

The Welsh Universities and Devolution

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the story of higher education in Wales from the creation of the University of Wales in 1893 to the present day. The granting of a charter to the federal university represented one of the major achievements of cultural nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After the Second World War the situation changed dramatically with the expansion in student numbers, an increasing percentage of whom were born outside Wales. This expansion was accompanied by a major attempt to defederalize the national University. Two further step changes are analysed. From the 1980s the system has been conditioned by continued expansion in student numbers in the context of economic contraction, imposing hitherto unprecedented strains. Rationalization came with the 1992 Education Act which demolished the binary line between university and local authority institutions of higher education. Devolution, in the form of the National Assembly for Wales and its government after 1999, is then evaluated in the context of changing manifestations of nationality bearing on the higher education system. The evaluations of the Assembly's Education Committee and the responsible Minister are probed in some depth in an attempt to understand the implications for the people of Wales of international institutions of higher education operating in a devolved political system, while the national University fragments.

Introduction

The underlying argument in this article is that the creation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 was the overt symbol of a sea-change in the manifestation of national identity over the previous century, and that nowhere has this been of more consequence than in the field of higher education. A little over a century ago a reinvigorated cultural nationalism achieved practical outcome in the shape of various national institutions. One of the most potent of these was the University of Wales, established in 1893, symbol of the aspirations of the Welsh people and repository of immense popular support. For much of the twentieth century it virtually monopolized higher education in Wales, although St David's College, Lampeter, opening in 1827 to train students for the Anglican priesthood, remained outside until after the Second World War.

Other institutions, immediately vocational, which were eventually to form the core of higher education establishments in the latter part of the twentieth century, either existed or were about to be created. For example, the Swansea Training College started in 1872, while the training college at Caerleon was established in the early twentieth century under the auspices of the Monmouthshire local authority. The School of Mines in Treforest opened in 1913, an institution which, after various metamorphoses, has become the University of Glamorgan. None of these, however, at any time assumed the role of national icon which was vested in the University of Wales, a role which arguably remained, however tarnished and diminished, at least until the 1980s. Even in the 1990s, with the exception of the University of Glamorgan and the non-residential Open University in Wales, aspirant institutions of higher education in Wales – for example, the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education and Trinity College, Carmarthen – clamoured to join the University of Wales. Indeed, at the time of writing, with the University of Wales in its traditional sense about to disintegrate, only Cardiff University has defected, and only the University of Glamorgan and the unique Open University in Wales have never been members. For this reason the underlying argument relates substantially to the constituent institutions of the University of Wales throughout the early part of this article, only having to be modified with the dramatic changes in government policy over higher education since the 1980s and, particularly, the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992.

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Beginnings

The article's title embraces an overarching paradox, itself subsuming the numerous paradoxes which thread their way through the story. On 30 November 1893, when the University of Wales was granted its charter, Wales possessed no institutions of statehood – indeed there was no obvious legal recognition of its existence. United with England in 1536–1543 by Acts of Union, no separate Acts of the Westminster Government (other than in the Cromwellian era) had applied to Wales for hundreds of years until the 1880s. Even then, only the 1889 Welsh Intermediate Education Act was of real constitutional significance in recognizing Wales as a separate entity. That Act, as well as providing Wales with a separate system of secondary education aided by the state, paved the way for the establishment of two university colleges, one serving south Wales, the other north. The former was eventually located in Cardiff, the latter in Bangor. The Act infamously ignored the fate of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth which had been preparing students from Wales for degrees of the University of London since 1872, but in practice this symbol of Welsh determination to provide a higher education for some of its citizens in the face of the most adverse conditions lived on to become one of the founder institutions of the University of Wales, along with the University College of North Wales, Bangor and the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff (the Welsh National School of Medicine became a separate constituent institution in 1931).

Students at all its constituent institutions became graduates of the University of Wales, not of the individual colleges.¹ It was a federal university,² but all its students were required to be resident. In the words of Geraint Jenkins, 'this was undoubtedly the crown and summit of the Liberal ascendancy in Wales in the late Victorian era, for the charter realised a dream which had fired the imagination of the people of Wales since the days of Owain Glyndwr'.³ So, the highly distinctive University of Wales was born, one of the most potent symbols thereafter of national achievement in a 'stateless' Wales, product of a resurgent self-esteem at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Wales's Liberal allegiance had ensured that economic prosperity and dynamism combined with an unprecedented cultural nationalism to translate into a series of cultural icons. The creation of the University of Wales was complemented by a separate system of state-funded intermediate schools, the Central Welsh Board to inspect and examine those schools and, in the first decade of the twentieth

century, the National Museum of Wales and the National Library of Wales. Even the disestablishment of the Church in Wales was achieved in principle before the First World War, though implemented only in 1920.

The University of Wales had a claim to be the major symbol of the intellectual and cultural independence of Wales from its vastly more powerful neighbour. Viriamu Jones, first Principal of the College in Cardiff, regarded the University Court as the educational parliament of Wales,⁴ originally even aspiring to fulfil the functions later vested in the Central Welsh Board in relation to Welsh secondary education. While the University did not do so, its power over the schools was enormous in that it imposed matriculation requirements which effectively dominated the curriculum of the schools and supplied the external examiners who set the standards for examination success. In due course it was to have a similar dominating influence over the training colleges of Wales.

