

Prifysgolion
Cymru
Universities
Wales

Universities Wales Annual Report 2023/24





About Universities Wales

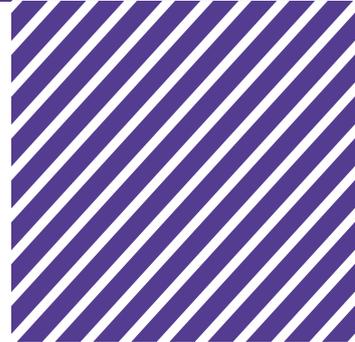
Universities Wales is a membership body representing the interests of Wales' nine universities.

We develop higher education policy, deliver political and stakeholder engagement, and campaign on issues where our members have a shared interest.

We also support our members to collaborate; our work encompasses that of Global Wales and the Wales Innovation Network - both of which are part of Universities Wales.

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.

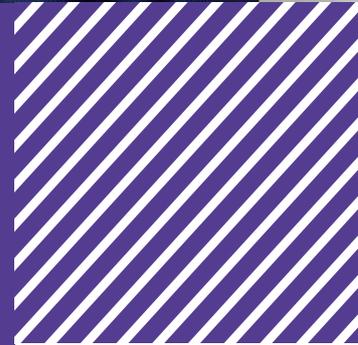
Universities Wales works autonomously as part of Universities UK.



Introduction

The last year provided one of the most uncertain and challenging environments for universities in recent memory.

While the pandemic in 2020 upturned the way our universities operate, the challenges that have faced us in 2023-24 are more fundamental. We have seen near unprecedented volatility in our international recruitment, cost pressures that have been driven by the highest levels of inflation in decades, and significant national and international political uncertainty. Meanwhile, in Wales specifically, we are still in the process of ambitious and wide-reaching regulatory reform of tertiary education and research.



The priorities for Universities Wales have been brought into sharp relief by these unprecedented conditions: preparing for our new regulatory environment, understanding and communicating our financial position are crucial. Other priorities have emerged from the need to focus on the tangible benefits universities deliver, whether that's how they transform the lives of people across the country, or the valuable contribution they make to the sustainability of our public services and our economy. Further matters emerged over the course of the year – like the participation challenges facing young Welsh people.

This report sets out the ways that Universities Wales, working with universities and partners across Wales, has delivered against its priorities.

