

## Welsh Affairs Committee

### Oral evidence: [One-off session on issues facing the Welsh University sector](#), HC 468

Thursday 1 July 2021

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Members present: Stephen Crabb (Chair); Tonia Antoniazzi, Simon Baynes; Geraint Davies; Ben Lake; Beth Winter.

Questions 1 - 22

#### Witnesses

Professor Colin Riordan, President and Vice-Chancellor, Cardiff University; Professor Paul Boyle, Vice-Chancellor, Swansea University; Professor Iwan Davies, Vice-Chancellor, Bangor University; and Professor Tim Woods, Pro Vice-Chancellor, Aberystwyth University.



## Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Colin Riordan, Professor Paul Boyle, Professor Iwan Davies and Professor Tim Woods.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this one-off session of the Welsh Affairs Committee where today we are looking at issues affecting the higher education sector across Wales. We are delighted to be joined by Professor Colin Riordan, president and vice-chancellor of Cardiff University, Professor Paul Boyle, vice-chancellor of Swansea University, Professor Iwan Davies, vice-chancellor of Bangor University, and Professor Tim Woods, pro vice-chancellor of Aberystwyth University. We are grateful for the time you are giving to the Committee this morning.

We have just one hour, so there is a lot to get through. I will open up the questions by asking: what are the key challenges and pressures facing Welsh universities, particularly on the back of the last year and a half with the Covid pandemic?

**Professor Riordan:** It is the continuing uncertainty over what the pandemic is going to mean as we come out of it, as we clearly are, particularly on teaching and learning and the intentions and movements of international students. We have come through extremely well thus far, and we might come on to that later. I think the key challenges are going to be around how the new way of teaching and learning, the blended methodology—of which we are going to keep some elements for sure— is going to affect student demand across the world and what it means for the shape of universities and the kind of university we all are. That is going to be the biggest challenge. There are other areas where there is uncertainty, but to me that is the biggest one.

Q2 **Chair:** I will touch on the point about blended learning. What are the expectations and aspirations of your teaching staff at the moment? Is there an expectation that, at some point, there will be a return to a traditional lecture hall and tutorial style of teaching or are the changes we have seen, which have been induced by the pandemic, here to stay? Will students be dialling in via Zoom to their lectures in perpetuity?

**Professor Riordan:** I think elements of it will stay. We have shown that we can deliver whole elements of degree programmes, certainly one and a half years of them, via remote means and we can achieve the learning outcomes. But that is very different from saying everything will now shift online, because there are a couple of things around that. One is that students clearly still want the on-campus experience. They are very keen to be back. Our students have been in Cardiff, many of them on campus and attending lessons—depending on their subject—throughout the pandemic. But we have learned what is possible and that some things work better online, especially some of the large lectures. We now have the capacity to devise new programmes for new sets of students we would not have been able to access before.



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There is a recognition that a combination of in-person and remote learning is now possible. You can go in one direction where nearly everything is in person—which you would expect for medicine and dental, that kind of thing—or you could be putting on new programmes in data science or something like that, which is entirely online if you wanted to do that.

**Q3 Chair:** Professor Paul Boyle, I will follow up and ask for your perspective on this. If some of these shifts are here to stay, there will be a permanent move to delivering a portion of teaching electronically via Zoom and the like. Do you think that makes the value-for-money proposition for prospective students more difficult to land?

**Professor Boyle:** First, I will apologise because there is building work going on nearby, so I am sorry if you hear some of that.

I think it is a very interesting period for higher education. Of course, we have had to transition in a very short time to a completely different way of providing teaching and learning. That had huge costs associated with it and will continue to do so as we improve on those systems because they change so rapidly. I think the provision we will have going into the future will be better for students rather than worse. The assumption that this blended approach will somehow not be quite as good as we used to have when it was all face to face—exactly what Colin said is correct. We will have a better provision where we choose carefully what can be done more effectively online but really make use of the time that we have available for the other types of learning where students get the most benefit from smaller class sizes, from interacting more closely with their tutors and other academics. I am convinced that, as we go forward, we need to project to that community of students what a valuable education they are going to get as a result of the changes that we have learned we can now accommodate.

It also gives us real opportunities to collaborate across institutions. We have a number of programmes under way within Wales to think about how we might, for example, collaborate more in the areas of teaching. We now have the opportunity to do that much more flexibly because we can now use online measures to bring academics from Aberystwyth into Swansea, from Bangor into Cardiff and so on. There are all sorts of opportunities that open up to us now in a way that perhaps did exist before the pandemic, but we were not taking advantage of them in ways we could have done. Across the whole of society we have understood suddenly that Zoom and these sorts of approaches are a much more flexible and appropriate way of delivering certain types of education.