The contribution of the national University to safeguarding the intellectual and cultural heritage of Wales can hardly be overestimated. For the first time, there was an institutional focus for professional academics in subjects such as Welsh, history and geography, whose rigorous scholarship structured the cultural past of Wales. This was enhanced in 1920 with the setting up of the Board of Celtic Studies which had the specific function of fostering scholarship in Welsh language and literature, history and law, and archaeology and art. The Haldane Commission, set up in 1916,⁵ also recommended the creation of the University of Wales Press Board, whose function from 1922 was to publish academic works relating to Wales or by Welsh scholars. There was therefore a corporate involvement of all the colleges in these areas of study, and a means of publishing the resulting research. Welsh cultural independence had been recognised and its chief custodian, for many, was the University of Wales. Not that this silenced continued and vociferous criticism that the University was insufficiently Welsh in character.

Although the University College of Swansea became a fourth constituent member in 1920 as a result of the recommendations of the Haldane Commission, and there was modest expansion in all colleges during the first half of the twentieth century, the University of Wales remained a national institution not only in its academic responsibilities but in that the great majority of its students were born in Wales. In 1900–1, Cardiff, largest of the Welsh colleges, had 628 students, only forty-two born outside Wales.⁶ In 1937–8 there were 2,970 students in the University, all but 8 per cent from state schools.⁷ In 1939 only 8 per cent of students in the University were born outside Wales.⁸

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The first revolution

In the post-Second World War years that situation changed radically. First, as increased numbers of state scholarships and, above all, local authority awards allowed a degree of financial independence, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, numbers of students increased dramatically. Secondly, and independently, there was a greater emphasis on university education in the round and the experience of collegiate life, which resulted in a vast increase in the numbers of halls of residence for men as well as women. Such facilities had previously been largely regarded as providing communal living for women students who needed moral policing. The overall result was that the tendency of the Welsh colleges to draw their students first from their local area, then from the rest of Wales – usually as a matter of financial necessity – changed dramatically. By 1964–5, for the first time, students from outside Wales (53 per cent) outnumbered those from Wales.⁹ Thirdly, this sea-change within a vastly expanded university sector was predicated on the expectation from the 1960s that ever-increasing provision of higher education and training would be linked with economic prosperity in economies which were becoming ever more dependent on service industries and what came to be called intellectual property. The whole aspect of the University of Wales changed under the impact of government policies. In the two decades after 1939 student numbers increased to over 6,000.¹⁰ This was to prove a mere prelude to the expansion of the 1960s. By 1972 the number had jumped to 15,469.¹¹

To accommodate this increase new buildings proliferated. In Aberystwyth, for example, the centre of gravity moved from Old College to a wholly new campus in Penglais, while Swansea's building programme was similarly dramatic on the twenty-seven acres of land donated to the college by Swansea Corporation in 1950. The nature of the University of Wales changed as it incorporated new institutions. In 1968 the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology emerged from the College of Advanced Technology which had itself been born of the Cardiff Technical College in 1957, and in 1971 St David's College Lampeter joined the University of Wales.

At the same time, the position of the University of Wales at the centre of higher education seemed to have been consolidated when Anthony Crosland had made it clear in 1965 that a binary line existed between the university institutions of higher education, chartered, self-governing and financed largely by the University Grants Committee (set up in 1919 to ensure the independence of universities from central government), and other

institutions such as technical colleges and colleges of education which came under the aegis of the local authorities. For example, the College of Advanced Technology in Cardiff fell into the former sector, while the Glamorgan College of Technology, to become the Glamorgan Polytechnic in 1970, fell into the latter.¹² In hindsight, it is clear that the pace of change in the local authority sector would continue unabated for decades to come. Mono-technic institutions such as the colleges of education, technical colleges and the colleges of art were no longer able to survive either economic or policy pressures. The major casualty in Wales was Barry College of Education, which merged with the Glamorgan Polytechnic in 1975 thus, significantly, breaching the monopoly of the University of Wales over the award of teacher training qualifications in Wales. The Council of National Academic Awards was already validating degrees at the Glamorgan Polytechnic.

A major reorganization of teacher training in 1970s saw the eventual demise of the Barry College in 1977. Other institutions merged to form, for example, the West Glamorgan Institute of Higher Education and the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, amalgamating colleges of education, technical colleges and, in the case of Swansea and Cardiff, colleges of art. Trinity College Carmarthen, alone, retained its independence. All of these institutions, however, remained firmly in the maintained sector of the binary line until the watershed of 1992.

