

The North Wales Economy: Thoughts from the Assembly Commission's first Academic Fellowship

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The Assembly Commission has established a new pilot Fellowship scheme to enable academics at a more senior (post-PhD) career level to spend time at the Assembly working on a specific project, where this will have mutual benefit to the academic and to the Assembly.

The objective of the first Knowledge Exchange Fellowship project is to supplement the existing evidence base for the future scrutiny of the Welsh Government's approach to developing the north Wales economy. The Fellowship has been funded by Bangor University / Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) monies. This project has been undertaken by Dr Alexandra Plows, Bangor University, who has set out her findings in a report that is available on the [WISERD website](#). The report is based on Dr Plows' existing research, stakeholder interviews and desktop research.

Challenges and opportunities

The report firstly sets out a number of challenges facing the north Wales economy, focusing on the 'missing Mittelstand' – the lack of medium to large employers; a lack of infrastructure, including inter-regional connectivity; post-Brexit economic uncertainty; a lack of quality employment, and skills gaps, including gaps in training provision. The report then sets out key initiatives in development, focusing on the North Wales Growth Deal, including planned infrastructure improvements, cross-local authority partnership working, developing cross-border relationships with north west England, and significant inward investment / capital spend high tech projects, focused around the region's three Enterprise Zones (manufacturing in Deeside, energy on Anglesey and ICT and aerospace in Snowdonia). Strategic planning by stakeholders to match supply with demand is outlined in some detail; including skills and training initiatives linked to high tech energy and manufacturing, and concerted efforts to develop supply chain capacity across the region. Stakeholders are seeking to ensure a



“golden thread” in the procurement supply chain, enabling local businesses and the local labour force, to benefit directly from forthcoming demand-side opportunities.

The report then provides a number of critiques of some of these initiatives as identified by some stakeholders in interview. In particular, the emphasis on infrastructure improvement in the North Wales Growth Deal was critiqued, with some interviewees firstly questioning the extent to which improving connectivity between north east Wales and north west Wales would directly benefit peripheral areas of north west Wales. Interviewees also flagged the possibility of infrastructure improvements in north east Wales catalysing displacement in north west Wales, and the potential of disruption catalysed by particular initiatives, such as the influx of construction workers for the forthcoming Wylfa Newydd. The report also identifies the challenges of matching supply with demand in the context of market uncertainty; for example stretching timelines for the delivery of some demand-side projects presents a significant challenge for training providers and for local businesses.

The final section of the report outlines a number of alternative and complementary approaches to developing the north Wales economy suggested by interviewees, with an emphasis on improving jobs quality within the existing sectors which underpin the region’s labour market. These are; developing a “strongly indigenous” economy building on existing social, cultural and natural capital; building capacity within the ‘foundational economy’; community level economic development; and targeted support for micro businesses and self-employment.

Conversation starters

The report sets out a number of suggested recommendations or ‘conversation starters’ in a number of areas – including, the need for a targeted ‘action research’ agenda to address the identified evidence gaps; the importance of ensuring that all policies and initiatives are “periphery proof”; the benefits of strengthening the hand of stakeholders seeking to ensure that procurement terms and conditions can deliver for local businesses and the local workforce (including ensuring job quality); and the need to broaden the membership and remit of existing partnerships to address the economic challenges facing the region.

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