

HECC Welsh Sub-Committee Meeting Notes

Wednesday, 31 March 2004 - Cardiff University

Present:

Dr J MacDonald	-	University of Wales, Bangor (Chairman)
Professor K Smith	-	University of Wales, Swansea
Professor D Knight	-	University of Wales, Cardiff
Mrs L Steele	-	Secretary, HECC
Professor P Gummatt		Acting Chief Executive, Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW)

- 1) Dr MacDonald welcomed Professor P Gummatt and thanked him for the opportunity to follow up discussions started at the HECC meeting in November 2003 when the three funding councils for England, Scotland and Wales had participated in a panel discussion.
- 2) Dr MacDonald asked whether, given the importance of chemistry (and physical science as a whole) as a fundamental science and economy driving discipline, the current crisis facing many university chemistry departments in universities across the UK was viewed by the Funding Councils (and HEFCW in particular) as a matter of concern. Professor Gummatt explained that even though it may be of concern, the 1992 Act prevents intervention by the Councils in Universities autonomy. The group agreed that, while direct interference by the Funding Councils would not be appropriate, it is extremely important that the situation be monitored to reduce the chance of further irreversible damage being done to educational opportunities and science research infrastructure across the nation.

In this context, Professor Gummatt raised the question of recruitment to chemistry courses particularly with regard to what industry that requires chemistry graduates was contributing to the effort to raise the interest of young people in science and associated careers. Mrs Steele explained that outreach activities from industry to school were widespread and that recent discussions with several companies indicated that in response to the business community's rising concerns over the reducing number of students opting to study chemistry (and other physical sciences) at HE level, many companies were increasing resources allocated to outreach. It was noted that RSC also has an area on the website indicating Awards, sponsorships and scholarships for chemical science degree students http://www.chemsoc.org/networks/learnnet/awards_uni.htm. The RSC is working with Universities in England to try and access funding for outreach activities through the AimHigher scheme.

Professor Gummatt referred to the Reaching Higher Reaching Wider scheme operating in Wales and agreed to forward further details to RSC for information. It was noted that Chemistry Departments in Wales already participate in or are seeking to engage with the Reaching Higher Reaching Wider agenda. Nevertheless, the key issue remains to interest a higher proportion of the very best school leavers in science careers.

- 3) There was discussion around the unit of resource relative to England and Scotland. It was confirmed that Wales does receive less than England or Scotland overall, However, Professor Gummatt observed that if teaching is differentiated from research funding then the picture shows all OoAs, at all grades, being better funded in Wales than in England. Currently many 4 rated Departments in Wales receive more than 5 rated Departments in England. Research funding would have to be reduced to increase the unit of resource for teaching as there is a fixed total. The difficulty of developing and improving Departments to maximise their contribution to the economy and future competitiveness and well-being of the

Nation in a climate where funding is simply mechanistically bound to declining numbers was acknowledged.

- 4) Professor Gummett confirmed that the Reconfiguration and Collaboration Fund for HE in Wales was now adjusted to enable a greater focus on improving performance through collaboration rather than simply through mergers. He indicated that there was presently £8m allocated for research capacity development through establishment of high impact research initiatives producing demonstrable added value and based on subject focussed collaboration between HE institutions. It was recognised that this presents a real opportunity for the Chemistry community and it was noted that some progress had already been made in identifying suitable initiatives.
- 5) In the light of the extensive discussions which had taken place recently in RSC and elsewhere concerning the likely impact of the Bologna Declaration on Chemistry courses and degree structures, the HEFCW view was sought. In response, Professor Gummett indicated that it was felt that it would present a major threat if Wales did not fully engage and, on the other hand, that there were potentially huge opportunities and benefits to be reaped from implementation of the principles embedded in the agreement. The well known and widely debated issue of 'masters level' funding should not be seen as presenting an insurmountable obstacle to engagement with the process.

On the possibility that Wales might embrace the agreement while other parts of UK decline to participate it was agreed that it was desirable that some coordination be maintained within the UK system if at all possible.

J N Macdonald
April 2004