We will not get away from the fact, though, that students want to be on campuses and want to have a face-to-face experience. We must never forget that a university education is an holistic education that includes sitting in lecture theatres and seminars but also engaging in a wide range of other activities that are an important part of students' educational provision.



Q4 **Chair:** That is very helpful. Forgive me, I did not see which organisation produced it, but I saw the media reports this week about an increase in the proportion of students who felt they were not getting value for money during this academic year. Do you think all of that shift is being driven by Covid, or are there deeper underlying factors about how students view the university experience and how it may or may not affect their prospects in life afterwards?

**Professor Boyle:** There is an awful lot to unpick around what students do and don't think about their education. We should remember the vast majority of students—and certainly the vast majority of students in Wales, where we have arguably come through this pandemic particularly well. The student satisfaction measures for Welsh universities are considerably better than they are, on average, for the rest of the UK. I think Welsh universities have accommodated this, with the support of the Welsh Government and the measures that have been taken to allow us to provide the best system of education that was feasible within a pandemic situation.

We all know we have been through a pandemic and things are not as we would have wished. Of course, we would have provided a different level of education if it was possible. We had to change things so rapidly and within such a short time that, of course, there had to be some changes that we perhaps would have preferred not to have done.

Having said that, we have achieved a really fantastic breadth of education that people would never have imagined was achievable before the pandemic came along. If I speak to my student union or students on our campus, the average student is extremely pleased and certainly understands what had to be done to achieve what we have achieved in such a short time.

Q5 **Geraint Davies:** I want to switch the focus on to the financial implications of Erasmus, specifically in the context of the pandemic. I will turn to Professor Davies of Bangor, as we have not heard from him yet, to tell us about the implications of the UK's withdrawal from Erasmus in the current situation.

**Professor Davies:** Thank you. The issue here is one of timing. The important elements relate to the fact that parts of the Erasmus programme are still accessible for the UK as a non-programme country, and we are actively exploring that. The other point is that, with the advent of the Turing scheme and also the Welsh Government-sponsored scheme around the ILE, these are opportunities for the Welsh higher education sector that we are looking to take advantage of.

The key point is the importance of mobility. We have already heard about the student experience and the points that Colin Riordan and Paul Boyle made. Student experience is centred on things such as mobility, and outward mobility is part of a world-class higher education, and we are very keen to exploit that within the sector.



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Partly by way of response to the previous question, it is very obvious that the cognitive experience of students, the academic experience, is critical; so is the non-cognitive, what students achieve and experience outside of the classroom, informed by classroom activity, of which mobility is a critical part. I know students value that and see it as a huge additionality coming out of the university experience.

**Q6 Geraint Davies:** That is very helpful. Paul Boyle, what are the implications for Swansea University of the UK's withdrawal from Erasmus, and perhaps the opportunities from Turing? Are you going to participate in that?

**Professor Boyle:** You won't be surprised that most of us were disappointed when it was initially announced that the UK was not going to participate in Erasmus. We feel that Erasmus has been a very good scheme. It allows for the mobility of students but also of staff, and there are quite a breadth of different types of programmes within Erasmus. Having said that, we were very pleased when we learned about Turing and the ILE in Wales. They provide alternative schemes for mobility. I think we should see those three schemes as complementary, in a sense.

We hope to continue to collaborate, and are already expecting to continue to collaborate, with many of our Erasmus partners but, of course, using funds particularly from the ILE in Wales and Turing across the whole of the UK to allow us to continue with those partnerships. I agree with Iwan. It is absolutely vital that students have access to mobility schemes, so we have applied to participate in Turing. We will be applying for funding through the ILE, the Welsh version, which allows for students and staff to come into the UK, which Turing does not facilitate currently. Turing is an outward mobility scheme. I want to stress that key point.

Of course, it is important for our students to have experiences all over the world. It really is a vital part of their educational experience, but for a healthy university system it is also vital that we attract people into our universities, that we bring in students from overseas and we allow staff from overseas to come and collaborate with our academics. That two-way flow is a vital part of the way university systems across the world wish to operate. Europe had placed itself very high up. By introducing Erasmus, it had put in place a scheme that facilitated it perhaps better than in many other parts of the world and there were huge benefits as a direct result. We are very pleased and hope that Turing and ILE will replace those for our Welsh universities, although there clearly will be some work to continue to maintain the relationships we have with existing Erasmus partnerships.

**Q7 Geraint Davies:** Tim Woods, what are the implications for Aberystwyth of the withdrawal from Erasmus? What are your hopes for Turing? It was supposed to have started in March, wasn't it?



