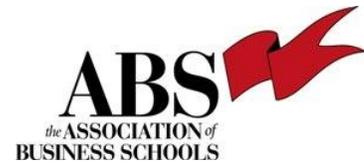


ABS Policy Network 2013 Wales



Is it Possible to Balance Student Demands with Business Needs?

The Association of Business Schools ▶ 23 May, 2013

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The Association of Business Schools (ABS) Policy Network, Wales, is part of a broader series of events that are being held by the ABS across the UK. These events provide a platform for key stakeholders in higher education (HE) policy and business school practice to engage in debate and discussion around pressing issues. The Welsh network session has allowed challenges and opportunities to be explored in relation to the specific HE policy and business school environment in Wales. The Policy Network aims to directly engage with stakeholders, to influence policy, and to increase media profile.

This series of events focus on one central question:

“Is it Possible to Balance Student Demands with Business Needs”

That question has been broken down into focused sessions with specific topics with the Welsh event centring around the question of:

“What do Organisations Want From Business Schools?”

To help us negotiate these discussions, the ABS invited key players from within both the private and government sector in Wales.

We were delighted to be joined by **Neil Surman**, Head of the Higher Education Division at the Department of Education and Skills, Welsh Government, and **Chris Doherty**, HR Lead at GE Aviation Wales and member of the Strategic Advisory Panel for the Welsh Government. Both individuals were able to give us valuable insights into the

Profiles



Neil Surman joined the Civil Service from university in 1988 and is currently Head of the Higher Education Division of the Welsh Government with responsibility for HE policy and funding and post-16 student finance.

Prior to taking up his current post, Neil worked in a wide variety of policy roles within the Welsh Government and previous Welsh Office. His experience incorporates local government finance and reorganisation, health policy, central government finance, children's welfare and safeguards, public services reform and education.

Within education Neil has managed the Higher Education Act 2004, supported the Rees Review of higher education funding and student support (2005), helped to lead the devolution of student finance to Wales, authored "The Learning Country: Vision into Action" strategy (2006) and is a previous Head of Student Finance in the Welsh Government.



Chris Doherty is the HR Leader for GE Aviation Wales. He is responsible for all HR matters at that site covering 1200 employees. Chris joined GE Aviation in 2004 from Panasonic, where he was General Manger of HR. Chris has 25 years experience of leading HR teams, mostly in large high volume manufacturing businesses and mostly in heavily unionized environments.

Chris sits on the strategic advisory board for the Welsh Government on developing Leadership Excellence for Wales; he is also a member of the Swansea University Employability Strategy Board and of the University of Glamorgan Engineering Advisory Panel and a member of Engineering Employers Federation South Wales Council. Chris graduated from the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM) program at Glamorgan University, Pontypridd, Wales.



Key Themes

Innovation and Growth

Long term prosperity and growth in Wales, relies on the ability of organisations to innovate. A strong track record of university collaboration with business in Wales has significant potential to support this innovation led growth through research and practice. Business schools in Wales ought to lie at the heart of this agenda given their expertise and strong industry links.

Supporting Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

The economy of Wales (in particular South Wales) is largely built on small and medium sized organisations, very few large multinational companies are head quartered here, with GE Aviation being an exception. Subsequently, a key challenge for Welsh business schools is how to engage and support SMEs. Given their hugely significant role in driving innovation and growth in the Welsh economy, business schools should be working to facilitate and enhance this economic contribution.

Business Schools in Wales are faced with a dual challenge:

- Producing relevant and applicable research into SME development,
- Deciphering effective ways to connect and build relationships with businesses that may not have developed organisational structures that facilitate university collaboration

Employability and Skills

Related to the above, the theme of enhancing the employability of graduates frequently emerged. Moreover, working with business to meet their needs in regards to skills. This is applicable across small, medium and large organisations.

Stakeholders spoke extensively on the process, challenges and benefits of developing more meaningful employer engagement in order to shape teaching and assessment.

Points that were raised included:

- Ensuring graduates are equipped with basic business skills; communication, project management, presentation and negotiation
- The need to enhance and develop engagement with business to ensure the delivery of effective and valuable student placements – understood to be the most effective way to ensure graduates have the skills required.

Internationalisation

Developing and maintaining international links emerged as a key topic of conversation throughout the network event.

- Business schools have the ability to play a hugely supportive role in tapping into international alumni networks, promoting the Welsh HE and business education brand abroad, and attracting and retaining foreign investment and business.
- To do this requires a fundamentally collaborative approach.

Understandably, recent visa restrictions make this agenda more difficult.

- Limiting international graduates not only promotes a hostile higher education reputation abroad, but also impacts the talent pipeline within companies. If placement and intern schemes are developed, international students who benefit from this initial training will be unlikely, or unable, to stay on after graduation. In addition, company sponsorship of visas is often limited to senior positions thus undermining the talent pool and pipeline for industry.
- Limiting international graduate numbers not only restricts the talent pool but also places organisations with a less diverse workforce on a back foot in an international business environment.

Supporting Learners

One theme that appeared to draw many of the other topics together was that of supporting learners from multiple-demographics, backgrounds and countries into higher education.

- Higher levels of deprivation in some areas of Wales sometimes results in students arriving at university with a more limited skill set than those from more affluent areas. Welsh business schools face the challenge of developing courses that can account for this.
- Supporting learners also applies to post-graduate students from both home and abroad. This relates to the need to promote a Welsh HE brand abroad, as well as the need to address financial constraints that may discourage individuals or entrepreneurs returning to study. One idea that was suggested was that of condensing an undergraduate and post-graduate qualification into a three year degree that would still qualify for student finance.



Collaboration

The higher education landscape in Wales is unique given the number and proximity of large universities, especially in the south of the region. Competition for student recruitment, funding & reputation, recent mergers and the politics associated, has produced a decidedly fraught environment. Whilst competition of this kind is perhaps limiting for some forms of collaboration, there is significant scope to further the interests of all institutions through working together. Challenges that would benefit from closer ties include: increasing and promoting an international Welsh business school and HE brand, attracting and retaining international students, producing and developing national student placement initiatives and SME engagement, amongst others. With support from the Welsh government closer institutional links could provide significant opportunities for Welsh business schools in their efforts to meet both student demands and business needs.

Conclusions

- Through the process of engaging multiple interested stakeholders, the ABS policy network provided a forum for discussing the key challenges facing the Welsh business school community and how these inter-relate with business and government.
- The themes identified provide clear channels to pursue a collaborative agenda in Wales, in an effort to align government priorities, industry requirements and business school best practice.
- Developing these relationships across a triple-helix of stakeholders will help ensure that research, advancement and teaching within Welsh business schools are best positioned to further innovation and economic development.
- These aims are fundamentally related to ensuring that graduates from Welsh business school are fully equipped with the necessary skills and presented with the best possible opportunities to apply them.



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