

## Fairness and Freedom in Higher Education – HE policy motion

Conference notes that:

1. The Higher Education sector in Wales has experienced an unprecedented period of change and instability over the last five years, including the raising of tuition fee levels, cuts in direct public funding, caps on recruitment, institutional mergers and the interventionist approach of the Labour administration in Wales.
2. The current Welsh Government policy on student finance has cost more than initially projected and is not financially sustainable.
3. The current Welsh Government policy has transferred up to £100 million of Welsh public funding from universities in Wales to universities in England, further widening the funding gap between Welsh and English universities.
4. Fair access to higher education is compromised by financial challenges for students from low- and middle-income households, notably the cost of living whilst studying for a degree.
5. There is no Welsh university in the top 30 institutions for student satisfaction in the 2013 National Student Survey, no Welsh university in the top 30 of the *Guardian* or *Times* university league tables, and no Welsh university in the top 200 universities in the world ranked by *Times Higher Education*.

Conference believes that:

1. Access to higher education should be determined solely by academic ability and should not be constrained by social background, geography or financial resources.
2. Universities should be appropriately funded to enable them to deliver high quality teaching in an excellent learning environment and to undertake internationally significant research.
3. Opportunities should exist for students from Wales to pursue degree-level and postgraduate study across a full range of subjects at universities in Wales, through a range of course formats and in both English and Welsh.
4. Excellence in higher education is best achieved by strong, independent universities that are accountable to key stakeholders including students, staff, local communities and the Welsh public, but which have operational autonomy free from direct government intervention.
5. Students should play a full part in the realisation of excellent education and universities should include students in the discussion, development and monitoring of academic quality and improvement.

Conference resolves to endorse the policy paper *Fairness and Freedom in Higher Education* and to adopt the policies outlined, including key proposals to:

1. Introduce a Student Living Support Grant for all Welsh-domiciled students registered for a first undergraduate degree at a UK university, including part-time students, payable on top of the existing means-tested Assembly Learning Grant. This will be funded by withdrawing the Tuition Fee Grant.
2. Support access to higher education by introducing a programme to encourage prospective students from backgrounds with low participation in higher education, paying the full tuition fees of care-leavers, and requiring universities to adopt a 'Fair Access Agreement' outlining measures to broaden access and improve student retention.

3. Introduce an Employability Enhancement Bursary to support students on postgraduate courses at universities in Wales that emphasize employability skills and include an appropriate work placement.
4. Support collaborative PhD studentships delivered by universities in partnership with local businesses, cultural organizations or community groups, with students contributing to business research and development, or to cultural or arts activities.
5. Reform the system of funding for higher education in Wales to introduce a more flexible, objective-driven model that will encourage individual universities to focus on developing distinctive areas of strength within the framework of national strategic objectives.
6. Remove the cap on the recruitment of home and EU undergraduate students for universities in Wales, and increase funding available for allocation to universities in Wales directly by the funding council, using savings from the withdrawal of the Tuition Fee Grant which are not committed to the Student Living Support Grant and other schemes.
7. Use the objective-driven funding system to target additional funding to improve the quality of teaching and learning support at universities in Wales, expand provision in subjects not currently taught in Wales, develop a broader range of delivery formats, and consolidate Welsh-medium teaching.
8. Establish a Commission for Higher Education in Wales to replace HEFCW, with responsibilities for regulation and oversight of the HE sector as well as the distribution of public funding.
9. Oppose the forced merger of higher education institutions in Wales, instead encouraging partnership working and collaboration between universities in Wales, and between universities and FE colleges, through the objective-based funding system, including incentives for the development of shared services and joint research infrastructure.
10. Invest in areas of proven research excellence in which Wales has the potential to be recognized as a world leader, promote Welsh research achievements and innovations, and work with the UK research councils to develop awareness of the workings of devolution and the specific context of Wales.
11. Create enterprise zones linked to universities in Wales, with a targeted focus on sectors that reflect the institution's research strengths, and require the Economic Development division of the Welsh Government to liaise with universities in producing a new strategy for inward investment and business incubation specifically targeted on areas linked to the specialist skills of graduates from Welsh universities.
12. Support an 'Opportunity Wales' 'milk-round' of graduate recruitment exhibitions and events at universities in Wales by Welsh public and private sector employers.
13. Encourage universities to engage with local communities through participatory or action research on community-identified problems, and by enabling schools and local residents to use university facilities including sports facilities, arts facilities and libraries, especially outside term-times.

## **Transport in South East Wales**

### **Conference notes**

- the ongoing Welsh Government consultation on alleviating congestion on the M4 around Newport, closing 16<sup>th</sup> December 2013.
- the importance of improving traffic flow and capacity in the M4 corridor in an economically and environmentally sustainable way.
- that the Welsh Government predicts 46% more vehicles on parts of the M4 around Newport by 2035 than there were in 2012, but this has been heavily disputed.<sup>1</sup>
- that 43% of journeys made on the M4 around Newport involve trips of less than 20 miles.
- Newport has 27.1 business start-ups per 10,000 population in 2011, to compare to a UK average of 41.3 start-ups per 10,000 population.<sup>2</sup>
- the presence of four areas of Sites of Special Scientific Interest and three nature reserves to the south of Newport.

### **Conference Believes**

- in the importance of effective and sustainable transportation to unlock economic potential, support ambitions for growth and enable business in Cardiff, Newport, and Wales to expand and compete with UK regions and internationally and attract inward investment to Wales.
- in the importance of protecting the environment for future generations in line with our party's commitment to sustainable development.
- that improving transport in Wales must be a key economic and environmental priority for the Welsh Government.
- in the importance of an integrated transport policy, including public transportation.

### **Conference Calls**

- on the Welsh Liberal Democrat Policy Committee to bring forward a future policy paper on transport issues in Wales.
- on the Welsh Government to develop the A48 Southern Distributor Road and A4810 Steelworks Access Road near Newport's Llanwern Steelworks, as part of an integrated transport strategy for South-East Wales incorporating investment in public transport, rail freight infrastructure and the improvement of strategic local routes.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.clickonwales.org/2013/07/zombie-m4-relief-road-relies-on-phantom-cars/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://citiesoutlook.org/summary/newport/business-start-ups/table>

## **Topical Motion – HS2**

This conference notes the recent publication of figures produced by KPMG outlining the potential detrimental economic impact to certain parts of Wales of the UK Government's HS2 high speed rail plans which will provide a high speed rail link from London to cities in the midlands and north of England.

This conference affirms its support for a high speed rail network that will link all the major cities of the UK and believes that such detrimental impact can be overcome by a UK Government commitment to further development of a high speed rail network beyond HS2 which will include high speed rail links to cities in Wales.