**Professor Woods:** Much as Professor Boyle said, we are very disappointed at the prospect of having to leave Erasmus in time. We are very pleased at the prospect of the ILE—the Welsh Government’s initiative—which is giving confidence for the future not just to us but to our partners. It is a five-year scheme and there is time to plan. At the moment, Turing is just a one-year scheme and we do not know where it will be in a year’s time.

Q8 **Geraint Davies:** Is it your view that Welsh universities are better placed, therefore, than English universities because of ILE alongside Turing?

**Professor Woods:** Yes, I think so. When I have spoken to English universities, they envy our situation at the moment.

Q9 **Geraint Davies:** In the overview of your financial situation coming out of the pandemic, and it is a pretty difficult situation to be in, are you making adjustments? What does the future look like generally?

**Professor Woods:** We have had to make adjustments this last year. Given the sort of uncertainties that Professor Riordan spoke about, we may well have to make further adjustments during the course of the coming year, but if we are able to attract the student numbers that we are currently looking at, we should be able to manage. The big uncertainty is the overseas students, how the red list operation is going to work and whether that will put students off from coming to the UK.

Q10 **Simon Baynes:** Thank you to the witnesses for giving up your time this morning. It is appreciated. I want to look in a little more detail at the Welsh Government’s ILE programme. What is your understanding of the progress that has been made in developing the scheme and of when it will be launched? I will start with Professor Riordan, please.

**Professor Riordan:** It is probably appropriate to start with me because Cardiff University has been entrusted with running this. We are now at the stage of putting together the framework under which the scheme will run, assembling the advisory board and getting all the people in place to make everything work. The timetable is that we intend to have it up and running at the beginning of the next calendar year in 2022 so that we can invite applications for students to take advantage of it in the next academic year, which is roughly from September 2022. It is about a year behind Turing.

**Professor Boyle:** We are extremely pleased that the Welsh Government have managed to find the funds to introduce this scheme. We have been very pleased with the way Cardiff University was identified as the organisation to run it. We think universities across Wales have skills in this area. Cardiff, in particular, had a large mobility presence prior to the changes we have seen recently, so it is very appropriate for Cardiff to run this. We have been very involved with Cardiff. Certainly, my colleagues speak very positively about their involvement with Cardiff colleagues in shaping the scheme and giving ideas about how it may run. To date, we are very pleased with how things are progressing.



I reiterate the point Tim made earlier. It is really important for these sorts of schemes to have a period of funding, not just year-by-year funding. The whole value of Erasmus—I am sure we will come on to Horizon Europe and other parts of the European system later—is the stability of the funding, allowing you to prepare and get yourselves organised for it. If the funding is only year by year, it makes it much less stable and much more difficult for our academic communities to engage with. We are pleased this funding has come through. We are very happy with the way it is being organised, and I think it is an appropriate timeframe to have things up and running for the next calendar year.

**Professor Davies:** The ILE scheme is innovative. We are designing it under a quite significant purview of outcomes. What we like about the scheme is that it is about outward and inward participants. It is developmental in the way in which we can develop partnerships, and we see it as a scheme that can complement the opportunities provided by Turing. We do not see this as either/or; we see it as both/and. That gives Welsh higher education an advantage in moving forward.

It is great to be part of a collaborative venture, and Cardiff University has provided the infrastructure upon which we can build. It is an all-Wales activity—it is great to see that—and it is multi-institutional and multi-sector within the education sector as a whole element of activity.

We are excited about it. We know the next six months are quite important for the way in which we develop the framework further, but there is a solid basis upon which we can build.

**Professor Woods:** I cannot add much more than colleagues have already given you, except on the last point Professor Davies made. We look forward to the prospect of being able to work with local schools and the local county authorities in the area of mobility.

Q11 **Simon Baynes:** That picks up on my next question. How will the Welsh scheme relate to the Turing programme? Will Welsh educational establishments be able to participate in both the UK and the Welsh schemes? To add another point, the Welsh Government said their new programme will “fill the gaps Turing leaves” particularly with regard to long-term funding, two-way exchanges and the inclusion of youth work. How will it do this?

**Professor Riordan:** I think these schemes are complementary. Given the stage of negotiations at the time, Turing was put together fairly swiftly and in the context of the CSR being for only one year. We understand why it is only for one year. The big question for Turing is whether or not it will become an exchange programme, and that is still to be decided. We can definitely take part in both, and they are complementary. The Erasmus scheme is still running, by the way, so many of us will have students going on Erasmus programmes for the next two to three years as we run out the funding we had on that. We put a very substantial application into Turing for over 1,000 mobilities. That is



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not including people like modern languages who have to go abroad, because they were still on Erasmus.

We will gradually move out of Erasmus and into a combination of Turing and the Welsh programme. The big difference is that the Welsh programme is not just very clearly aimed right across the educational basis—schools, colleges and universities—but it also has a youth element from Erasmus. It is more like Erasmus than Turing is, and I think the intention is to mirror a lot of the way that Erasmus operates. I am sure that is where we will end up with it, but that is not exclusively what it will do.