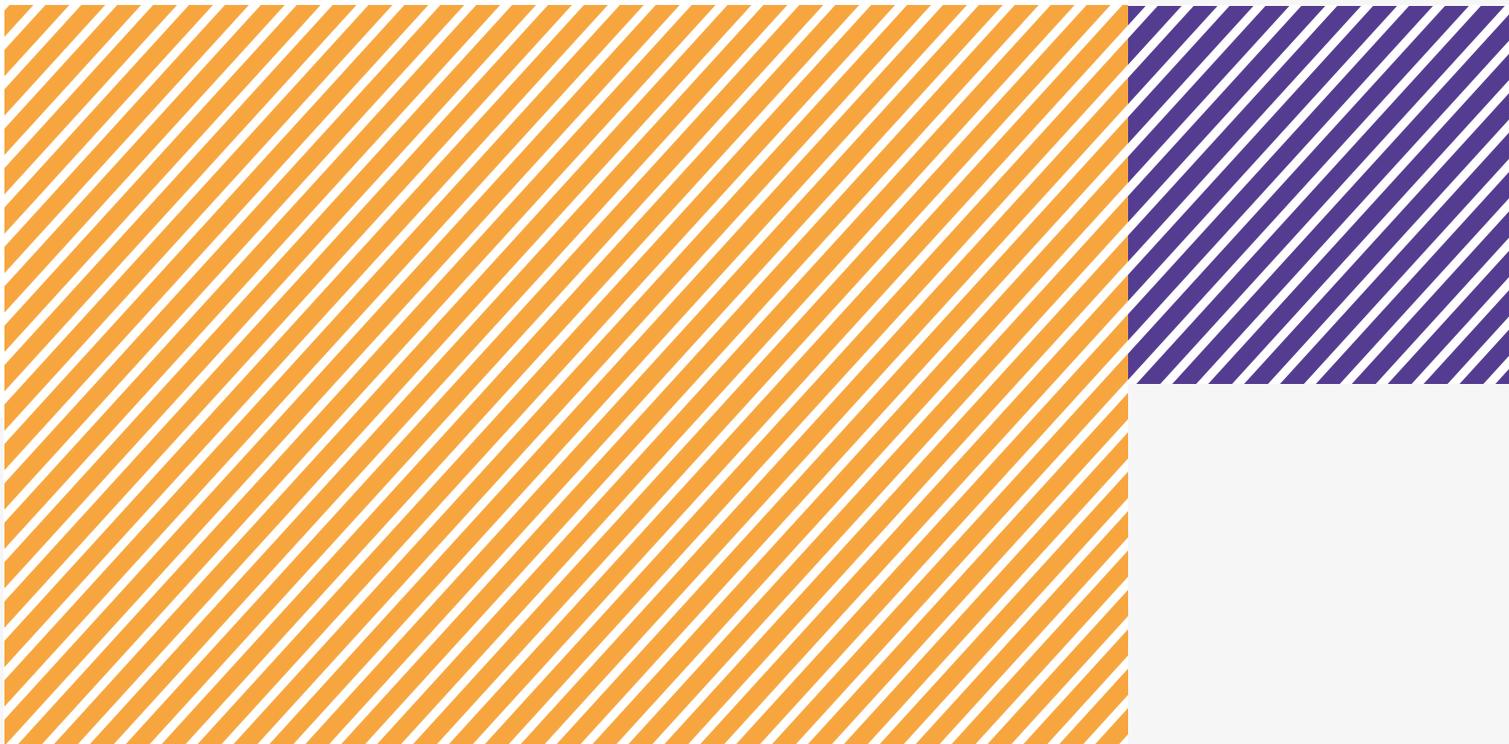
It spans areas of practical and timely policy development to inform decision-makers – such as on the challenge of participation or our financial environment – through to successfully communicating these issues to a broader audience across Wales, the UK and globally.

This work sits alongside the collaborative, mission-driven work of Global Wales and the Wales Innovation Network. Projects that bring colleagues together and, through that collaboration, create and deliver new opportunities and benefits.

Looking ahead to the coming year, the key challenges persist: an uncertain financial environment and the challenges posed by low higher education participation in Wales. We will build on what we have delivered this year, continue to make the case for the value and importance of higher education, promote the benefits of study in Wales for students in the UK and globally, and maintain our focus on just what's at stake.

