Dear friends,

Firstly I want to thank all those who have contributed to this event – the speakers and participants, and all who joined us in Bangor. Special thanks to the University and to our co-hosts Universities Wales.

The focus on Higher Education was part of a series of discussions of different aspects of soft power – how Wales can use the different instruments at its disposal better to influence policy and developments , both inside and outside Wales for the benefit of the nation. There was ready agreement on the base concepts. Wales needs a healthy strategic international policy to augment the competences of the British Government and enhance Welsh interests. Welsh universities have a particular role to play with a plethora of international links. Each is contributing to its community and region, to Wales and its economy, and providing skills and promoting scholarship. Internal projection within Wales went hand in hand with the external The background paper tabled for the seminar covered relevant data and posed questions for discussion.

The following is an initial summary of the event – a fuller report on our event series will draw on all of the presentations yesterdays, and on more of the contributions made by participants at the tables.

There was common ground on the givens. The initiative to develop an international strategy was timely. Higher Education had a key contribution to make with many times more international contacts than government. The UK HE brand was overarching and positive. Rankings in league tables and the REF influenced choices. Wales and its institutions needed to compete in a very challenging environment and inevitably competed with each other.

Wales’ offer therefore had to take account of these factors and be distinctive. How to achieve this was the particular challenge.

Firstly by the academic offer underlining the quality of the Department, suitability of course, availability of technology, the quality of the research led teaching, the value of the qualification and more.

Secondly to bring out the particular benefit of studying in Wales. Those identified included the student experience, the development of the person, the intangibles which would remain after imparted information was forgotten, the values, traditions, diversity, culture, bilingualism, the geography and beauty of the land, ‘cynefin’, resilience and more of the Welsh experience. A small nation, yet a global village, outward looking, promoting sustainability through a unique Future Generations Act, and a responsible global citizen promoting low carbon, fair trade and climate emergency. Key global challenges, including contributions to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, were being addressed in Wales.

Additionally the nature, scale and operation of the sector offered particular scope for a joined up, nimble, supportive funding and regulatory system.

How then better to project Welsh HE?   A range of suggestions were put forward:

-there was scope for increased cooperation between the eight universities, putting Wales before institution, recognising the benefit to each of promoting Wales and creating first order interest in studying here. A common responsibility to promote for mutual benefit and not at the expense of existing individual collaborations. Account should also be taken of those such as language schools and FE who were preparing overseas students for university entry.

-seek the views of existing international students studying in Wales. What have been the plus points? What could have been better? How should Wales project itself in your home country and would you be prepared to help as ambassadors?

-recruiting students or establishing collaboration requires trust and preparation. Wales’ offer has to be tailored to the aspirations and interests of the market, a symbiotic relation where both sides should derive benefit.

-project better what Wales is offering, its distinctiveness and advantages. We heard how Global Wales brings together Universities Wales, British Council, HEFCW, and the Welsh Government. I saw last month in Hanoi how the courting of Vietnamese students is starting to produce more applications to study in Wales.

-we need to make better use of UK wide institutions, FCO, British Council,  DfID, BBC etc and hold them accountable. The UK sector has successfully lobbied for important changes to the visa system. Identifying and prosecuting such interests will be vital.

-Alumni, expatriates, people of Welsh descent offer a rich scope to promote Wales and its interests and HE. Could universities do more through their contacts? Is there a pool of talent which can enrich the research/teaching/collaboration by coming to Wales, for a semester or more or less?

-projecting in Wales the contribution of HE and in the UK, to UKRI the obligation to provide a level playing field for research grant capture, satisfactory arrangements for the UK Prosperity Fund and a firm British involvement in Horizon Europe. If the last proves elusive, the Welsh Government should press for Welsh links.

Positively, the Welsh Government wants to develop international policy and recognises the important contribution of HE. Equally the British Government is shaping Britain’s new global role. There are therefore opportunities for universities to be more proactive. Pressing the objectives will be challenging and is a longer term venture. But it is desirable, necessary to react to change and should be beneficial. Success will require increased cooperation at many levels, including between governments and with organisations.

The wider aspects of how to influence the external will be considered at the final seminar in this series which will be held in Aberystwyth on 21 April. This horizon scanning event will consider priorities for action, how implementation of strategy can be delivered, and how the aggregate contributions of the different stakeholders can be encouraged and their contributions enhanced. The Learned Society will then pull the series together in a summary report which will also look forward.

Emyr Jones Parry