Tensions

Given the scale of change within the university system, particularly its expansion, it is hardly surprising that the tensions within the University of Wales should surface overtly. The most significant early manifestation of this came in 1960 with the attempt to defederalize. There had always been rivalries between constituent institutions. A bitter battle between Swansea and Cardiff for the location of the original south Wales college had generated considerably more heat than light. Cardiff academics were greatly put out that the charter of the University of Wales was conferred on the University by the Prince of Wales in Aberystwyth.¹³ The scramble among the principal towns of Wales to house the University Registry was even more unseemly, but thereafter the nature of the University of Wales changed relatively little during the first half of the twentieth century. In contrast, the acceleration in the pace of change from the 1950s could hardly have been more dramatic, both in terms of numbers and in the increasing proportion of students born

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outside Wales. As a result, the forces for defederalizing grew more potent. In 1960 a university commission was set up to review the structure of the University.¹⁴ The exercise was acrimonious and the nature of the debate was, in the context of devolution, significant. Those who advocated the disbanding of the University of Wales in favour of separate university institutions did so substantially on the basis of efficiency of administration, arguing, with some justification, that the overarching machinery of the University delayed decision-making and involved duplication. This argument was essentially mechanistic. Those who upheld the principle of a national university emphasized its centrality to the recent history and culture of the nation and its fundamental contribution to the education of its people. The commission split down the middle, fourteen members wanting to break up the University into its constituent elements, twelve wishing to preserve it. Despite three of the four college principals being adamant for defederalization the University Court (then a powerful body) endorsed the minority report. The whole unifying exercise had taken four years.

In the 1970s other developments undermined the national University's foundations. In Bangor, in the heart of Welsh-speaking Wales, only a fifth of students in 1980 came from Wales. In 1985 a possible portent of things to come saw the establishment of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies in Aberystwyth with separate University Grants Committee funding and resulted in the creation of the firmest footing ever for the scholarly study of aspects of Welsh life so fundamental to a sense of nationhood. Until that time the guardianship of research and intellectual inquiry into the language, literature and history of Wales had lain with the university colleges, together with the Board of Celtic Studies. Nevertheless, under the pressures outlined above there was no guarantee that these areas would continue to be focal points of interest in the individual colleges.¹⁵ The creation of a designated centre may therefore be seen as a new way of ensuring that such crucial concerns continue in Wales whatever disintegrative forces operate within the university system.

If the expansion of the post-Robbins era in the 1960s and early 1970s had changed the nature of the University of Wales then the economies imposed from the later 1970s began again the process of undermining its federal structure, this time fatally. The economic crisis was accompanied by a wider crisis of ethos and *raison d'être* which similarly laid siege to any notion of a national university safeguarding what was precious in the higher culture of its society. Particularly with the Thatcher era from 1979, the predominance of competition and market forces as the pre-eminent dynamic

of universities resulted in university institutions being modelled on business organizations, with vice-chancellors occupying the role of chief executives. The liberal humanist model of Western universities gave way to an internationalist multinational model eventually to be based, with the introduction of student fees, on payment for a service 'delivered' through an economic contract. Within this model the nation and its culture are peripheral. Any organizational manifestation of that notion (which had provided the rationale for the creation of the University of Wales) would inevitably be seen as increasingly superfluous. The 1985 Jarratt Report on university efficiency was an early stage towards a world of cost effectiveness, economies of scale, the Quality Assurance Agency (created in 1997) and research assessment exercises, all encapsulating the notion of individual institutions operating as independent businesses with measurable criteria of success.

Within this model, fully endorsed and in some respects inspired by a Westminster government which had full oversight of the university system, individual institutions in Wales had to be motivated by competition to a greater extent than ever before. The only merger was the shotgun marriage of University College, Cardiff and the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology in 1988, brought about in the unique circumstances of the virtual bankruptcy of the former in 1987, which 'shook to its foundations not only the University but the whole of the British higher education system'.¹⁶ This financial and institutional fiasco also served to highlight the lack of authority of the University of Wales, by now far less able to steer the fundamental changes soon to take place. There was no longer any corporate ethos. Each institution looked to its own interest.

There was, however, one intractable problem. Even the newly combined university college in Cardiff was no colossus compared with some of the English giants. Other constituent members of the University were relatively tiny, and it was obvious that in this new market-driven climate not only competition for students but also for all-important research funding would be concentrated on the biggest institutions. Even in 1992 there were only 30,000 students in the six constituent institutions of the University of Wales, 11,000 of those in University of Wales, Cardiff.¹⁷

Centripetal or centrifugal?

One proposed solution to the problem of size harked back to the earliest days. In 1989 the Daniel Report stressed that university colleges in Wales

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could only be big players in this brave new world if they co-operated as a unit under the aegis of the University of Wales. As a result, a new co-ordinating post, that of Deputy Pro-Chancellor, a joint planning and resources committee and university subject panels provided the machinery for planning teaching and research, both to avoid duplication and to provide a unit large enough to attract major research funding. Some rationalization of subject provision and research followed. Nevertheless, the increasingly centralized structure envisaged in the Daniel Report rested on a model of control which would have created difficulties even in the circumstances prevailing when the University of Wales was first created. In a situation in which institutions had to cater for massively increased funded student numbers, the degree of co-operation and self-abnegation required to rationalize planning on a Wales-wide scale by these means was never going to be forthcoming. It was made virtually impossible by the revolution wrought by the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 which created separate funding councils in Wales and England for higher (and further) education, did away with Crosland's binary line drawn in 1965 and, at a stroke, made possible a dramatic increase in the number of potential university institutions. This sector would now incorporate not only the constituent institutions of the University of Wales but those – for example, the institutes of higher education – which had previously been financed, and therefore substantially controlled by, the local authorities. Such institutions were now to become incorporated, with a much enhanced degree of independence.