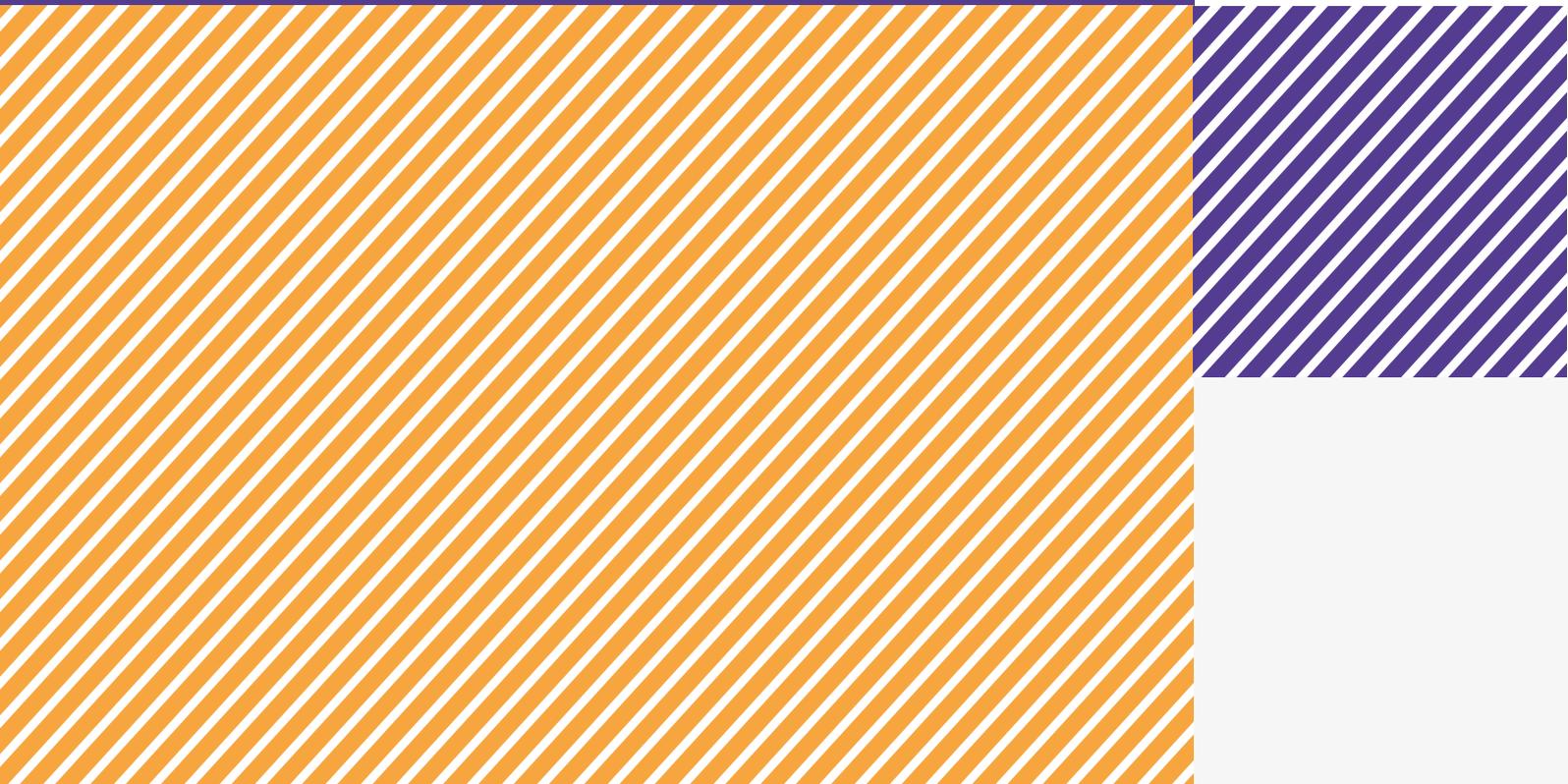
And we do so with the conviction that our universities matter, not for their own sake but for the transformative opportunities they offer people, for the contributions they make to places across Wales and the role they will have in our future prosperity.

Professor Paul Boyle
Chair, Universities Wales



Financial sustainability

Universities Wales' response to the Senedd's call for information on the Welsh Government budget provided the foundation for our work over 2023-24. It highlighted how fees and funding no longer cover the cost of delivery in domestic undergraduate teaching or research. It emphasised the levels of borrowing for the Welsh sector and the impact that the erosion of funding for core research and innovation will have on our ability to bring extra investment to Wales.



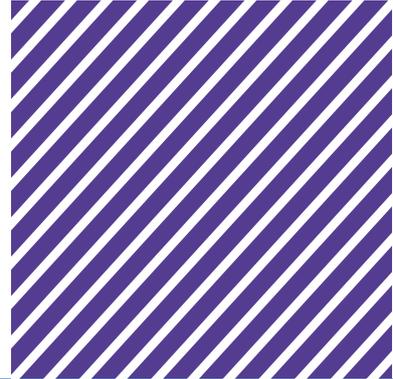
As part of our efforts to support sustainability, we worked collaboratively to support institutions with the fee increase announced by Welsh Government.

We also commissioned work that explored opportunities for business transformation and that identified the value Welsh universities deliver to public services in Wales.

Working with institutions and government we helped secure £20m in Financial Transactions Capital that was made available to higher education and further education for 2024-25.

We also reached a broad audience, with our work on financial sustainability generating 17 items of press coverage of university funding across multiple outlets and 14 separate mentions of the financial environment in the Senedd.

