



THE LEARNED SOCIETY OF WALES
CYMDEITHAS DDYSGEDIG CYMRU

THE NATIONAL ACADEMY – CELEBRATING SCHOLARSHIP AND SERVING THE NATION
YR ACADEMI GENEDLAETHOL – YN DATHLU YSGOLHEICTOD A GWASANAETHU'R GENEDL

Stakeholder Views Report

October 2017



Executive Summary

In spring 2017, the Society commissioned AMJ Communications an independent company to carry out a series of interviews exploring external perceptions of the Society with a view to feeding these stakeholder views, including those of the Fellowship, into the development of the Society's next five-year strategy

The report provided many positive constructive ideas and gave valuable insight into the areas stakeholders would like the Society to focus on in the future.

Over the last seven years the Society has established itself as a respected and credible organisation. Its stakeholders consider that the Society has been built on strong foundations and was playing an increasing important role in Welsh life.

Areas for the Society to reflect on included whether it is telling a clear enough story about its work so that stakeholders can *articulate its priorities and the breadth of its activities*.

In keeping with similar organisations, the Society was also asked by stakeholders and Fellows to do more to promote greater diversity in its people and its work, and also ensure that it is not too Cardiff-centric.

There is a clear appetite from stakeholders and Fellows for the Society to maximise its impact and help *shape discussions on issues of national importance to Wales*, including what Brexit could mean for Wales, what kind of governance does Wales want and need and how does Wales seize opportunities to enhance its economic wellbeing as a nation.

Stakeholders want the Society to consider *broadening its definition of what it means to be 'learned'* and create opportunities for others, perhaps in industry or at the early stages of their career, to play a role with the Society.

Stakeholders believe that there has never been a more important time for the **Society's voice** to be heard with major, long-term issues to discuss within public life and a crisis of trust in institutions and with expert advice. If the Society were to raise its profile, invest in growing its team and facilities, stakeholders are confident it could increase its impact.

- Overall, the report provided a positive endorsement of the work and leadership of the Society – **an organisation that is viewed as authoritative, independent, credible and thoughtful**. Stakeholders and Fellows wanted the Society to build on these strong foundations to help power Wales forward and inspire the next generation of researchers, academics and learned people.

The Society is grateful to the Fellows and individuals who have up their time to participate in the project.

Background

In May 2017, the Society commissioned Ben Jones from AMJ Communications to conduct a stakeholder perceptions exercise to support the development of its next strategy plan.

Feedback was collected in two ways:

- Telephone interviews were held with a wide range of external stakeholders who were split into several groups that reflected the Society's stakeholders. These interviews were conducted on a non – attributable confidential basis.
- An online survey was sent to all Fellows.

61 external stakeholders were invited to participate, and 40 separate interviews were held with a total of 45 stakeholders, a 67% participation rate.

The online survey was sent by email to all 460 Fellows. It received 87 responses – a 19% response rate. This response rate is in line with other exercises for similar organisations

Stakeholders who participated in this project represented a broad range of organisations in order to collect feedback and perceptions from unfamiliar as well as familiar audiences - individuals were included to represent organisations or areas that would not know the Society well or perhaps only a minimal connection with it.

The project heard from this full spectrum of organisations and individuals.

The feedback

The feedback from stakeholders and Fellows can be grouped under five themes:

- *The Society has been built on strong foundations and made good progress*
- *There is some uncertainty over the precise role, focus and narrative of the Society*
- *The Society is asked to go further on diversity; in its people and its work*
- *There is a gap in the market for an independent, respected, authoritative, impartial voice*
- *The definition of “learned” and growing the Society’s reach and impact*

Strong foundations and good progress

There was a widespread perception that the Society, in its relatively short history, had established itself with the stakeholders who engaged with this project as a credible, authoritative organisation which does good and important work. The Society’s reports in particular carried weight and the awarding of medals by the Society was also singled out as a positive contribution the Society makes to Welsh life.