**Professor Boyle:** I don't have an awful lot more to add. I agree with what has been said. I think it will be very interesting. As Colin says, the Turing establishment was constrained by the one-year CSR and that is a challenge. Of course, as it goes forward, it gives an opportunity for the UK Government to reflect on whether Turing should stay the same or whether there should be changes made and so on.

The point has already been made that in the Welsh system we now have the ability, by using these complementary schemes, to effectively put in place a system that is very close to what we had previously, or still have for a short period, under Erasmus. We will have to wait to see how things develop. The UK Government will have to consider what the next stage or phase of Turing is going to look like. We will be very enthusiastic to participate in Turing as, of course, we will want to participate in the ILE as well.

**Professor Davies:** We are enthusiastic about Turing as well. As part of the UK Government's process for reaching out to individual universities, including Welsh universities, it is something that we very much appreciate. We see this as a situational advantage for Wales with the complementarity of the three programmes that we have just talked about. We see the ILE opportunity for Wales around building up networks among the sector of schools, youth work and universities in a way that builds capacity. That is a differentiator we look forward to driving further.

Bangor University has made applications under the Turing round. We are awaiting the determination of those applications, which I understand will be forthcoming towards the end of this month. We look forward to that and to collaborating fully around the three programmes.

**Professor Woods:** I don't have much more to add. I endorse pretty much all that my colleagues have said about the three schemes and their complementarity.

**Simon Baynes:** A final thought that we might address at some stage is after whom the Welsh scheme should be named. We have Erasmus and Turing. I wonder who we should have among Welsh scholars or people of high achievement. I will leave you with that thought.





Q12 **Beth Winter:** Thank you for giving your time this morning. I want to turn to research funding and to focus initially on Horizon 2020. The UK Government have agreed that the UK will participate as an associate with the 2021 to 2027 Horizon framework programme. How confident are you that Welsh higher education institutions will continue to be able to access Horizon funding?

**Professor Woods:** In our situation it is a case of size. Smaller universities have some difficulty in finding the investment from partners abroad. While we still wish to participate in these schemes and be successful in them, we are finding some obstacles with partners being reluctant to invest in the time to forge the partnerships necessary for future success.

**Professor Boyle:** I am very confident that we will continue to participate in Horizon Europe. There is real demand among our academics. The whole point about the Horizon Europe scheme is that it is a fantastic scheme for collaboration. That is the thing we were most worried about losing as a result of Brexit. It would be a huge loss if we were not able to continue in the collaborative partnerships that we have across the whole of Europe. But it is also all about competition. It is an opportunity for our academics to compete with the very best across Europe. It gives them the opportunity to try to access funds in a way that forces them to deliver the very best research and science.

We are very enthusiastic about the programme. Of course, we expect there to be something of a lag in the UK's success in this programme. Having had this period where there has been a lot of uncertainty about whether or not the UK is going to participate, it means that in some of the collaborative partnerships, which are continuous—these discussions are ongoing almost permanently among our academic colleagues—there are inevitably going to be some partnerships where people have turned elsewhere.

In particular, the UK was very successful in leading a lot of the EU collaborations. We were often the PI. I suspect we will see much less of that in the next short period, but I am confident that over the next two, three, four years we will see our ambitions realised and we will come back to where we were as a very successful nation in accessing a lot of those funds.

I go back to the point I made earlier about Erasmus, because it is also relevant to Horizon Europe. The critical point is the stability of funding. A seven-year programme of funding, usually, provides an opportunity for academics to build collaborations and their proposals, and not necessarily have to rush in one particular year but to build those proposals into the very best they can be. With the financial situation we are in, which we absolutely understand—we accept there are a lot of challenges for the UK Government to juggle—we saw a lot of uncertainty for this year's funding as to whether the money would be available, whether it would sit within UKRI or elsewhere and so on. As we go forward, we would prefer a



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situation where the funds are more stable and it is clearer how the funds will be allocated. That would encourage our academics, not only for us to engage with European partners but for our European partners to engage with us, too.

**Q13 Beth Winter:** I don't know if I share your confidence in the merits of a competitive approach, but I will come back to that. Are you confident that the UK contribution will be met over the whole period? There have been reports questioning that.

**Professor Boyle:** There has been discussion about whether or not the funds will be found, where they will be found from and what impact that might have on domestic funding for research. My personal view is that the UK Government have made it absolutely clear that they want the UK to be a science superpower. One way of achieving that is to make sure we continue to participate in what is the biggest and one of the best research systems in the world.

