

# Future Directions for Higher Education in Wales

Students as Partners: Lessons Learnt  
May 2013



future directions  
for higher education in wales



cyfeiriadau'r dyfodol  
ar gyfer addysg uwch yng nghymru



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## Introduction

In response to the Welsh Assembly Government's strategy for higher education, For our Future (Department for Children Education Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2009), representatives from all major higher education stakeholders agreed to a focused enhancement theme for Wales – Graduates for our Future - built around three major work strands: Learning for Employment, Learning in Employment and Students as Partners. The work strands were officially launched in March 2011 and the three groups set about discussing how they could best capture innovation and practice from the sector. The work strands each produced a collection of case studies published by the Higher Education Academy in April 2012.

The purpose of the Students as Partners work strand was for staff and students involved in Welsh higher education to share best practice and develop ideas to enhance student engagement. The strand is made up of students and staff from each Welsh higher education institution, sector agencies, and interest groups including the National Union of Students (NUS) and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

During the last three years the group has:

- Focused on **three themes**:
  - Student representation;
  - Students supporting students;
  - Curriculum development.
- Collated **case studies** detailing current practice and developmental work;
- Presented our journey and developed future projects at the inaugural Welsh Future Directions **learning and teaching conference**;
- Created and disseminated the **“Jargon buster”**: defining acronyms used in higher education
- Organised **Students as Partners in Practice**: an event enabling students and staff in higher education, to improve and develop understanding of working partnerships;
- Heard from expert **guest speakers** inside and outside of Wales;
- Reported our findings to **national UK conferences**.

The work strand has enabled universities and students' unions to evaluate the projects that they were undertaking, understand their worth and develop further projects using the experiences of others.

The practical events have enabled students across Wales to understand how much the sector values student input. They have also given staff the opportunity to work with students on an equal playing field, to understand the barriers to, and the enthusiasm from students for, partnership working.

This leaflet is an evaluative document that seeks to draw together lessons learnt and knowledge gained from the work strand and from working with students (and staff) in partnership in practice.

## Case studies

Staff and students from every Welsh university submitted case studies relevant to the three themes: student representation, students supporting students, and curriculum development. Similarities and differences within the case studies are summarised below:

### Student representation

Each institution had a system of student representation but with varying hierarchies and reward structures. Similarities which tended to lead to success were:

- Representatives for **every course and module**;
- More **senior representatives** having extra responsibilities;
- Representatives that fed up to Students' Unions and institutional senior management;
- A **forum** for representatives to discuss cross-disciplinary issues;
- Representatives **gathered information** from, and fed-back to, students; ;
- Successes and barriers were **reported** each year, either by the union or senior representatives ;
- Representatives were asked to **feed into institutional strategic policy**;
- Institutions and Students' Unions closed **the feedback loop**; students knew the difference they had made.

Differences included:

- **Rewarding** the senior representatives:
  - **Monetary benefits** could enhance the position of representatives (e.g. employed like staff) but it could also make them less independent;
  - **Non-financial benefits** such as free courses and club tickets were an inexpensive way to reflect privilege but could attract candidates who were focused on rewards;
  - **Awards ceremonies** rewarded the highest achieving representatives and were given at the end of the year but could only celebrate the work of a few.
- **Recognising** the representative system:
  - **Clothing** and badges could clearly identify representative but this only has an impact if it was worn by representatives and seen as positive by others;
  - **Branding** and logos could give an identity but could go unnoticed or be divisive;
  - **No visual recognition** could lead to low awareness of, or inapproachable, representatives.

### Students supporting students

The number of these projects was increasing. They were designed around induction processes or particular groups of students, such as mature students. In most cases the institution provided the funding, framework or supervision for the project, whilst student groups either supported each other or volunteers supported a vulnerable group of students. Similarities which tended to lead to successful collaborations were:

- **Assessing the need for support** through collected student data;
- **Measuring the project outcomes**, if possible, through the same data source;
- Students having **ownership** of the project;
- **Raising awareness** of the support on offer;
- **Commitment** from key students;
- **Interaction** facilitated in a way that was appropriate to the targeted group of students;
- Appropriate **training** for students who were supporting students.

## Curriculum development (Student voice in learning and teaching)

This was the newest area of student-staff collaboration within the themes and the case studies reflect students becoming more involved in designing their curriculum. This led to a change in the theme's title half-way through our work to Student voice in learning and teaching.

Many Welsh institutions had small-scale projects, where all students were feeding into the development of the academic years they had completed or small groups of students were working with tutors to help create new modules. These projects tended to depend on the enthusiasm of individual lecturers rather than being embedded in university strategy, with differing views on the input students should have on their curriculum.

Similarities which tended to lead to successful collaborations were:

- **Induction** processes were key in initially engaging students and raising awareness of opportunities involved with curriculum development;
- **Students researching** development options, such as using student-led focus groups;
- **Paying students** through summer internships to complete projects;
- **Good communication**, trust and respect between students and staff;
- **Clear expectations of what was involved with the project and** from students and staff.

