

Special Issue

Future Directions for Higher Education in Wales Conference April 2014

Guest editorial - Nick Potter and Helena Lim

This special issue of PESTHLE features a small selection of the work presented at the 2014 *Future Directions* conference. We hope it gives you a flavour of some of the exciting and innovative learning and teaching developments across Welsh HE and promotes further discussion in how together, we can meet the challenges set by a rapidly-changing world and to be able to take advantage of the opportunities that world affords.

On 2nd and 3rd April 2014, the second biennial conference in the series *Future Directions for Higher Education in Wales* took place at Aberystwyth University. Over 200 delegates from across Wales and beyond gathered for a series of sessions in the areas of Distinctive Graduates, Inspiring Teaching, Learning for Employment, Students as Partners, and Learner Journeys. A wide variety of sessions featured including, keynotes from Professor Ron Barnett, Emeritus Professor of Higher Education at the Institute of Education, University of London and Professor Shân Wareing, Pro Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching at Buckinghamshire New University, student panels, workshops, nano-teach sessions, discussion sessions, paper and poster presentations. Each session was practice-based; contributors were encouraged to discuss their experience, including their reflections on the literature, their discussions with colleagues and with their students in their continued efforts to further develop the learning experiences they offered.

Future Directions is a learning and teaching enhancement programme in Wales, led by the Higher Education Academy in partnership with other agencies committed to the continuing development of higher education (HE) in Wales, including the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), Higher Education Wales (HEW), the National Union of Student (NUS) Wales, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), Colegau Cymru, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and all Welsh higher education institutions. The first conference in the series was held at Glyndwr University in April 2012 and many other enhancement activities have taken place under the *Future Directions* banner. Over the last four years *Future Directions* has introduced two major enhancement themes for supporting the work of the Welsh HE sector:

- *Graduates for our Future* (2010-2013)
- *Global Graduates: Enabling Flexible Learning* (2013-14)

Future Directions has organised 10 national conferences, sponsored six Case Study and Lessons Learnt publications as well as the student-led *Jargon Buster*, developed on-line video and podcast resources, and introduced seven enhancement projects within individual universities. This work has been facilitated by the following work strands:

- *Learning in Employment*
- *Learning for Employment*
- *Students as Partners*
- *Distinctive Graduates*

- *Inspiring Teaching*
- *Learner Journeys*

Opening the 2014 Conference the Chair suggested that there were three key challenges facing HE in the twenty-first century: instrumentalism; consumerism; skepticism. The first argues that HE programmes must be able to demonstrate a directly instrumental relationship to the economy; the second is powered by the encouragement given to students to think of themselves as consumers of a product and the third arises from the widely-accepted view that HE has been complacently assuming that it is beyond criticism for far too long. There are dangers in these views when put together. If, to use Maslow's illustration, all the problems that we see around us appear to us to be nails then we shall train hammers.

There is, however, much truth in some of the charges laid against HE: the sector needs to be far more pro-active in defending what it believes are its virtues and far keener to demonstrate the advantageous opportunities it offers on a wider basis than immediate employability. *Future Directions* can help to address these challenges.

The partners that came together to found *Future Directions* in 2010 believe that HE matters. They believe, above all, that learning and teaching in HE matters and that we can best develop and provide top quality learning and teaching by working together to explore our experience as teachers and as learners.

There are advantages to being a small country. It is easier to get round tables and talk. *Future Directions* is both national and collaborative. Taking advantage of the smallness of the nation, *Future Directions* has consistently promoted a culture of mutual benefit to strengthen the HE sector in Wales by pooling our best efforts and learning both together and from each other. This, the second conference in a series already successful and effective is a further demonstration of what can be achieved in this way. There have been beneficial outcomes through developing and disseminating learning and teaching practices for enhancing student experience at individual, institutional and sector levels. Sector bodies and Welsh Government have formally recognising *Future Directions* achievements within policy and strategy statements and guidelines and *Future Directions* is increasingly the respect of stakeholders within the higher education sector, extending beyond Welsh borders.

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Chair, Future Directions Conference 2014

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