I certainly expect the UK Government to want to continue this, as indeed the agreements that they struck during Brexit made clear. If we think back to the conversations that were going on even right at the beginning of the very difficult Brexit negotiations, in nearly every announcement that was made the one thing that the European negotiators and the UK negotiators could agree on was that they wanted to continue to collaborate in the areas of research and science. It is quite clear to me that the UK Government, the European Commission and others absolutely see this as something that should continue.

There will be challenges for the UK Government to think about how they are going to fund that. We all understand the challenges to all of our financial situations at the current time, and clearly some difficult decisions will have to be made.

**Q14 Beth Winter:** Professor Davies, staying with Europe, to what extent do you have concerns about the end of EU structural funding and a move to the Shared Prosperity Fund and the implications that has for the HE sector?

**Professor Davies:** The significance of Horizon Europe is important because it links in with the whole issue of structural funds. We are talking here about a sophisticated system whereby structural funds have historically supported building research and innovation capacity in Wales. Wales has been particularly successful over the last 10 years in attracting significant structural funding. It is absolutely essential for building capacity.

Professor Boyle mentioned the aspirations of the UK to be a science superpower, and I think there is credibility around such an assertion, particularly with the commitment of the UK Government to increase R&D investment substantially over the three-year period. Every part of the United Kingdom has to participate in and benefit from this. It is



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absolutely essential that Wales enjoys the alternatives to structural funding, so that we can build further on the excellent capacity that we are developing in Wales.

The Wales levelling-up agenda can boost R&D investment in Wales through the university sector and will improve the competitive quality of Wales within the United Kingdom to compete globally. There are many examples throughout Wales—for example, the four universities giving evidence today—of where structural funds have made a difference.

As part of that process, when you look at Horizon Europe it makes sense to invest in this way. To make us competitive, what we bring to the table in building networks of research alliances so that we can exploit the opportunities around Horizon Europe in the best possible sense, building the economy, building capacity and building skills, are important elements of the levelling-up agenda. We are keen to see the emphasis on innovation and research and development in any substitutes for the structural funds for Wales.

**Q15 Beth Winter:** Professor Riordan, on Horizon and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, please?

**Professor Riordan:** These are obviously two different things. Horizon is about funding excellent research, and that is where you need the competition. You need the best researchers to compete against the best in the world, or in this case the best in Europe, and then you get the best coming to the top.

The structural funds and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund are regional development funds, and there you are essentially looking at innovation, connectivity and skills. The good thing about the ERDF funds was that they focused at least as much on innovation as on connectivity, new roads and broadband and so on, and skills, which meant we could align that type of funding with the excellent funding for research that comes from Horizon Europe.

The key point for us is whether the UK Shared Prosperity Fund will allow that to happen. Will we be able to align regional development funding into innovation? That would promote economic growth and jobs, and it would improve people's lives with the kind of funding that we can get from Horizon Europe and other sources, from UKRI and, in our case, the Cardiff capital region. That type of funding as well.

To me, the big challenge is how we align all of this to get the best outcomes ultimately for the people of Wales. The research and innovation that we do is a means to get an outcome. It is not just an object in itself, although science for its own sake is really important.

**Q16 Beth Winter:** Have you been party to conversations with Ministers about the post-Brexit position and the Shared Prosperity Fund?



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**Professor Riordan:** I sat on the high-level Brexit working group that looked at all of this for as long as that existed. We were never really involved with the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, so we have had very little input into that.

**Professor Boyle:** I agree with the points that have been made. The prosperity funds are a very different set of funding but a vitally important part. It is essential that the message is strong that research and innovation—particularly innovation elements but also, on the back of that, certain types of research—played a strong part in the way that structural funds made a big difference to the Welsh economy. We have to remember that.

With the way the funds are being distributed through a particular Government Department, more around communities and housing and so on, that Department does not have an awful lot of experience of the sorts of innovation that we are talking about here. If you remember, the Smith and Reid review recommended that part of the prosperity funds should be managed through Innovate UK, which is part of UKRI, because that body has a lot of experience of this type of innovation funding.

It is not to say that it cannot be done through the particular Department that the funds will be disbursed through, but there needs to be a lot of learning and a lot of understanding of how innovation can really contribute to economic development. This is one of the key issues we want to try to push for.

The second is that the prosperity funds are an opportunity to deliver the sort of levelling-up agenda that we hear the UK Government talking about a lot. One immediate way of working directly against the levelling-up agenda would be if the prosperity funds were not devolved in similar sorts of proportions to the way they were previously.

Wales benefited considerably more than other parts of the UK under the structural funds, and that is for good reason. It was based on an independent assessment of where those funds were required most in the UK. If a decision is taken that, in the end, means the proportion coming to Wales is lower than we saw under the structural funds, you could argue that is effectively acting against levelling up. If anything, we would probably hope to see a slightly higher proportion.