The logistics of accommodating them within the University of Wales proved daunting, with forces for change acting in different directions. The Glamorgan Polytechnic, on becoming the University of Glamorgan in 1992, chose to remain outside the University of Wales. Other institutions like the presently-named University of Wales Institute, Cardiff and the University of Wales, Newport sought University of Wales constituent status. But their success was another factor in motivating some of the original members, particularly Cardiff, to distance themselves from this less exclusive University. The binary line might now have disappeared, but it ushered in other status symbols and aspirations, most notably Cardiff's successful bid to join the self-appointed Russell Group of elite universities.

Further paradox lay in the mechanism of funding. The vast majority of civic university income had always come directly or indirectly from central government, particularly since the student expansion of the second half of the twentieth century. Originally, the notion of academic freedom from

government had been sufficiently strong to channel these funds at arm's length through the University Grants Committee (UGC) which had provided stability through quinquennial grants. In the changed circumstances of the 1990s such balmy days for university administrators were a distant memory. As a result of the 1992 Act the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) came into existence in 1993. Since the UGC had a British remit, HEFCW represented financial devolution. In theory, at any rate, the Welsh higher education institutions were, by this mechanism, more accountable to the people of Wales, although only with the creation of the National Assembly in 1999 did a more formal process of democratic accountability come into existence. At the same time, both in matters of funding and in underlying trends, the university system is far less amenable to local control than schools. Much of the research funding is still channelled through the research councils which have a British remit, while all higher education institutions have to compete for students on a world stage, with non-European Union students being particularly attractive financial prizes.

Under the impact of the 1992 Act no vision of an expanded national university, symbol of a nation's cultural independence and aspirations, could be realized. The Council of the University, acknowledging the inevitable, commissioned Sir Melvyn Rosser to produce a document in 1993 which essentially recognized the right of the constituent institutions to determine their own destinies in teaching and research, subject not to the University of Wales but to Audit Commission, QAA and the HEFCW. For the University of Wales as the kind of institution envisaged by its creators the writing was on the wall. The Rosser Report inevitably saw the University's diminished role as granting degrees, safeguarding standards and being responsible for such pan-Wales academic institutions as the University of Wales Press and its conference centre, Gregynog. For the moment, its constituent institutions merely changed their titles.

Devolution of government

By the time the Welsh Assembly Government came into existence in 1999, the higher education system in Wales had changed out of all recognition from that created in 1893. It consisted of thirteen institutions, not three. It had been revolutionised by the 1992 Act. It now operated substantially under the influence of market forces. Collegiality had been eroded by

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competition. Systems of accountability now existed which would have been unrecognizable to university academics as late as the 1960s. In this vastly expanded system a pecking order had developed, underpinned particularly by successive research assessment exercises (RAEs). The distribution of research money was dependent on the results of the RAEs.

While it was the 1992 Act which fundamentally changed the structure of higher education in Wales, from 1999 it was the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) which had to oversee the operation of the new higher education system and help steer it in the direction which would best serve the needs of the people of Wales. It was a highly significant player because it interacted between the governing bodies responsible for individual institutions and the multinational competitive world in which HEIs had to compete for students and research funding. The situation confronting the Assembly was exceptionally difficult. The higher education sector in Wales was big business. Total income in 2000/2001 was £641 million. In the Assembly's first year there were more than 62,000 full-time students and 30,000 part-time students in the sector. However, they were distributed across multiple HEIs, virtually all of them very small by the standards of the English big hitters. The monopoly of the University of Wales had disappeared – only eight of the institutions were constituent members, although most others were associate members and awarded its degrees. The Welshness of higher education had been eroded institutionally to complement the fact that half the students were now born outside Wales.

In the circumstances the structure of higher education in Wales was bound to be one of the Assembly's priorities. First, in 2002 the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee of the Assembly produced its Policy Review of Higher Education. It reported that there were thirteen institutions of higher education, all but one 'part of, or associated with, the University of Wales'.¹⁸ The committee went on to endorse a definition of the purposes of higher education given to it by Lord Dearing which included a 'nourish[ing of] a distinctive culture and its values'.¹⁹ The committee then proceeded to include in its vision two elements specific to Wales, the role of higher education in revitalizing Wales, and its responsibility for promotion of the Welsh language and the benefits of bilingualism, before making three main recommendations of specific significance. It recommended that there should be a 'revised structure of our higher education based on the cluster model', that HEFCW should 'adopt a more proactive strategic planning role' and that there should be a review of the 'appropriateness of the present University of Wales structure'.²⁰

Although the committee did not set itself the task of advocating an institutional pattern for the future of higher education, the report incidentally made suggestions for merger. For example, it recommended closer research collaboration between the University of Wales, Cardiff and the University of Wales College of Medicine with a view to possible merger.²¹ Similarly its chapter on widening access suggested that closer collaboration between the University of Glamorgan, the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff and the University of Wales, Newport might result in them merging.²² The committee accepted that the relationship of HEIs with each other and with government is not susceptible to the enforcement of a centrally imposed pattern. They are independent corporate bodies appointing their own governing bodies, although they are accountable to government by way of these governing bodies and through a variety of controls – for example, HEFCW and the QAA. The quality of their research work is regularly judged. Nevertheless, their relationship with each other is ultimately a matter for them, however much their thinking might be moulded by financial incentives from the Funding Council.

