

Answers to the Written Assembly Questions for answer on 25 January 2011

[R] signifies that the Member has declared an interest.

[W] signifies that the question was tabled in Welsh.

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To ask the Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning

Nick Bourne (Mid and West Wales): What discussions has the Minister had with the University of Wales with regard to its future in the last 12 months and will he give details of those discussions. (WAQ56958)

Answer issued on 01 February 2011

I met with the University of Wales on 28th June to discuss its Strategic Plan, and its planned response to the Welsh Assembly Government's HE strategy, For Our Future.

Discussions centred around the role the UoW has in contributing to the regional planning need, as identified in For Our Future; its part in validating the delivery of higher education provision within FE institutions; and the University's capacity to interact with international partners.

As you are aware, For Our Future emphasises the need to ensure Wales' HE sector is strong and vibrant with a positive reputation across the world. The quality of Wales' HE sector provision must set world-class standards for excellence, and the University of Wales can be no exception.

As part of this strategy, you will recall that I have asked the independent HE Governance Review Group to evaluate the governance and strategic direction of the University of Wales, and its current and future contribution to the implementation of For Our Future. I am expecting the Review Group to report to me in late February.

The vice-chancellor of the University was present at a meeting I held with Higher Education Wales in the autumn and the vice-chairman of the University was present at my meeting with the chairs of Higher Education Wales.

Nick Bourne (Mid and West Wales): What is the Minister doing to promote greater collaboration amongst Higher Education institutions in Wales. (WAQ56959)

Answer issued on 01 February 2011

Collaboration within the Welsh higher education sector in Wales is of increasing importance and has to be a central driver for change - but it must also have proven practical benefit in freeing up greater resource for front-line delivery; driving measureable improvements for learners; and achieving proven infrastructure efficiencies.

However collaboration alone is not sufficient and there is a need for radical structural change within the sector. Successive evidence, as identified by For Our Future, points to the need for fewer institutions with greater critical mass, building on respective strengths rather than wasting resources competing with neighbours. Too many higher education institutions in Wales are too small to cut a mark internationally, to operate effectively and efficiently and to respond to the growing pressure of international competition.

In order to address these challenges, I asked the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, in my Remit letter for 2010-11, to establish a strategic priority to deliver a reconfigured higher education system. The Welsh economy needs a strong higher education system in which providers work in partnership, particularly regionally, to offer more accessible higher education opportunities to learners and employers.

Additionally, the Council has set a target for at least 75% of Welsh higher education institutions to have an annual income in excess of the UK median, with no institution in the lower quartile by 2012/13. This is a challenging target, however, it is an achievable one, and one which the Welsh Assembly Government strongly supports.

Historically, the Welsh Assembly Government has made available, via HEFCW, more than £115 million to support reconfiguration and collaboration developments in the higher education sector. In addition, a further £32 million has already been committed from 2011-12 onwards. This has been used to support key collaborative developments such as the Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences (IBERS), The Climate Change Consortium for Wales (C3W) and the merger between Trinity University College Carmarthen and the University of Wales, Lampeter.

The Council has recently issued guidance on the future shape of the Welsh higher education sector which unequivocally sets out the number of institutions which the Council considers to be sustainable. It is now for the sector to respond to the challenge and to develop merger proposals.

Jenny Randerson (Cardiff Central): When is the Minister planning to have the new regulations relating to student tuition fees in place. (WAQ56963)

Answer issued on 25 January 2011

I announced in my statement on 30 November 2010 how Wales will respond to the decision by the UK Government to increase higher education tuition fees in England. The revised arrangements for higher education funding and statutory student support in Wales are to be put in place for students commencing new courses of study on or after 1st September 2012.

My intention is to make regulations in March this year which amongst other things establish the basic and higher tuition fee rates for full-time undergraduate higher education courses, set out the monitoring and approval processes for institutional fee plans and make provision for the new student support package. The arrangements for part-time students to access student loans will be taken forward subject to amendments to the Higher Education Act 2004 being made in the post-election period.

My intention is that all of the required legislation should be made before the elections to the National Assembly for Wales in May this year, to enable full implementation of subsequent system changes in preparation for academic year 2012/13. A consultation on delivery of the new arrangements is underway and will be supplemented by stakeholder workshops over the course of the next month.

To ask the Minister for the Economy and Transport

Nick Bourne (Mid and West Wales): What road Improvements are proposed in the Mid and West Wales region during 2011. (WAQ56961)

Answer issued on 01 February 2011

We are reviewing the programme and I will shortly make a statement about future plans.

Nick Bourne (Mid and West Wales): What is the Minister doing to encourage job creation in Llandovery, Llandeilo and Ammanford. (WAQ56962)

Answer issued on 01 February 2011

As exemplified by Economic Renewal: a new direction, we are helping to create a strong and enterprising economy throughout Wales. In Llandovery, Llandeilo and Ammanford, we have:

Awarded £220,000 to the Cawdor Arms Hotel in Llandeilo as part of an investment package of £750,500 resulting in 22 full time equivalent jobs being created in the area.

Provided Pullmaflex Ltd in Ammanford with £200,000 for a project where 15 new jobs are forecast.

Provided Town Heritage Initiative Programme support to aid the restoration of buildings of historical interest in Llandovery since 2000 and, due to the success of the project, a further five year phase was approved in 2006. We have contributed £50,000 per annum towards this initiative which has resulted in a number of jobs being created.

Through Economic Renewal: a new direction, we will continue to provide the infrastructure, skills, environment and direct support where appropriate to help create a strong and enterprising economy throughout Wales.

To ask the Minister for Health and Social Services

Nick Bourne (Mid and West Wales): What discussions has the Minister with Hywel Dda Local Health Board regarding changes to the delivery of health services in their area in the last 12 months, and will she give details of those discussions. (WAQ56957)

Answer issued on 25 January 2011

I meet with the Chairs of all Local Health Boards, including Hywel Dda on a monthly basis. Local Health Boards are responsible for planning and delivery of services for their local populations and I would expect them to engage effectively with citizens, staff, stakeholders and partner organisations on proposed changes. I have published new guidance for consultation on how the NHS should engage on proposals and I expect discussion to be open and transparent.

To ask the Minister for Rural Affairs

Nick Bourne (Mid and West Wales): What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues and officials in the European Union with regard to any proposed changes to the Glastir scheme to encourage more new entrants. (WAQ56960)

Answer issued on 08 April 2011

My officials have notified the European Commission about the forthcoming review of the Glastir scheme and advised them that further bilateral discussions may be required to consider any subsequent proposed amendments to the scheme.