



**THE LEARNED SOCIETY OF WALES**  
**CYMDEITHAS DDYSGEDIG CYMRU**

## President's Address

Learned Society of Wales

22 May 2019

It's my privilege and pleasure to address this AGM of the Learned Society of Wales, now for the fifth time. I'm not sure where the years have gone, but Wales' National Academy can look back on nine years of solid achievement, dare I say more than the Founding Fellows could have envisaged in 2010.

Let me first congratulate 48 new Fellows on their election. This brings your Fellowship to 540 underlining the breadth and depth of talent in Wales and connected with Wales.

Professor Alan Shore has reported on developments during the past twelve months. I will not cover the same ground. But I must thank all those who have contributed to the work of the Learned Society, to our excellent team led by Martin Pollard, to members of Council and our standing committees, to those who've served on panels, and to all those who have put their expertise at the service of the Society. This has permitted us to hold events across Wales and to meet our duty to serve the nation.

I must also thank those who have contributed financially to the Society. We are most grateful for the support of all universities in Wales. Their grants and the fees of Fellows are our primary sources of funding. Another very welcome and generous gesture was the bequest by Professor Ieuan Gwynedd Jones which we record with thanks. We have also started to develop our fundraising efforts in other areas, including applications to charitable trusts and foundations, in order to develop the Society's ambitions.

The only limit on our ambition is resource, human and capital. We can only undertake that which is feasible and financed. Money is important, but the contributions of Fellows more so. We have succeeded to achieve much because of the input of colleagues. Thank you again.

In the Autumn the Council adopted the Society's strategy for the next five years. It builds on a body of achievement.

Our **mission** is to promote excellence and scholarship, inspire learning and benefit the nation.

To achieve this mission, our main **aims** are to:

- celebrate and recognise excellence
- champion excellent research and researchers, catalyse ambition and inspire researchers, youth and society more generally
- promote the advancement of learning, scholarship and education
- act as an independent source of expert advice

Our ambitions for the next five years are underpinned by the **core values** of excellence, diversity and independence.

These aims are in part typical of an academic academy. The Learned Society is deliberately all encompassing, including the professions, business, the arts, and public service. That diversity is a strength, and I am pleased to say that we will be launching a Strategic Equality Plan later this year. This will build on the Society's existing efforts to encourage a diverse Fellowship and address any barriers to participation in our work

The Society is also committed to serving the nation and does this in many ways. It should also crucially be an inspiration, encouraging ambition and aspiration. Fellows demonstrate the benefit of identifying talent and merit, nurturing it and giving it the opportunity to blossom. We would like to see Fellows be stronger exemplars to encourage others to follow along paths to excellence. Martin and his team are developing further opportunities for you to do so, with plans for community projects and the potential launch of an Early Careers Academy for Wales.

Again this year we have offered advice to government and legislatures. We contributed to the work on the new Schools curriculum which promises to be both exciting and challenging. Work continues apace as to how Fellows might work in and with schools. Progress is slow but it is important that we devise arrangements which work with the grain of the curriculum and respond to the interests of schools. Our initiative with Seren Cymru is progressing well. Our newly established Education Committee under Professor Gareth Rees' leadership will be a motor to take forward this work.

We continue to organise and plan symposia and to support other events. This coming year will include three important topics.

A third in the series on the economy of Wales is planned with Cardiff Metropolitan University. It will focus less on the purely academic, but bring together policy makers and opinion formers to address the specific challenges of the Welsh economy.

We plan a major conference on Bilingualism in Cardiff in Spring 2020. The aim will be to unlock the full potential of bilingualism and indeed multilingualism to identify policies which enrich the lives of all the population across a range of aspects. The intention will be to go beyond the slavish dimension covered by legislation and translation. We want to cover the physiology, psychology, philosophy, economics and cognitive advantage of bilingualism as well as its benefit in specific sectors.