Having said that, it was obvious by the time that *Reaching Higher*, the Assembly Government's blueprint for the development of higher education in Wales, appeared in March 2002 that HEFCW, under the aegis of the Welsh Assembly Government, had taken over any planning of the higher education sector that was to take place: 'HEFCW will continue to be central to the delivery of our [the Assembly government's] aims for higher education. The contents of this strategy [*Reaching Higher*] will shape successive remit letters to the Council setting out guidance as to what will be required of it and by when. We will monitor the Council's performance against these requirements . . . We endorse the view that HEFCW should adopt a more proactive strategic planning role.'²³ In terms of the history of higher education in Wales this was devolution on the grand scale, symbolism being replaced by the practicalities of power. The national government had now taken over from the national university. *Reaching Higher* set out an admirably ambitious vision for the higher education sector in Wales to be realized by 2010. That vision was of a higher education sector distinguished by its excellence in teaching and research, providing increased access for less advantaged groups and integrating more dynamically with the Welsh economic base. An essential prerequisite would be the reconfiguration of the sector to achieve a reduction in costs, based on clustering and collaboration which would in turn immeasurably strengthen the research base.²⁴

It was taken as axiomatic in *Reaching Higher* that in the new higher education world of the twenty-first century there was no place in a small

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country like Wales for thirteen institutions of higher education. Indeed, the document expressed the forlorn hope that 'by 2010 we intend that higher education in Wales be defined less by institutions than by networks of excellence'.²⁵ The 'clustering' theme was reiterated yet more strongly in the section on research.²⁶ The inter-relationship between academic research and commercial, industrial and business development within the Welsh economy required that the Welsh higher education sector should attract research funding on a scale which would allow at least some of the research and development deficit within Wales to be rectified. Welsh HEIs attract only 3 per cent of the research funding in the United Kingdom, half of what should be its share on the basis of population.

Tiny institutions could not turn this situation around. Government priority now was that the Welsh higher education sector contribute increasingly to the Welsh economy. In any case, without a successful economy the cultural and linguistic contributions envisaged in the early days could not materialize. It would now be Wales's government operating through HEFCW, not the University of Wales, which would attempt to increase the numbers of students taking their higher education through the medium of Welsh, or finance the publication of works of academic rather than commercial worth through the University of Wales Press. It would also be the Assembly Government which would be held to account if the 'Welshness' of the higher education sector – in terms of Welsh-language provision, the attractiveness of Welsh institutions to those born in Wales and the amount of research directed towards matters of importance to Wales – was deemed to be inadequate or underfunded.²⁷

It would seem that the authority of the people's government to plan rationally for education would be considerably greater than that of the historic University of Wales, even when the latter's moral authority was sanctioned by the people of Wales at the end of the nineteenth century. After all, the dependence of higher education on the state for funding is now at unprecedentedly high levels. Nevertheless, there are considerable constraints on the ability of government radically to alter the structure of higher education in Wales. First, it has to contend with institutional independence, reinforced in a number of instances by charter. Secondly, given the economic significance of even the smallest institutions to the economy of their neighbourhoods, there are local considerations. Thirdly, and most powerfully, international forces determine the general shape of the sector.

We have seen that the publication of *Reaching Higher* was intended to usher in an era of clustering, collaboration and merger, encouraged by

earmarked funding from HEFCW. I suggested in 2003 that 'precedents indicate that the debate may well generate more heat than light. It may also be very difficult to prod the more well-founded institutions into action, particularly generous action.'²⁸ So it has proved. The only merger which has taken place has been the logical integration of Cardiff University and the University of Wales College of Medicine in 2004. There has been some rationalization of subject provision in Swansea, where the University has transferred its education department to the Swansea Institute of Higher Education in return for departments of law and nursing. Merger talks between Bangor and the North East Wales Institute got nowhere, though collaboration between Aberystwyth and Bangor in various areas of research and research management, resulting in the creation of four joint research centres, has been constructive.