Our work on financial sustainability and funding will remain one of our most urgent priorities in 2024-25.



Working with Medr

A key priority for Universities Wales was the establishment of Medr, the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, which has responsibility for funding and regulating post-16 education and training, and research.

Universities Wales set out our priorities for Medr in articles that appeared on our website and in Wonkhe: these priorities were centred on participation, reducing bureaucracy and advocating for Welsh research and innovation. We were pleased to see participation and reducing bureaucracy featured in the Welsh Government's statement of priorities for Medr.

We responded to Welsh Government's consultations on regulations and engaged with Welsh Government, Medr and wider partners as arrangements for the move to the new body took shape.

We also were able to draw on the expertise of international partners by arranging for a roundtable with the Chief Executive of Universities New Zealand to discuss their experiences of working within a tertiary system.



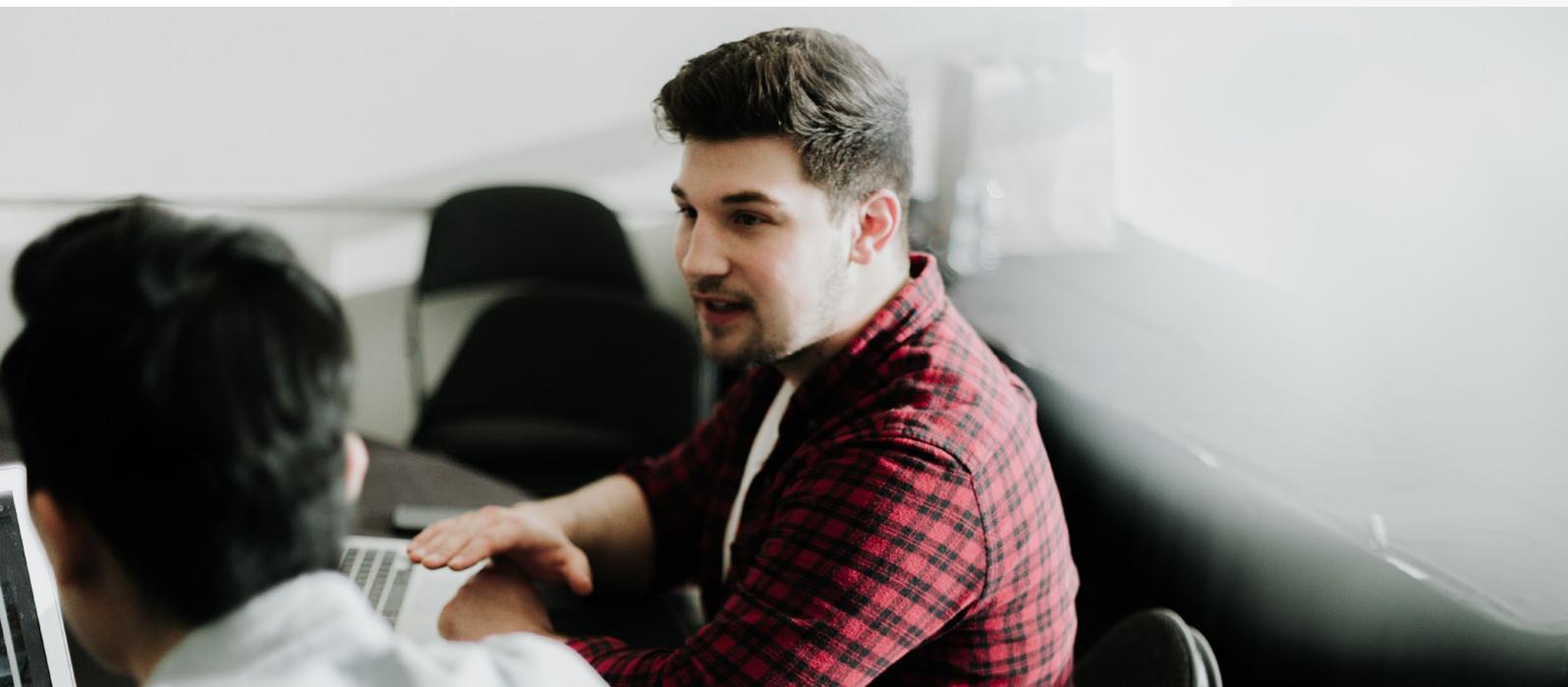
Participation

Participation emerged as a pressing and urgent priority for Universities Wales over the course of 2023-24 as it became clear that participation in higher education from Welsh young people was trending down over a multi-year period.