Thirdly, I have had the opportunity in the roles that I have—I currently chair the research and innovation group for Universities UK—to meet senior civil servants and others from that Department to help talk through how they might structure some of the funding elements of what the prosperity funds may involve. My experience of the first pilot phase is that it was a fairly quick process, and I am not entirely convinced that some of the messages we were trying to get across were taken on board, partly because of the rapidness with which they wanted to put the scheme in place.



**Q17 Beth Winter:** This is of fundamental importance for the future of the HE sector. There is undeniable evidence of increasing marketisation of the HE sector, possibly to a different degree in Wales. The University and College Union, who represent staff in the sector, have undertaken a massive amount of research with staff on this issue as well as the casualisation of staff—short-term contracts, insecure work, lower pay, huge disparities in pay—which has a significant impact on staff morale, wellbeing and the quality of research. Ultimately, it has a negative impact on the student experience.

I know that today UCU has launched its postgraduate research manifesto for postgraduate researchers. They do a lot of the same work that researchers do, but they don't get the same terms and conditions. There is industrial action being taken in various parts of the UK at the moment, and there has been in Wales. What are your thoughts on this? What can the HE sector in Wales do to prevent the increasing marketisation and, also, to address the casualisation of staff?

**Professor Davies:** It is essential that universities are good employers. It is a people business. It is something that we cherish as part of our mission. Of course, as you rightly point out, the issue is that we are in a competitive situation. We want to ensure we are in a situation where we can maintain staff morale and provide the conditions necessary to allow people to flourish.

It is around investing in talent. As research-orientated universities, it is important that we retain great talent and maintain the new blood that comes through the postgraduate arrangements. We are aware of the UCU manifesto, and working collaboratively with all colleagues—and particularly with the trade unions—is an essential part of the way in which we move forward.

Marketisation is a challenge. It is about ensuring that we maintain our values as institutions. Those values are critical in defining not just the student experience but the experience of the whole university community. That includes not just the immediate university community but the wider community, such as civic society. We certainly take those very seriously.

**Professor Boyle:** Iwan has described it extremely well. We spend a lot of time—as any organisation would, but I think particularly in the university sector—thinking hard about the people experience. That is for our student community and our staff community. We have seen very good evidence during the most recent period, the most difficult period we have ever had to experience in our sector, during this pandemic, where staff have come together with our students to provide solutions to a whole set of really challenging problems.

There is no question but that all of us are working harder than perhaps we ever have before to accommodate so much change, but the surveys we have put out among our staff suggest that, on balance, staff are very



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pleased with the way things have developed. They recognise there are strains and stresses, but they also understand that we are doing our best to try to accommodate that wherever possible.

It is important to work closely with trade unions through all of this. The relationship we have with our local trade unions in Swansea is very positive. We have had some very productive and helpful conversations about how we move forward. We have probably had more conversations with the unions during this period than we usually have because there has been so much to discuss with them about the change that is going on. I have found that extremely helpful.

Q18 **Beth Winter:** Are you committed to addressing casualisation?

**Professor Boyle:** Casualisation is one of the huge challenges that faces the sector, I agree with you. It is partly brought on for a range of reasons. We have a funding system for research, for example, which is similar to the funding system across most of the globe, based around short-term contracts. There is work to be done to think about how that system could become less fragmented and a bit more reliable, but it requires fundamental changes, not just in universities but across the funding systems that provide research contracts to our academics.

We have to remember that many academics come into the system recognising that there are short-term contracts. Some of our researchers value the opportunity to work in more than one place and expect that at the beginning of their careers. For others it is not what they expect, and it is more challenging.

I think the conversations at the moment are very positive, with UKRI, for example, which has put a real focus on culture. It is looking at casualisation and some of these other issues as part of that cultural piece of work. We will continue to be committed to working alongside the funding agencies to think about whether there are mechanisms we could use to improve on the current situation.

Q19 **Beth Winter:** Finally, I address that question to Professor Riordan. The UCU branch is very active in Cardiff, and there has been a lot of action there because of the concerns over marketisation and casualisation.

**Professor Riordan:** Marketisation is the structure of the way the system works in the UK. We have to operate within that system. We work very hard with the trade unions to ensure that our postgraduate researchers now have terms and conditions that much better reflect the type of work they do and what they ought to expect. But the structural issues will remain because, if we have people employed on research contracts, they are by nature short-term contracts for two or three years—it can be less or sometimes more. That is quite difficult, but there has been a perennial issue for many years in higher education and in research institutions generally of how to provide a sound basis for somebody to feel secure in their role when the funding for the role comes in tranches that are not



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always certain. It is a difficulty, but it is one that we absolutely recognise, and we would like to address it as best we can.