Elsewhere there has been much talk but little action. The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama explored the possibility of a closer relationship with Cardiff University until the end of 2005 without success and in 2006 opened talks with the University of Glamorgan, this time more fruitfully. Negotiations between the University of Glamorgan and the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC), announced in 2003, broke down acrimoniously within six months. The University of Wales Institute then entered into merger talks with the University of Wales, Newport but these were shelved in 2005 because HEFCW, on the basis of a report commissioned from Professor Sir Ron Cook and Professor John Bull, indicated that it was only interested in tripartite merger planning between UWIC, Newport and Glamorgan. In an unusually candid response the Vice-Chancellor of Glamorgan rejected any such notion: 'the University of Glamorgan would, however, be prepared to consider *taking over* [my italics] the University of Wales Newport and the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff in order to deliver speedily the vision of a strong and united post-92 university. On what grounds, you might ask, should Glamorgan be the one to take over the other two? Well, the answer lies in the following reality check.'²⁹ He proceeded to emphasise the superiority of Glamorgan in terms of size, financial reserves and research excellence, this last unfairly on some measures.³⁰ Most significant in terms of the enormous difficulties in the way of constructive merger is the realpolitik evident in his conclusion: 'I acknowledge this may make uncomfortable reading for all our institutions but it is the only way the vision can be delivered in a realistic timescale. In practice, however, as all three institutions are autonomous, such a result is highly unlikely.'³¹ It is impossible to know where all the various 'conversations' will lead but at the

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time of writing institutional merger within the higher education sector in Wales has made very limited progress. The implications are serious because of the research deficit referred to above.

The fate of the University of Wales

It is now clear that the main casualty of the revolution in higher education is going to be the University of Wales, despite its recent expansion. After the 2002 enquiry undertaken by Sir David Williams, which recommended that full constituent membership be offered to all HEIs, the University at the time of writing includes the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Swansea Institute of Higher Education, Trinity College, Carmarthen and the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education, with full membership finally conferred in 2005. Yet in retrospect, the issue of quality assurance was going to compromise the University of Wales from the start. The functions of the QAA, responsible in the case of Wales to the Assembly Government, did not sit easily with the traditional role of the University of Wales. Already, in 2001, the Assembly's Education and Lifelong Learning Committee was informed that 'the status and role of the University of Wales further complicates the position in Wales' in relation to quality assurance.³² The position was made more complex in that, following the Higher Education Act of 1992, university title would only be bestowed on any institution which had degree-awarding powers. The QAA's view, therefore was that any institution in Wales even aspiring to full membership of the University of Wales should seek degree-awarding powers which might then be held in abeyance. It is difficult to conceive of a situation more likely to undermine the national university. Given that HEIs were complaining vociferously about the increasingly burdensome layers of accountability which detracted from their teaching and research, any additional layer of control was inevitably seen in a particularly critical light. It was of considerable significance, therefore, that the first of the recommendations on quality produced by the Policy Review of Higher Education in 2001 should read 'that the Assembly Minister, ELWa-HEFCW and HEW (Higher Education Wales – a body composed of vice-chancellors and principals) should enter into dialogue with the University of Wales to critically review the appropriateness of the present University of Wales structure'.³³

Later in the report the committee made it evident that its review would have to take into account that some institutions now saw the University of

Wales as 'bureaucratic and out-moded. It is no longer acceptable to many of the larger institutions.'³⁴ Indeed, the document openly expressed the view widely known to be held by the pre-1992 university colleges, but not hitherto expressed officially, that they did not want to be seen to be members of the same university which had just accorded all its members equal university status.³⁵ The spirit which had, however imperfectly, once given the University of Wales its corporate strength had evaporated.

In retrospect, it is clear that the 2001 review of higher education in Wales foresaw almost exactly the shape of things to come. It concluded that the University of Wales could not continue in its existing form, that HEIs in Wales which did not already have at least taught degree-awarding powers should apply for them through the QAA, and that even overseas validation activities could be undertaken by individual institutions rather than the University of Wales.³⁶ The concept of a national university for Wales was effectively dead.

The review epitomized the new Wales in which thinking about the structure and purpose of higher education was now in the hands of a democratically elected National Assembly and its Government. The new higher education system envisaged was wholly different from that of the original University of Wales. It was to be a Wales of regional clusters of higher education institutions, based on a demarcation between research-centred and teaching-centred institutions. Academic quality would be ensured not by the University of Wales but by the QAA, granting either taught degree-awarding powers or both taught and research degree-awarding powers. The pre-eminent research centre would be in Cardiff, by means of an amalgamated University and College of Medicine. Planning would come from HEFCW.³⁷

The first practical step came with Cardiff University's secession from the University of Wales in December 2004. Losing the biggest player in Welsh higher education was obviously a body blow. However, the knock out punch came with the QAA's verdict, also delivered in 2004, on the University of Wales that only limited confidence could be placed in the University's management of the standards of its awards and the quality of the programmes in its constituent institutions. Whether that report rested on a mis-interpretation of the role of the University of Wales in its relation to its constituent members, as some claimed, was irrelevant. From that point on the University of Wales in its traditional role was doomed. Each institution would now have to be the guarantor of the quality and standards of its own degrees. This could only be achieved by each institution seeking its own