Analysis by Universities Wales found that the gap between Wales and the rest of the UK in the proportion of 18-year-olds who apply to university was wider than it had ever been, and that those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in Wales were less likely to go to university than those from similar backgrounds across the rest of the UK.

Further exploration of this data identified a wider drop in participation among 16–18-year-olds in Wales.

Universities Wales worked tirelessly to raise the alarm on this data, engaging directly with partners including Welsh Government and Medr, and generating press coverage across multiple channels including The Guardian and BBC Wales.



Influencing and communicating

Universities Wales undertook extensive engagement with political parties, elected representatives and the press over 2023-24.

This included a series of events at party conferences, three meetings of the Cross-Party Group for universities, 52 references to Universities Wales in the Senedd, a large number of engagements with Senedd Members and MPs, and over 43 references to Universities Wales across different press outlets including The Guardian and BBC Wales.

Our communication work has been supported by the strategic placement of articles in different publications including Western Mail, Wales Online, Nation Cymru, the Institute for Welsh Affairs and Wonkhe.

We continue to grow our online presence, expanding the reach of our website and social channels over the course of the year.



52

references to
Universities
Wales in the
Senedd

43

mentions of
Universities
Wales in the
media



168k+

social media
impressions



Towards 2026 – elections

The focus of our political activity in 2023-24 shifted to the general election announced in May 2024.

Universities Wales produced a set of priorities for the next UK Government to unlock Wales' potential. At the heart of these priorities was the importance of restoring the decision-making on replacement structural funds to Wales. This has been a central issue for Welsh universities since the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the loss of the £60m a year funding that universities received from those funds. It has formed the cornerstone of our work with UK Government and Westminster over recent years. We were pleased to see Labour commit to restoring decision-making on these replacement funds.

We communicated our priorities through engagement with candidates and, following the election, engagement with MPs and the Wales Office.

We produced a set of priorities for the next UK Government to unlock Wales' potential



Transforming Lives

In 2023-24, Universities Wales set out to highlight and celebrate one of the core reasons our universities exist: to transform lives.

Through our campaign, we gathered a range of inspirational stories of people's experience of university and built on opportunities to highlight those stories, whether through our social media presence, press work or engagement with Senedd Members. These case studies were seen over 40,000 times across our own communication channels.

In early 2024-25, Universities Wales held an event to celebrate those who have shared their stories with us while also drawing on the stories of Senedd Members' own experiences. This was supported by a publication showcasing many of the case studies.



Developing policy

Universities Wales maintained activity across a broad range of policy areas encompassing quality, student well-being, green economy, adult learning, research and innovation, and skills.

This has included being part of reviews and reference groups focused on vocational qualifications and adult learning, preparing consultation responses on the Welsh Government's revised mental health strategy and the Senedd's inquiries on the green economy and research, and organising feedback on the Research Excellence Framework consultation.

Universities Wales also worked closely with UUK on the Migration Advisory Committee's review of the graduate route, ensuring the Wales-specific issues were communicated. This work included engagement with the Cabinet Secretary for Education, submitting evidence to the Welsh Affairs Committee, and direct engagement with the Secretary of State for Wales and the Migration Advisory Committee.



