

RESPONSE TO:
Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee – Priorities for the Fifth Assembly

August 2016

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. It was formed on the 1st June 2006 by the amalgamation of two strong partners – the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) – who shared a long history of defending and advancing educators’ employment and professional interests.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the request for information to inform the priorities of the Fifth Assembly.

With regard to skills and research development, from our perspective as a trade union and professional association, the priorities for the Fifth Assembly are as follows: ,

- A long term strategic approach to investment in a strong research base.
- An inquiry into the impact of casualisation of staff on the quality of research and development.
- The development of a robust infrastructure to support decisions made in the light of the recommendations from Diamond and Hazelkorn.

Long term investment into research.

The universities in Wales have a far wider influence than simply providing higher education for individuals; research undertaken can have global impact, improving life for millions of people.¹

However, the UK’s total research and development (R&D) expenditure in 2012 was around 1.8% GDP; the OECD average was 2.4%.² Although Wales is dependent on UK government for its allocation of funding, a strong research base is important in fostering a prosperous economy and a healthy society. Public funding for research encourages greater investment from the private sector. It has been estimated an extra £1 of public funding on HEI research generates an additional £0.29 of private funding and a further £1.07 to research conducted elsewhere³. Half of the research submitted to the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, from universities in Wales was considered to “World Leading”⁴.

¹ <http://www.ukcds.org.uk/the-global-impact-of-uk-research/disease-resistant-crops>

² <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2015/why-invest-in-universities.pdf>

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/438763/bis-15-340-relationship-between-public-and-private-investment-in-R-D.pdf

⁴ https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/publications/hefcw_reports_and_statistics/HE%20Nation%20%20English.pdf

With this in mind, as well as the additional economic impacts that Higher Education has to offer⁵, we ask that over the term of the next Welsh Government, the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee seek to ensure a long-term strategic approach to public investment in the post 16 education sector in Wales.

Casualisation of staff

The impact that the casualisation of staff has on the quality of research and development, must be taken into account when developing policy. Data gathered by the University and College Union suggests that 68% of research staff in higher education are on fixed term contracts, with many more dependent on short-term funding for continued employment.⁶ The recruitment, development and motivation of researchers are key factors in the quality of R&D. The predominance of fixed term contracts (particularly early career) makes research a highly precarious career choice, unlikely to retain long-term, the researchers needed to engage in and promote the world class research and development that Wales has the potential to deliver. We welcome the recommendations in Lord Stern's review of the Research Excellence Framework⁷ and are hopeful that they will lead to the recognition of the benefit of secure contracts of employment for researchers in Wales. We would welcome scrutiny of the impact of casualisation on the quality of R&D, when considering government proposals during the next term.

Robust infrastructure.

In light of any decisions made as a result of publication of both the Hazelkorn Review⁸ and the forthcoming Diamond Review, we would welcome scrutiny of the infrastructure that will need to be in place to support them. In the best interests of the people of Wales, it is crucial that the skills providers and the research bases of the future are supported by adequate and reliable funding, robust organisation and management, and a stable and motivated workforce.

The Post 16 Education Sector in Wales has much to offer in the way of expertise, resources and solutions to the successful development of the future skills and research bases that we, as a nation, aspire to. As a trade union and professional association, UCU Wales would welcome the opportunity to assist the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee during the Fifth Assembly term.

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⁵ <http://www.uniswales.ac.uk/wp/media/The-Economic-Impact-of-Higher-Education-in-Wales.pdf>

⁶ https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7995/Precairous-work-in-higher-education-a-snapshot-of-insecure-contracts-and-institutional-attitudes-Apr-16/pdf/ucu_precariouscontract_hereport_apr16.pdf

⁷ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/541338/ind-16-9-ref-stern-review.pdf

⁸ <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/160310-hazelkorn-report-en.pdf>