

Universities Wales response to UKRI Independent Review – Survey

About Universities Wales

Universities Wales is a membership body representing the interests of Wales' nine universities.

Our mission is to support a university education system which transforms lives through the work Welsh universities do with the people and places of Wales and the wider world.

Overview

This response is intended to support and complement Universities UK's submission to the review. In our response we have focused on areas of particular importance to Wales including how UKRI operates across the four constituent UK nations.

Does UKRI fairly represent and serve all areas of the UK?

1. UK research and innovation is deeply collaborative between UK-level and devolved-level stakeholders, as well as international partners. Each of the four nations of the UK have their own arrangements in relation to the dual support funding system in addition to the UK-wide role of UKRI. Beyond support through the dual support funding system, there are also a range of different funding streams, legislative contexts and local needs. Given the UK-wide remit of UKRI, it is important that the organisation is able to develop and maintain strong relationships with relevant organisations in the devolved nations as well as able to draw on expertise that reflects the breadth of UKRI's remit.
2. There could be better representation of the devolved bodies at strategic levels within UKRI. Currently, our experience has been that relationships at a policy level are largely dependent on individuals, rather than built into the UKRI structure.
3. Although an organisation's governance is not intended to be strictly representative, the make-up of Councils and the UKRI Board, and the breadth of expertise on those bodies, will inform decision-making UKRI and research councils. Currently, Council members from the Welsh sector remain relatively low in number. This includes no UKRI Board members from the Welsh sector. During the Higher Education and Research Act 2017's passage through Westminster, we consistently highlighted the need for appropriate representation from devolved nations to ensure that UKRI was able to sufficiently exercise its UK-wide functions. Addressing the geographic balance of Board and council membership could help ensure UKRI is best able to serve all areas of the UK. Other bodies that operate across different legislative and policy contexts – such as EUA and Science Europe – take geographical representation into account in the makeup of their boards.
4. The review could also consider its mechanisms/systems for assessing and distributing research funds, and how funding allocations might consider the potential for strong collaborative opportunities. This could enable new groups/institutions, including those with more limited capacity, to access significant funding effectively and deliver a more inclusive knowledge economy. This would also support the UK Government's commitment in the Levelling Up White Paper to boost pay and

productivity across the UK by increasing public investment in R&D outside the Greater South East by at least 40% by 2030¹.

5. Part of this may be considering how funding might be distributed through broader recognition of an institution's research strengths, including its expertise, regional partnerships and local economic strategies. For example, through regional Impact Accelerator Accounts or Innovation and Knowledge Centres.
6. In Wales, the Wales Innovation Network (WIN) has been established to support these aims. Every Welsh university is a member of WIN which aims to leverage Welsh universities' diverse strength and support greater collaboration. We would welcome the articulation of ways in which units such as WIN can engage with and feed into the work of UKRI.

Does UKRI act effectively as a single voice for the RD&I sector, and as a steward of the system?

7. When it comes to university research and innovation, each UK nation has its own set of arrangements with bodies such as HEFCW performing a role in Wales that, in England, is performed by UKRI itself, through Research England. This set of arrangements will be further complicated through the creation of ARIA.
8. To operate as a single voice for the RD&I sector there is a need for strong structural engagement between the stakeholders in the devolved nations and UKRI. For example, with HEFCW as a funder and with devolved administrations. This is particularly important given the different contexts that providers may be operating in across the UK.
9. Recent Elsevier analysis has shown Wales' research to be highly productive with its researchers the most efficient and mobile in the UK². However, there is considerable uncertainty in Wales due to the shifting funding landscape prompted by the loss of EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF). ESIF funding had played a significant role in building capacity in research and innovation in Wales with Welsh universities being awarded over £300m as lead partners in projects between 2014-2020. The ending of structural funds creates a cliff edge for a significant number of research and innovation activities taking place across Wales.
10. UKRI should recognise the significant perturbation in the research and innovation system that will be created by the end of structural funds. UKRI's role as steward means the organisation has a role as a champion of research and innovation, not solely as a funder.
11. There are also legislative differences across the devolved nations that have implications for RD&I policy decisions. The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill, currently making its passage through the Senedd, will change the legislative underpinnings of how funding such as quality-related research funding is administered in Wales.
12. Given this, to operate effectively as a single voice for the sector, UKRI needs to be cognisant of the different contexts research organisations such as universities are

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-unveils-levelling-up-plan-that-will-transform-uk>

² <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-08/a-performance-based-assessment-of-the-welsh-research-base-2010-to-2018.pdf>

operating in across the UK, and able to draw on expertise that reflects the geographic reach of UKRI's remit.

13. Being the steward of the system also brings responsibility for the role of research and innovation in supporting, engaging with and developing areas of socio-economic disadvantage. The geographic spread of universities in Wales bring a rich variety of relationships with high technology business; proximity to rural populations; access to coastal waters; and understanding of the social and economic challenges faced by individual communities. Through UKRI engagement with stakeholders in Wales, there are opportunities for UKRI to leverage new research and innovation opportunities while also addressing disadvantage and delivering on the objectives of the UK Government and Welsh Government.

How well does UKRI support graduate education?

14. Training and skills development are important to research, development and innovation. Currently there are five CDT schemes led from Wales across five local authorities. Sector demand dramatically exceeds supply.
15. Schemes such as KESS, a £36m pan-Wales project supported by structural funds, have provided support to SMEs while integrating with CDTs and UKRI funding. Given the cliff-edge faced by structural funded activity in Wales, there is a risk that, in future, the large SME economic base in Wales, and the opportunity it presents for levelling up, will be underserved.
16. In its support of postgraduate education, UKRI may want to consider regionally focused priorities in research, development and innovation training and postgraduate research provision.