The Welsh Government will soon set out an approach to Wales' international dimension. We are contributing thoughts and in March, with the Welsh Centre for International Affairs, convened representatives of the third sector to collate a positive contribution to preparation of policy. There has always been much interest within Wales on the external world. In the 1920's, nearly 400,000 Welsh women petitioned the President of the United States pressing for the US to join the League of Nations.

At the present time Wales needs a strong international policy to reflect and project the interests of Wales. Of course British foreign policy is a competence of the British Government. But decisions taken in London frequently impinge on policy areas which have been devolved to Cardiff. Conversely issues like environment, agriculture and education which are the responsibility in Wales of the Welsh Government have obvious international aspects. Coherence and sensible coordination would benefit Wales and indeed the UK.

Soft power is increasingly important to Wales. How can its different dimensions, be they Higher Education, the Arts, sport and so on be better exploited to promote the interests of Wales, our institutions, economy and people. This is a responsibility which goes beyond government and involves all of us in some way. We all need to speak more loudly about Wales and its positive characteristics. So we are working to focus attention on the various sectors involved, with a series of events through to Spring next year.

Each of these topics has a resonance in Wales and a strong academic dimension. Importantly we also hope to draw conclusions from each which will inform and influence policy and practice.

This audience, the Fellowship as a whole, and Higher Education are important voices for Wales. Consistent with our aims, your Society has taken every opportunity to speak up for Research and scholarship, with governments, the Funding Council, and more widely. In particular we continue to press UKRI to take account of Wales and devolution in a more systematic way. More than ever research funding is determined competitively, but we need to press that Welsh researchers have a fair crack at securing grants. We also joined with our two Celtic academies in a joint representation to British Government ministers and UKRI.

In the same spirit we have continued to work as part of the seven national academies to ameliorate the effects of Brexit on research and on our universities. It was not for the Society to take a position on the merits of British membership of the European Union. However we have been resolute in pointing to Brexit's adverse consequence for Higher Education and research and pressing for measures to ameliorate the disadvantages. If participation in Horizon Europe post 2020 proves impossible, then substitute funding, and

unhindered recruitment and movement of staff and students will be essential if the nature and success of our universities is to be maintained.

Higher Education in the United Kingdom continues to face turbulent times which show no sign of abating. Recent disclosures of the fall in recruitment in three English Russell Group universities were a stark reminder of the financial risks. The situation in Wales is no less challenging. Moreover we are always vulnerable to the consequences of policy changes in England. We will face real problems if Reports in preparation propose lower university tuition fees or changes in Student Loans as the UK Public Accounts must now reflect the prospect that at least 45% of existing loans are unlikely to be repaid. The Treasury suspect that some institutions and some subjects attract a disproportionate percentage of students who will not be able to repay. Watch that space.

All this underlines why we need national academies to stand up for academia, all research and scholarship and at a level distinct from that of individual institutions.

Enough of the pessimism. I've described our ambitions which of course are on top of all the routine essential tasks. Fellows have been elected, activities arranged, expert advice given, medals awarded, and excellence promoted

We very much want to involve early career researchers, The Dillwyn medals have demonstrated the quality which exists. We are exploring how we can more systematically involve young researchers, bring them together and give them opportunities to cooperate and network. We envisage more focus group activity to sharpen up what would be appreciated and whether we are able to provide it.

Ireland has a flourishing Young Scientist of the Year competition. Indeed some of the past winners have been astoundingly successful in developing their ideas commercially. Why can we not emulate this concept in Wales? It would encourage youth to explore science and develop creativity.

Promotion of research and scholarship with recognition of excellence and achievement are our guiding goals. As we approach the celebration of the Society's tenth birthday we can be reassured that its foundations are firmly in place. The next stage is to develop our activities ambitiously so that we can be a broad inspiration in Wales and be of greater service to the nation. As we look at the challenges confronting Wales and Higher Education the need for a strong National Academy is obvious. Fellows can have a part to play as individuals and through the Learned Society. Let's all grasp that opportunity.