**Beth Winter:** Thank you for your time.

Q20 **Ben Lake:** Thank you very much for your time this morning. I want to turn to questions on immigration policy and how that is impacting each of your institutions. The first question is quite an open one: are Welsh universities still as attractive to EU and other international students? As we go around, let us know what proportion of students in Wales are expected to come from outside the UK in the forthcoming academic year.

**Professor Woods:** Yes, I think we are still an attractive institution to European employees. We have not seen a drop in applicants for jobs from outside the UK, although I think we have seen a slight drop in European applicants. International, outside Europe, remains buoyant, but within Europe we have found a decline. We have found a huge decline in European students, and we have been fortunate enough to make up for that drop with international applicants outside Europe, but that has been a particularly heavy hit for us.

The global talent visa approach has paid dividends for us, rather surprisingly at times. We are very interested in that scheme, and we will put more applicants through that scheme in the future. I think it is a good scheme.

**Professor Davies:** In the context of attraction and the attractiveness of the sector, the key ingredients of the sector have not changed: essentially, the cultural opportunities we provide students when they come, the satisfaction of students when they are here. It was interesting to see in the last NSS review that academic support, learning opportunities and the student voice were seen as sector leading in the UK for Wales. Also, the location of Wales, the economic advantages that coming to study in Wales provides—it is a less expensive part of the United Kingdom—the research vibrancy within the institutions, are all givens and are part of what makes Wales and the sector in Wales very attractive and, of course, the individual strengths of the Welsh higher education institutions, the universities.

On the issue of international students, and particularly European students, it is true to say that there has been a drop in European applications but that was foreseeable. There is going to be a period of readjustment. Just before the Brexit deadline, we saw a huge increase in the number of applications from Europe to Welsh institutions. I see this as readjustment, reappraisal and an opportunity to ensure that the attraction of Wales as a sector is communicated to our friends in Europe.

Part of that process is supported by our ILE programme. We are very pleased to see there is a focus on Europe. We see it not so much as a problem but as a legitimate challenge that we are seeking to achieve.



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More broadly, we are concerned about some of the immigration visa issues and particularly the deadline around the visa concession allowing remote study. That deadline is coming to a head now and we would like to see some movement there to provide at least some headroom in dealing with the pandemic for students coming internationally, particularly from red list countries.

It would be a shame not to have the opportunities that we provide for international students who provide so much vibrancy, colour, culture and energy, which is part of the experience for all students within university—these are culturally enriching assets. It is a two-way process when we greet and meet international students.

The evidence shows that attraction has not diminished. In the publicly available data, applications to Welsh higher education institutions, universities, are up this year from last year and we want to see that develop. One of the great privileges for me in seeing the global Wales initiative is a focus on making Wales an attractive, outward-looking country where universities are windows and doors to the world. These are elements that make us really strong as an offering to European students and, more widely, to international students.

**Professor Riordan:** I have been surprised at how relatively low the fall in applications from European students has been. I was expecting a much greater cliff edge with this, but we have not seen anything like the fall I was expecting. On international, again, I have been astonished by the preparedness of international students, certainly in our case, to come to Cardiff throughout the pandemic. I live right next to the university, and at the very height of it I saw new students arriving, determined to come in to study. I am quite optimistic about that, and our applications are looking very strong for next year.

We have undoubtedly benefited from the fact that Australia, which is quite a big competitor in the biggest area where we recruit, which is China—and that applies to all of us—has had its borders closed for quite some time. We can expect that, according to their plans, to start changing next year. I think they are hoping to be fully open again for students by next July. Therefore, we have a kind of grace period, but the competition for international students is going to increase over the coming year, so we have to have a focus on that. Students from all over the world like coming to study in the UK and they like coming to Wales. We are seen as a safe destination for coronavirus, which is very helpful. We have quite a lot to build on there.

**Professor Boyle:** I agree with everything that has been said already. My institution has seen a dip in European applications, as Iwan has stated, not perhaps as great as we might have imagined but there has been a bit of a dip. It has been more than accommodated by the rise we have seen in applications from elsewhere across the world. At the moment our application figures are looking much stronger than we imagined they





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would if we went back just a few months, so that is a very positive situation.

Colin is right, we have to be very cautious. In each year, in each of these recruitment phases, different challenges come along. Australia is going to come back to the fore, and they will come back very strongly and be very keen to recruit students again once they open up their borders. We have also seen a change in the President of the United States. That is going to make quite a large difference as well, because many students from across the world were perhaps discouraged from going to the United States by the previous President, but I think with the new President there is a much more open and encouraging sign for people to want to go to the United States. That is another area of competition that we will have to accept.