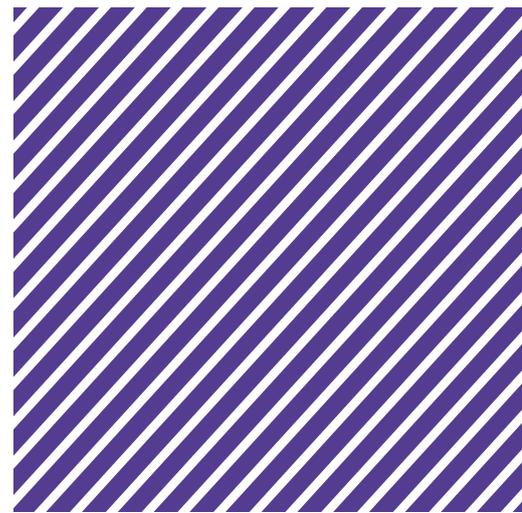
Wales Innovation Network

The Wales Innovation Network (WIN) has continued to build its networks this year, encouraging collaboration between Welsh universities through its steering groups.

The Wales Arts and Humanities Alliance (WAHA) has developed an all-Wales bid for doctoral training, and the All Wales Policing Academic Collaboration (AWPAC) has funded a second year of joint research projects between police forces and Welsh universities, resulting in some impactful research as showcased at a research symposium held in June.

WIN's small grant fund provides seed funding for the development of bids to external funders, growing external research income capture and delivering impact for Wales. This year, £113,115 was awarded to 16 collaborative research and innovation projects across Welsh universities, building on the success of the 2023 round of the WIN small grant fund (funded jointly with Global Wales), which generated over £9 million in external funding bids.

WIN has highlighted Welsh research and innovation strengths through several events this year, most notably through the R&I showcase in London with the Secretary of State for Wales and St David's Day event in Brussels with Welsh Higher Education Brussels (WHEB). These events were attended by politicians, representatives of funding bodies, and university leaders, raising the profile of Welsh universities' R&I and building significant connections across London and Europe.



Welsh Higher Education Brussels

Welsh Higher Education Brussels (WHEB) formally became part of Universities Wales in October 2023 building on many years of close co-operation and enabling stronger connections with Universities Wales' work.

Following the agreement on the UK's association to Horizon Europe reached in September 2023, the focus of WHEB's work has been on ensuring universities are briefed on the opportunities available through the programme, including the key policy objectives and relevant networks and platforms to maximise participation. WHEB has organised discussions with senior research leaders in each university to share information on Horizon Europe, including the strategic direction of the programme in its final period from 2025-27, to enable universities to identify and plan for relevant opportunities in the programme.

In partnership with Wales Innovation Network (WIN), WHEB organised a showcase in Brussels enabling key contacts from European institutions, regional partners and networks to meet researchers exploring a wide range of topics including AI, mental health, semiconductors, low carbon building and crop science. This event has led to further opportunities for researchers, including funding bids, membership of networks and invitations to connect with European research and innovation organisations.

WHEB has organised a range of activities in Brussels involving universities, including thematic events, study visits by early career researchers and a second Brussels Welsh universities alumni event held at the British Ambassador's Residence with a focus on civil society research. There has also been continued support for the Global Wales/ Universities Wales partnership with the Flanders Research Agency (FWO) to incentivise Welsh participation in the FWO Scientific Research Network programme.

In policy and public affairs, WHEB responded to the European Commission consultation on the Erasmus programme, one of only three UK organisations that provided a response, as well as providing input to Senedd Inquiries and briefing Senedd members during their visits to Brussels.

International

From strengthening international partnerships to contributing to increasing the numbers of students coming to Wales, the international work of the Global Wales III programme has delivered much across its priority markets (India, Vietnam, North America and Europe) in 2023-24.



