future Generations Act, we hope that these initial suggestions offer a practical and realistic contribution to the government’s recovery framework, as well as strengthening the forthcoming Commission for Tertiary Education (CETR) and Social Partnership Bill.

First Minister Mark Drakeford has consistently called for an “equality led recovery”. We hope that CETR reforms can occasion a model of post compulsory education which privileges civic value and collaboration above competition. Wales is perfectly placed to advance an ethos of excellence through which institutions necessarily engage with communities, business and government as well as one another. As seen in England, market logic does not deliver the sustainable systems best designed to unlock human potential. Similarly, a commercial focus on the ‘low hanging fruit’ will ill serve the hardest to reach.

Much of the knowledge and expertise sit with our members and will require the funding to continue the research that delivers it. To realise the ambitions contained in the Reid Review and Prosperity for All, it is vital that the coal-face voice is heard in addressing the arrangements that will follow our departure from the European Union. That said, this is not merely about the demand to be heard. Recognising the real value of social partnership, UCU and its members are eager to engage collaboratively with government to share our expertise with respect to realising the equality-led, green recovery that Wales deserves. We fully recognise that this partnership best serves the interest of education.

One of the principle advantages of the social partnership model is its ability to detect and address failures before they occur. Responding to the Camm Report and Charter for Change, UCU will monitor developments to ensure that the aspiration towards good governance in the HE sector is realised so that excellence can be placed on a sustainable footing for future generation.

Similarly, the Welsh Government fully understands that the impact of the coronavirus crisis has not been felt equally across the population, both in health and economic terms. This impact will be more intense in Wales due to the age profile of our population, and the higher levels of social and economic deprivation in our communities. Welsh Governments “Leading Wales out of the coronavirus pandemic: a framework for recovery” establishes a useful policy test;

1: Does the measure have a high positive equality impact? 2: Is the measure consistent with the requirements of the Future Generations Act, and other legislation? 3: Does the measure have any biases to the detriment of vulnerable or marginalised groups? 4: Does the measure provide any opportunities for widening participation and a more inclusive society?

Our point of departure is that systems which perpetuate managerialism and competition not only generate corrosive staff workload pressures but also introduces severe structural instabilities. Competition implies the existence of winners and losers, meaning that only those most able, whether through professional status, class background or privilege, can access excellent education. Rather than an add-on, equality must be treated as a pre-figurative necessity. This means that public service bodies not only mainstream equality thinking across their organisation but also embed these principles into their recruitment processes. For instance, we were surprised to note a recent Qualifications Wales application form in which equality considerations did not even feature.

In seeking to operationalise Welsh Governments Recovery Framework principles, thought needs to be given to measures which are locally rooted; socially and economically beneficial to all demographics; equality impact assessed; promote agency through creating community power and environmentally sustainable in the long term. UCU contends that this purpose will always be best served by collaboration, collegiality and pooled capacity. Innovation rarely emerges because of a metric. Rather, it is a process nurtured in the dynamic response between professionals and Welsh civic society at large.

There is an urgent need to return the focus of post 16 education to pedagogy. A managerial approach risks undermining expertise and diminishing opportunities for quality enhancement through its focus on quality performance. In the never-ending hunt for perfection, outcomes will only ever reflect input; input needs to be designed and delivered to reflect and support, the purpose of the overall aim. If we are not clear about the purpose of the system, we run the risk of evaluating outcomes that are not entirely appropriate; when such outcomes are then used to inform input, they are likely to skew the process away from the original purpose of the system. The result is then revealed in the unintended consequences and behaviour that appear. For example, funding by results has led to the quality of provision being

measured by the number of qualifications obtained, but takes little regard of the process which led the 'successful attainment'. This concern appears to be echoed by employers who report that although employees have relevant qualifications, they lack other intellectual and social skills, which would be beneficial to the workplace.

In the same vein, whilst supportive measurement and evaluation has its place, bureaucracy must never become an end in its self. Data must be collected in response to a socially valuable purpose. Moreover, that purpose must be rooted in an evidence-based methodology which demonstrates the value that its capture will produce. If this cannot be demonstrated then it simply should not be collected. Our vision for the post 16 education sector in Wales, is one where the value of education is recognised in its own right, for the importance of providing life-long opportunities to develop personal skills; not just as a tool for delivering an employer skills agenda measured only by its economic value. This is the principle that we will seek to embed in the forthcoming CETR bill.

As a concrete proposal, there is now a generalised recognition that local and accessible provision provides by far the best way of meeting the needs of underrepresented groups who would otherwise be left behind in any recovery. Successful initiatives such as 'Better Jobs – Closer to Home' demonstrate the power locally focused regeneration.

If Wales created an apprentice framework which met international vocational standards, it could lead the way in this field, especially in engaging SMEs to allow their workforce access to part time apprenticeships

Rather than having a series of qualifications joined together to deliver the appropriate apprenticeship and level of study, we envisage the level of apprenticeship achieved to be the qualification in and of itself. Allowing the learner to build up their capabilities, transferable skill levels with one employer or indeed with several employers.

The introduction of the new curriculum in schools seeks to future-proof to ensure that school leavers are properly prepared for the structural changes to work with the increased use of digital technology and the changes in the production processes in manufacturing. Health and well-being goals of the current government are key drivers in this space. In responding to governments Foundational Frame and Economic Contract, we must ensure that we have an apprenticeship framework which meets the needs of the individual and the employers in Wales, many of whom are SMEs.

We know that Wales is different and hope that this letter serves to evidence UCU member's commitment to social partnership and a just transition. Considering this as a first step, we propose;

- 1: A recovery based around collaboration and innovation
- 2: A recovery which values social partnership as *the* vehicle for unlocking human potential
- 3: A recovery whose social model of equality debunks the logic of winners and losers
- 4: A recovery with world-class pedagogy and seamless lifelong learning at its heart
- 5: A recovery whose creative adaptation learns from the best to tear down outmoded distinctions and extend opportunities across the board i.e. 'Welsh Apprenticeships'.

Yours sincerely

Jamie Insole – Wales Policy Officer