There was a very positive response from stakeholders when discussing their experiences of engaging directly with the Society. The Leadership of the Society was regularly praised during this project, especially the Chief Executive and President.

If there was a concern raised, it was that the Society was perceived to need more money and more people to build on the positive work it has done to date to maximise its impact.

Those stakeholders who had knowledge of the membership of the Fellowship also praised the high calibre of the people that had been elected, again describing them as highly credible and authoritative. There were, however some concerns, expressed by a small number of stakeholders that the Fellows should be more diverse and that some individuals and organisations – including those outside Cardiff – may not feel as engaged either by the day to day work of the Society or as involved in the Fellowship as others may feel.

Uncertainty over the role, focus and narrative of the Society

Although there was a strong perception that the Society had been built on strong foundations and was considered to have made a positive impact in its short life, there remained some uncertainty about what exactly it did. Around half of those interviewed felt they did not have sufficient knowledge or understanding of the breadth of the work of the Society and did not feel they could articulate its key areas of work or priority. These stakeholders were keen for the Society to raise its profile and articulate a concise, clearer message about its role and focus. A number spoke about the need for the Society to “tell its story” in a simple, more compelling way.

A number of stakeholders made the point that the Society was unique amongst organisations in Wales for being able to speak out on issues and convene discussions from a non-partisan, neutral position, using its credibility as an independent, evidence-based organisation to raise difficult, long term issues.

A significant number of stakeholders suggested that the natural next step for the Society was to secure royal title, alongside its royal charter and patronage. They felt that having “royal” in the title would naturally elevate the Society’s status and profile and that this was an important next step in its

development as an organisation.

A number of stakeholders, including those from outside Wales, felt that the Society has done its best work when working with other academies and should continue more of this. Unsurprisingly, the subject which hung heavy over most of the discussions was Brexit. With this in mind, many stakeholders felt that this was the time for a greater emphasis to be placed on international work and collaboration at a UK- level and outside the UK.

Going further on diversity and inclusion

The most commonly-raised challenge to the Society was that of diversity – both in relation to the Society’s fellowship and the nature of the work it engages in. This included feedback from both stakeholders and Fellows.

On people, the feedback suggested that the Society needed to do more to diversify its fellowship with a greater emphasis on more women in senior positions, representing the Society at events and within the Fellowship.

Alongside this, there was a concern that the Society needed to do more to promote the voice and contribution of younger people, fearing that the Society is perceived as being an organisation where only those over a certain age were taken seriously or given important roles or status.

On its work, the feedback suggested that more needed to be done to ensure that the society wasn’t too “Cardiff-centric” and that more events and engagement needed to take place outside Cardiff.

At the same time, stakeholders and fellows suggested that it is important that those involved in working with the Society - whether that is in universities, industry or other sections of society – were not only “the usual suspects” from the large universities. Fellows and stakeholders asked for more regional events and that the Society should try to do more in mid and north Wales.

While there was some appreciation that the Society is not alone in facing perceptions of insufficient diversity and inclusion in its people and work – and recognition that the Society was making positive efforts – several stakeholders found it disappointing that these issues had arisen given the relative youth of the Society. Many saw the youthfulness of the Society as a key opportunity to address diversity.

A number of stakeholders felt that more needed to be done to celebrate the full range of research and educational excellence in Wales –and not just in the scientific disciplines.

Despite the regular calls for the Society to embrace greater diversity in people and work, all stakeholders cautioned the Society against anything that reduced its focus on excellence. They stated that the high standard of work and the robustness of the Society’s activity must be maintained and sacrificing that in the interests of greater diversity was not a price worth paying.

Gap in the market for an independent, respected, authoritative, impartial voice

The current context in which the Society operates was highlighted by a large number of stakeholders as offering a significant opportunity for the Society.

The ongoing discussions about the future of Wales and the UK post-Brexit, the continued debates about the future of devolution and powers for the Welsh government and Assembly in Wales, alongside the challenges faced within higher education, were all cited as reasons why the role and voice of the Society is more important than ever.