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degree-awarding powers from the QAA as a prerequisite of granting not only its own degrees, but also those of the University of Wales. These powers will be the ultimate badge of the independence of each institution. To add momentum to the separatist landslide, Westminster Government decree determined that no institution of university status may be a member of another university, and in August 2004 Peter Hain and Jane Davidson confirmed that this would apply in Wales. This meant that Cardiff University, for example, could not also be a member of the University of Wales even if it chose. Any aspiring university institution would be in a similar position – for example, Swansea University (the title by which it now wishes to be known) acquired degree-awarding powers in 2005 and will seek confirmation of separate university status and title in synchronization with the demise of the federal University of Wales. Since the enforced acquisition of degree-awarding powers in effect confers university status, with the natural desire for this to be reflected in an institution's title, the University of Wales is doomed as a membership institution. Its only possible future is as a confederal or non-membership organization, one higher education institution among others, responsible for accreditation of its degrees in Wales, validation of its degrees outside Wales and protecting and promoting the language and culture of Wales to the best of its now even more limited ability.

The University of Wales has already come to terms with the situation which is seeing its disintegration as a federal institution but custodian, at the time of writing, of the Board for Welsh Medium Teaching, the Board of Celtic Studies, the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies, the University of Wales Press, Gregynog and the Welsh Medium Teaching Development Centre. A report commissioned from its pro-Vice Chancellor, Dafydd Wigley, concluded that such a role was all that was left to it and this was accepted by the University's Council and Court in 2005. The governance of the University will be radically altered, probably in 2007, to reflect this. Whether there is any role for this new University of Wales, an institution doing no teaching and research, is already a matter for speculation. There are those who see its total disappearance as inevitable.

In terms of Welsh national identity, does it matter? There can be no question that the creation of a national university was a symbol of devolution, not in any political sense but in that it recognised the separate cultural identity of Wales and the intellectual aspirations of its people. Of course, its constituent colleges resembled and interrelated with other university institutions in the small world of higher education, but its title

and unique federal structure amounted to a statement of national pride and hope. It was a Welsh institution for Welsh students. It has been, in Prys Morgan's telling words, 'the largest of Wales's national institutions, a mini-state in itself, a conglomeration of Byzantine complexity, one of central importance in its twentieth-century history'.³⁸ We have seen that such concepts were radically undermined from the 1960s so that the University of Wales a century after its creation bore little resemblance to the original institution. What of the collective memory? Again there can be no question that for the earlier generations who attended constituent colleges, there was a sense of sentimental attachment to the University of Wales based on experience of relatively small communities which came together for inter-collegiate sporting and cultural activities ranging from rugby matches to eisteddfodau, but again, the university experience has changed out of all recognition.

Different differences

Fundamentally, the Wales of 1893 and the Wales of 2006 are dramatically different, moulded by entirely changed economic and social forces. Devolution now is of a different order from that symbolized by the granting of a charter to the University of Wales. Wales has its own Welsh Assembly Government, answerable to the people of the nation and responsible for its higher education system, subject only to those constraints, admittedly very substantial, which govern the system in England and throughout the developed world. That government is responsible for funding higher education through HEFCW, the most significant institutional manifestation of Welsh separateness in matters of higher education and one which would have been unrecognisable to the founding fathers of the University of Wales. The higher education experience in Wales now revolves not around the symbol of an institution but around the realities of life for those who, in the main, make the institution – the students. Even in the 1950s fewer than 4 per cent of the age range attended universities across the UK. By 2000 about 93,000 students, full- and part-time, excluding 5,000 in the Open University in Wales, were enrolled in higher education institutions in Wales.³⁹

With so many students now attending university, about 35 per cent of the age group, the question of student funding and maintenance takes centre stage. The golden age for students in higher education came in the four decades from the 1950s when acceptance at a university guaranteed not only

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free tuition but a mandatory, even if means-tested, local authority award. In the 1950s such an award was sufficient to allow students a tolerable standard of living if they were on a full grant. Such a generous state benefit could not survive either the practicalities of dramatic student expansion or the philosophy of successive Conservative and New Labour governments. First, the Conservatives replaced maintenance grants with student loans, then the Labour Government breached a fundamental principle of the 1944 Education Act that tuition in higher education should be free. The most recent policy being implemented by the Westminster Government in 2006 is that of top-up fees which allow individual universities to charge tuition fees of up to £3,000 per year.

Before the existence of the Assembly Government it would have been inconceivable that a Westminster government policy on higher education would not have applied to Wales. However, the Higher Education Act of 2004 devolved responsibility for certain elements of funding to the National Assembly. After a backbench revolt against a minority Labour government in the Assembly, Wales has adopted, like Scotland, a totally different fees policy from that in England. No student living in Wales and studying in a higher education institution in Wales is expected to pay more than the minimum fee of £1,200 annually. The shortfall in funding to higher education institutions is made up by the Assembly Government. Once more, it is education which puts the purest red water between government policies in Wales and England. The funding of higher education, along with policies for schools, has seen an unprecedented assertion of Welsh political independence, to a degree inconceivable to those who blazed the trail for the establishment of a national university. The policy now provides more incentive for Welsh students to study in Wales than has been the case since 1944. The proportion of such students – just over half in 2000⁴⁰ – may well rise for the first time for half a century.