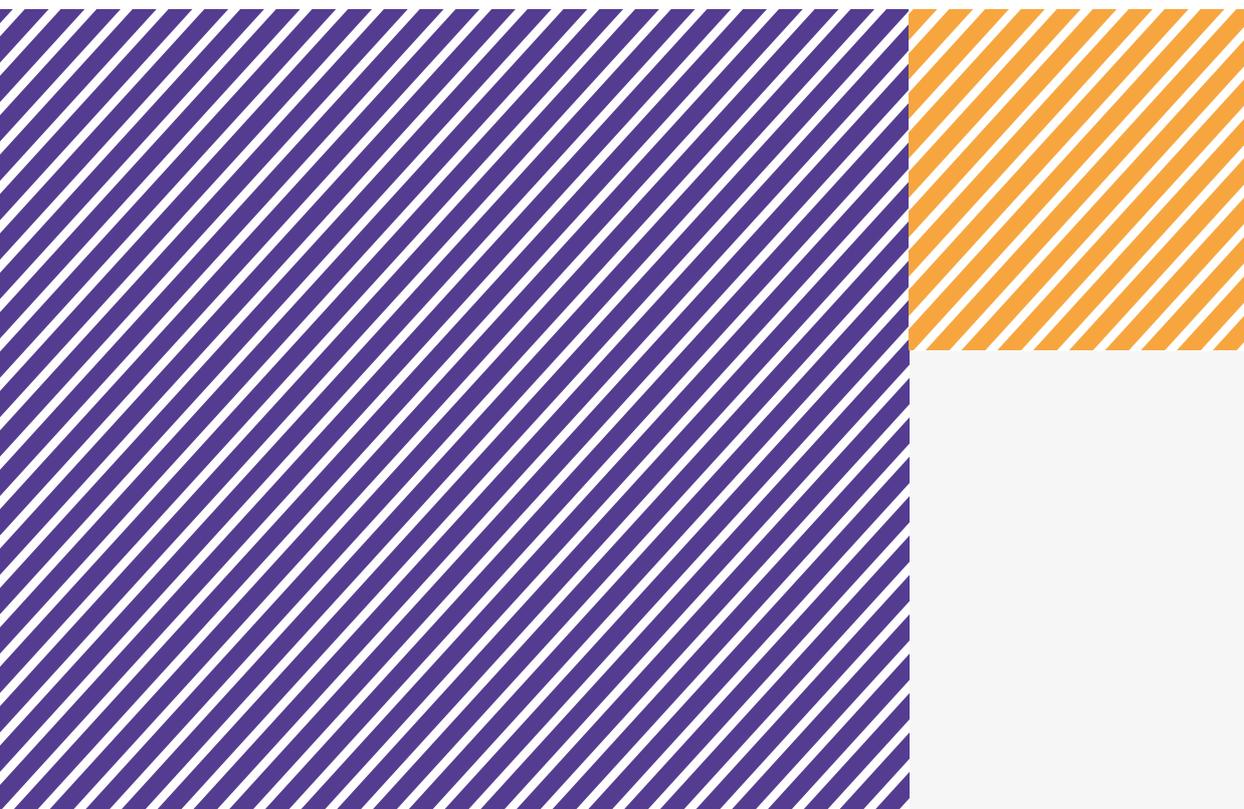
Like many other sectors, education has felt the impact of public sector cuts and, during its second year, the Global Wales budget was cut by 50%; the programme shortened by a year, ending this phase in July 2025. While these measures were necessary, they also reinforced our core strengths — collaboration, resourcefulness, and a shared vision for a globally connected Wales.

Over the past year, Global Wales has facilitated 22 partnerships, with an additional £156,000 worth of funding leveraged across the programme.

Vital in this time of volatile student recruitment, we delivered three Study in Wales destination marketing campaigns, including an additional campaign in India this summer. These campaigns raised awareness of Study in Wales and supported both undergraduate and postgraduate recruitment in priority markets, generating over 400 million impressions, over 6 million clicks, and over 84,000 leads to university web pages.

Within priority markets, Global Wales facilitated and/or supported 10 delegations. These included welcoming advisors from the EU and North America to explore Welsh universities, a Global Wales-led skills mission to India with four further education colleges, two delegation visits to Wales and Vietnam allowing representatives to observe and learn in-country, and a visit to Germany that strengthened ties between institutions and the automotive industry in Wales and Baden-Württemberg. Additionally, Global Wales attended a number of international events that focus on international recruitment and partnership building, including NAFSA, NACAC, EAIE, CBIE, CICan and more.

Across the year, Global Wales provided funding to 30 scholars to complete all or part of their studies in Wales and provided a scholar engagement scheme to create lifelong ambassadors for Wales. A total of 664 applications for the Global Wales Postgraduate Scholarship for 2024/25 entry were received for just eight scholarships.



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