We also know that many European universities are now putting on many programmes in English and are starting to compete with us, and they don't necessarily charge fees that are as high as the fees we charge in the UK. There is a lot of competition. Having said that, the UK has done extremely well and Welsh universities have done extremely well through this. We offer an excellent service. The higher education we provide is world class. Therefore, despite all the challenges, I am still confident that we will continue to attract students from across the world into what we are trying to deliver.

Iwan raised the issue of the deadline that is coming up for visas and whether or not students can study online. We think that is an essential change that has to happen very soon. Of course, it relates to how we would accommodate the large number of students who might arrive from red quarantine countries. At the moment it is difficult for me to see how they will be properly accommodated, given the very large numbers of students wanting to arrive across the whole UK. Extending that deadline would allow us to stagger the numbers of students coming into the UK and into Wales, so we are very supportive of an extension to that if at all possible.

Q21 **Ben Lake:** Thank you, Professor Boyle. That is certainly something I will make a note of, and I am sure this Committee will look to pursue it further.

My final question relates to something that every one of you has touched on, which is competition for international students in the coming years. Without having a crystal ball, I know it is difficult to anticipate what new challenges we may be facing, but is there anything in the immigration system and especially visas that you think could be amended or changed to help the offer to international students? I know it is difficult to compete on other aspects that Australia or the United States may offer potential students, but are there any particular issues of immigration policy that are causing specific barriers?



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**Professor Riordan:** I have been talking to some of our partners about this, and I don't think it is so much the policy. The policy is a massive improvement on what we had in previous years, but the point is that we are not really getting the message out. Applicants are not aware that our visa system has been reformed. They are not aware of the post-study work visa, for example, and how accommodating the Home Office now is in helping students with things like remote study visas and that sort of thing.

We need to get the message out about how successful vaccination is in the UK. People look at the infection rate and it looks bad, but if you look at the actual consequences it is much more comforting, as is being able to offer incoming students a rapid vaccination if they need it. That sort of message needs to get out. We all need to come together to get that out across the world to potential applicants, agents and partner universities.

**Professor Boyle:** I agree with Colin. The changes we have seen in recent times are positive. They have made a big difference, but it does need better communication. Frankly, if we want to do a better job of attracting more students—and the UK Government have stated an ambition to attract far more international students into the UK—the one area that is really popular among students is the post-study work part of the visa.

Being able to stay in the UK and work after they have finished their studies is a very attractive part of the visa system, particularly for students from countries like India and other parts of the world where they want the opportunity not just to learn here but to participate in the work environment, even if they don't do that for many years, as part of their experience when they come to the UK. If we are looking for ways to deliver on the expansion of student numbers, that part of the visa system is always the one I would look to first.

**Professor Davies:** Collaboration between the various agencies is also important, as is communication. As has already been mentioned, as part of driving up the UK ambition we are now pioneering in Wales what we call a system-to-system approach to substantially increase the number of international students. We have something quite unique in Wales. We can mobilise the university sector. We can mobilise the economic sector, the Welsh Government, the funding council and the tourist board. We can bring together the British Council in a way that is fleet of foot.

We can offer a complete service for an interface with emerging jurisdictions throughout the world. We are very proud of the recent agreement we put in place with Telangana in India and the relationship we are developing with Vietnam. All of these are wholesome and are based upon an outward looking and policy-focused emphasis. We are looking at this in a holistic, complete way and that is something we are hugely optimistic about for the future.

**Ben Lake:** Thank you to you all.



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Q22 **Chair:** We are going to wrap up now because we are approaching 10 o'clock. I will ask a final brief question, perhaps just to Professor Riordan. Obviously. Last year was incredibly challenging financially for higher education right across the UK. The Welsh Government stepped in with the recovery fund, £23 million, to support Welsh universities. Is a similar fund going to be necessary for this coming year, the financial year we are in? Is there a discussion happening with Welsh Government, or have those problems been put in the past now? Is there more financial security around the sector?

**Professor Riordan:** Obviously I am not privy to what is going on in each individual university, but we are undoubtedly through the worst of this. We know a lot more about what we are dealing with. We can have more understanding and certainty about student recruitment. We are not out of the woods yet, to coin a phrase, but we are not far off it. We need to see the Welsh Government continuing down the road of funding the Reid report for innovation, continuing with funding the Diamond settlement in a "business as usual" way rather than necessarily a rescue fund. It remains to be seen. We will have to see how things pan out, but I hope that is the kind of situation we will be in so that we are on a sustainable footing whatever buffets come up.

**Chair:** Thank you very much to you all. We really appreciate your time this morning and your very helpful answers to our questions. My thanks also to my colleagues on the Committee. It has been very useful. Have a great day, everybody.