What role is left for the erstwhile national university? In the changed political context of the twenty-first century it is no longer a powerful symbol of national identity. It perhaps falls into a similar mindset to that which now deems it fashionable to advocate dispensing with the word ‘Welsh’ in the titles of other national institutions because Wales has come of age. Many regard academic degrees of the University of Wales as a valuable commercial asset, known the world over because of the weight of history. This may be so, but probably only in the short term. It is now certain that supra-institutional attempts to impose some coherence on the higher education system must come from the Assembly Government and the Funding

Council. Arguably that is as it should be when democratic accountability has replaced the predilections of academics, however distinguished.

The notion that devolution in the form of an Assembly, even when it acquires enhanced law-making powers, is the end of a process rather than part of a continuing national dynamic is simplistic. That dynamic requires constant supplies of energy across a whole variety of fields from succeeding generations. A crucial part of that energy comes from the nation's cultural heritage – linguistic, historical, social, artistic – and the need to foster it in changing social contexts. The University of Wales has played a crucial part in safeguarding this heritage. Independent HEIs, subject to market forces, employing providers rather than lecturers to purvey expertise to clients rather than students who have paid substantial sums of money for the privilege, do not readily undertake the conservation of culture once seen as integral to the liberal-humanist university tradition. Newman's ideal of knowledge for its own sake has a hollow ring to it these days. So the Assembly Government will have to interpret the needs of the nation in this context also. It already accepts a responsibility to raise the number of students taking part of their degrees through the medium of Welsh from the present figure of around 3.5 per cent.⁴¹ Through HEFCW it makes a substantial contribution to the finances of the Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. HEFCW has taken over the role of supporting the University of Wales Press by subsidizing the publication of scholarly works of relevance to Wales or by Welsh scholars which might not be commercially viable. Whatever debate will now rage about the deficiencies of the universities in Wales in catering for the needs of Welsh students and the nation as a whole will now centre around the responsibilities of the Welsh Assembly Government.⁴²

However sentimentally attached so many of us feel to one of the proudest national institutions in our history we have to accept that the role once played by the University of Wales in safeguarding the national heritage must now be enacted in the infant Assembly structure symbolically attempting to throw a roof over the nation from Cardiff Bay.

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References

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Notes

- ¹ For some years after the granting of the charter the colleges, particularly Aberystwyth, prepared students for London external degrees as well as University of Wales degrees. See J. Gwynn Williams, *The University of Wales 1893–1939*, University of Wales Press, 1997, p. 12.
- ² The federal University of Wales was created at precisely the time when federalism in the English university system was in decline. See *ibid.*, pp. 19 ff.
- ³ Geraint H. Jenkins, *The University of Wales An Illustrated History*, University of Wales Press, 1993, p. 1.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ⁵ Williams, *op.cit.*, chapter IV.
- ⁶ Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
- ⁷ Prys Morgan, *The University of Wales 1939–1993*, University of Wales Press, 1997, p. 7.
- ⁸ Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
- ⁹ Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
- ¹⁰ Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- ¹² See Dai Smith and Meic Stevens (eds), *A Community and its University: Glamorgan 1913–2003*, University of Wales Press, 2003, especially the chapter by Basil Isaac, ‘From School of Mines to the University of Glamorgan’, pp. 69–98.
- ¹³ Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 11.
- ¹⁴ The full story is told in Morgan, *op. cit.*, pp. 87 ff.
- ¹⁵ The extent to which this erosion has actually taken place in the social sciences is graphically illustrated in Richard Wyn Jones, *The Failure of the Universities of Wales*, Cardiff, 2004, pp. 12–19.
- ¹⁶ Morgan, *op. cit.*, p. 192.
- ¹⁷ Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
- ¹⁸ National Assembly for Wales, Education and Lifelong Learning Committee, *Policy Review of Higher Education*, 2002, p. 1.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ²³ Welsh Assembly Government, *Reaching Higher*, 2002, p. 20.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 4.
- ²⁶ Ibid. pp. 11–13.
- ²⁷ Richard Wyn Jones., op. cit., passim.
- ²⁸ G. E. Jones and G. W. Roderick, *A History of Education in Wales*, University of Wales Press, p. 229.
- ²⁹ *Western Mail*, 11 May 2005.
- ³⁰ See table in Richard Wyn Jones., op. cit., p. 16.
- ³¹ *Western Mail*, 11 May 2005.
- ³² *Policy Review* op. cit., p. 61.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 64.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 72.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 73.
- ³⁷ Ibid., pp. 76, 77–8.
- ³⁸ Morgan, op. cit., p. vii.
- ³⁹ *Policy Review*, op. cit., p. 1.
- ⁴⁰ *Reaching Higher*, op.cit., p. 1.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 15. For 1999/2000 the figure was 3 per cent. In terms of full-time equivalent students in Welsh higher education, Richard Wyn Jones, op. cit., gives the figure of 1.5 per cent, representing a total of 1,002 students, in 2001/2. He makes the highly significant point that of these numbers nearly half were involved in teacher training.
- ⁴² The best example to date is Richard Wyn Jones, op. cit.