Find all the case studies at:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/events/academyevents/2012/Students\\_as\\_Partners\\_190412\\_1138\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/events/academyevents/2012/Students_as_Partners_190412_1138_FINAL.pdf)

## HEA Future Directions learning and teaching conference

On 26 April 2012, the work strand participated in the inaugural Welsh learning and teaching conference and ran six workshops: two on each theme. The three morning sessions aimed to report on the case studies; the afternoon workshops focused on horizon scanning. The majority of these workshops were led by students currently working in partnership with their institutions, which gave staff an opportunity to understand what students wanted from partnership working. The event enabled students to understand how much staff valued students' opinions, with one student commenting in the final plenary that he had not imagined events like this existed; where so many staff got together to talk about working with students. The conference reinforced and validated the reported lessons learnt from the case studies.

## Jargon buster

We understood that using higher education jargon within meetings could be a barrier to students and staff working in partnership so we created a 'jargon buster'. This was a comprehensive list that defined acronyms and jargon used within higher education, such as "academic standards," "FE" and "VBL". Whilst the jargon buster was a useful resource, there are other ways that institutions could make sure that meetings are always accessible to representatives.

Download the jargon buster here:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/nations/wales/jargon\\_buster.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/nations/wales/jargon_buster.pdf)

## Students as Partners in Practice

In November 2012 the Student as Partners work strand ran an event to develop the themes and to induct students who were new to working in partnership. It also aimed to raise awareness of the strand. The day was divided into plenary sessions and workshops with students and staff exploring the potential limits to partnership working and what it fundamentally meant to be a student partner.

We wanted the day to be as accessible as possible for participants and to be used as a resource for those who did not attend. A Facebook group was set up to allow students to network and share resources and the Twitter hashtag was used on the day and afterwards to share resources and views.

The event was attended by around 70 students and staff, from all Welsh institutions. The feedback included comments about participants changing their view on what 'students as partners' meant and getting practical ideas on further projects or improvements they could make.

The day focused on the three themes but students and staff were also invited to give their definitions of what they believed 'students as partners' meant. These definitions were then used as the basis for a series of workshops at national conferences. Definitions included:

- Involvement of both parties at all stages and levels of decision making;
- Students having an active part in their experience rather than being passive learners;
- Advising each other as equals;
- Students getting involved and making a difference.

Students and staff used the event as a safe space in which to freely debate ideas and it was suggested that it should become an annual event.

## Reporting our findings

Throughout the last two years the Students as Partners strand has aimed to communicate its findings to the higher education sector by providing workshops and information at a number of national and bespoke conferences. These have included Grwp Landrillo- Menai HE Conference 2012, the HEA Annual Conference 2013 and the Students as Producers Conference 2013. Another outcome is other sector groups, such as the Wales Student Health Forum, want to join the project and use our expertise.

The members of the Students as Partners work strand hope that this leaflet has proved useful. For further reading on student representation; students supporting students and the student voice in learning and teaching please see the case study collection by following the link:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/events/academyevents/2012/Students\\_as\\_Partners\\_190412\\_1138\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/events/academyevents/2012/Students_as_Partners_190412_1138_FINAL.pdf)

Sarah Ingram  
Students as Partners work strand leader  
Cardiff University  
May 2013



# About Future Directions

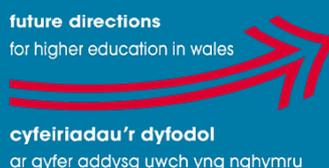
The higher education sector in Wales is committed to delivering the best possible student experience. This means continuously working to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. In higher education, this is called 'quality enhancement' and it can take place at university, department and course level. Universities and further education colleges who offer higher education in Wales are working together on a quality enhancement programme called 'Future Directions'.

The Future Directions programme is unique to Wales. Universities, staff, students, further education colleges, and a range of organisations are working together. This approach works in Wales because of its size – it's small enough to bring together all the key players, but big enough to offer a wide diversity of universities and creative ways of doing things. The programme aims to enhance specific areas of the student learning experience. This includes sharing practice and generating ideas for innovation in learning and teaching.

The Future Directions work is coordinated by the Higher Education Academy and is owned by Wales' higher education sector. Future Directions takes a thematic approach; working together on a specific area or theme at a time. The themes are chosen by the higher education sector, for the higher education sector.

The current theme is Graduates for Our Future with three work strands: Learning for Employment, Learning in Employment and Students as Partners.

To find out more about Future Directions, please visit: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/wales/future-directions>



## Contact us

**The Higher Education Academy**  
**c/o Higher Education Wales**  
**2 Caspian Point**  
**Caspian Way**  
**Cardiff Bay**  
**Cardiff, CF10 4DQ**

**+44 (0)292 047 1520**  
**wales@heacademy.ac.uk**

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to senior management. We offer services at a generic learning and teaching level as well as in 28 different disciplines. Through our partnership managers we work directly with HE providers to understand individual circumstances and priorities, and bring together resources to meet them. The HEA has knowledge, experience and expertise in higher education. Our service and product range is broader than any other competitor.

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