Many stakeholders spoke about what has been described as living in a “posttruth world” with debates about “fake news”. They suggested that there was a crisis in trust in the views of experts, especially those participating in public debate about high profile issues and that their portrayal in the media accentuate this crisis of trust. They therefore stated that they believed now was the time to reassert the vital importance of independence, academically robust research and work.

With this in mind, stakeholders and Fellows raised a number of specific issues and areas of work where they felt the Society’s voice could be heard or amplified.

On Brexit, there was a strong view expressed frequently during this project that the current debate in Wales – and especially in learned circles – was too narrow. The view expressed during this project was that the Society could help broaden this debate and shift the focus on to issues which have longer term, fundamental impact on the future of Wales as a country, such as the future of the food industry following Brexit. They also spoke about a need for much greater, better-informed, debates about skills, jobs, growth, economic sustainability, rural life in Wales, culture, the food industry and the space and transport infrastructure industries in Wales. These big, long-term issues were highlighted as crucial in the future of Wales and to retaining the graduate talent in Wales.

Redefining “learned” and growing the Society’s reach and impact

Although stakeholders consistently praised the quality of the work done by the Society and the credibility and status of its Fellows, many suggested that it would be helpful if the Society considered taking a broader definition of what it means to be “learned”. They suggested that this would help the Society to maximise its impact by reaching out to others - outside of traditional areas of academia that make up the Fellowship of the Society – especially in industry and other areas of civic life, such as the voluntary sector.

Many stakeholders and Fellows reflected that the Society could be even more successful if it had more money – allowing it to host more events, deliver more work and collaborate more frequently with other national academies and learned societies. It also felt that an increased profile of the Society would help it fulfill a key role that stakeholders and Fellows have highlighted - they want the Society to place greater emphasis on promoting and celebrating research in Wales.

A suggestion which was raised many times was to develop a “Junior” or “Associate” Fellows programme – to broaden the pool the Society draws from and to build stronger links with individuals and organisations that could help it achieve its mission, including industry figures. A further similar idea was also floated during this project by a number of stakeholders; that of developing a corporate membership or partnership which might allow companies to become “friends of the Society”.

To build on its success and upon the strong foundations that have been laid in the first few years of the Society, stakeholders regularly suggested some further investment to help build a larger team, move to larger, more prestigious premises and to develop programmes of outreach to help inspire those in schools,

colleges, universities and beyond.

Next steps

The report reflected the feedback by external stakeholders and Fellows. Collectively, it indicated that there is opportunity for the Society to build on its strong foundations. There are areas for further exploration and consideration, including in particular how the Society can better raise its profile and articulate a concise, clear message about its role and focus.

The final report was submitted to the Society's Council in October 2017. Many of the themes raised had been anticipated and the Society was already in the process of working on some of the suggestions.

The following challenges and opportunities are being addressed by the Society at present:

- **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion**

The Society is already undertaking a major Diversity Review to:

- ensure that the Society has the practices in place to ensure fairness and equality in all its workings
- ensure that no group connected with the Society is treated unfavourably on the grounds of ethnicity, age, disability, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, race, colour, religion or belief;
- ensure that deserving talent within any community is encouraged to join the Fellowship and that nominations are treated with equal fairness.
- provide the Society with a new policy covering equality, diversity and inclusion designed to ensure that the Society complies with its obligations under equality legislation.

- **Governance**

- On-going reviews of governance procedures to ensure they remain fit for the twentieth century

- **Celebrating Scholarship**

- The Society will launch a new medal celebrating public engagement later in 2018

- **Outreach and school's engagement**

- The Society is currently working on piloting outreach work with schools

- **More consistent messaging:**

- Improvements to the Society's website are on-going, and a communications strategy is in development

- **Royal Title**

- The Council of the Society agreed in 2015 that in due course the Society will seek Royal title

The Society has started to develop a strategic plan for 2018-2022, outlining priorities and ambitions for the sustainable growth of the organisation.

The strategy will be published in the Summer of 2018.