

Cyngor Cyllido Addysg
Uwch Cymru
Higher Education Funding
Council for Wales

Cwrt Linden
Clos Ilex Llanisien
Caerdydd CF14 5DZ
Ffôn 029 2076 1861
Ffacs 029 2076 3163
www.hefcw.ac.uk

Linden Court
Ilex Close Llanishen
Cardiff CF14 5DZ
Tel 029 2076 1861
Fax 029 2076 3163
www.hefcw.ac.uk

hefcw

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Circular

Guidance on good practice in funding of effective, democratic student unions, and student representation

Date: 14 December 2011
Reference: W11/46HE
To: Heads of higher education institutions in Wales
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in Wales
Chairs of governors of higher education institutions and directly-funded further education colleges in Wales
Presidents of Student Unions
Response by: 08 February 2012
Contact: Name: Dr Cliona O'Neill
Telephone: 029 2068 2283
Email: cliona.oneill@hefcw.ac.uk

This Circular provides guidance on best practice in the funding of effective, democratic student unions (SUs), and student representation. It includes principles which should underpin the funding of SUs, principles which should underpin the relationship agreement between the SU and the institution; and a common set of core functions which all SUs should provide. These should be in place by 2012/13.

This document is available online, in large print, Braille, on CD and on audio CD and cassette. Should you or someone you know require this in an alternative format, please contact us on (029) 2068 2225 or email info@hefcw.ac.uk.



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Introduction

1. This circular provides guidance for institutions on best practice in funding effective, democratic student unions (SUs), and student representation, in response to a 2011-12 remit letter request from the Welsh Government. We recognise that this is a complex area, because SUs in Wales offer diverse services and are funded in accordance with the range of services offered.
2. This guidance provides a common set of principles underpinning the funding of SUs and principles which should underpin a published Relationship Agreement between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and SUs in Wales. It also provides a set of minimum expectations for core functions which should be carried out by all SUs, while recognising the diversity of SUs across Wales. SUs should be appropriately funded to enable them to fulfil their core functions.
3. The effectiveness of operation of these arrangements will form part of our ongoing dialogue with institutions and with NUS Wales.

Background

4. HEFCW's [remit letter](#) from the Welsh Government for 2011-12 included an expectation that HEFCW 'Establish best practice in the funding of effective, democratic students' unions, and student representation on decision-making bodies, and to ensure that best practice in respect of student union representation becomes the norm in the Higher Education sector in Wales.'
5. We formed a task and finish group to advise us in undertaking this work. This consisted of the Higher Education Wales (HEW) Chair of the Pro Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching Advisory Group, NUS Wales President, HEW officer, NUS Wales staff member, and HEFCW officers. We also consulted our Student Experience, Teaching and Quality Committee in the development of this guidance.
6. Since 2007 HEFCW has funded a NUS Wales campaign to enhance student representation in Wales and to support SUs in participating in the QAA Institutional Review: Wales process. The campaign is entitled '[Have your Say](#)'.
7. In 2009 a cross-sector group was formed to engage students as active participants in the leadership, management, development and delivery of their own educational experience in Wales. It consisted of HEW, NUS Wales, HEFCW, the Quality Assurance Agency and the Higher Education Academy. The group developed the Wales Initiative for Student Engagement (WISE), which was launched by the Minister for Education in October 2009. In 2011 it was refreshed and Colleges Wales/Colegau Cymru became partners, to expand WISE across the whole of further and higher education in Wales. The WISE statement, setting out its principles of working in partnership, valuing feedback, and harnessing expertise, is attached at **Annex A**. It expects

partners to work collectively to drive innovation and enable widespread adoption of good practice in student engagement.

8. The Charity Commission sets out [operational guidance for SUs](#), as most SUs are charities and have to comply with certain legal requirements. This includes the conduct of financial affairs.
9. The [Education Act 1994](#) Part II sets out requirements to be observed in relation to SUs. This includes the conduct of financial affairs, and that the SU should have a written constitution which is reviewed at least quinquennially.
10. NUS carried out a two year 'Good Governance' project with SUs in England, funded by HEFCE, which resulted in the publication of good practice guidance and an associated toolkit for SUs early in 2011. The project was supported by Universities UK, the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, the Committee of University Chairs, and the Association of Heads of University Administration.

Funding Student Unions

11. We expect that you will address these guidelines in conjunction with the development and review of your Student Charter, in order to demonstrate engagement with the WISE principles.

Principles underpinning the funding of SUs

12. Although the functions undertaken by different SUs vary, the funding of SUs should be underpinned by a series of common principles. From 2012/13 we expect the funding of all SUs in Wales to be underpinned by the following principles:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Each SU will have a mission and a constitution, which sets out its role, responsibilities and aims.2. The SU will be an independent, autonomous, transparent, professionally run and democratically led organisation.3. The SU will represent the full and diverse range of its student members, ie part-time, full-time, international, European, UK, postgraduate, undergraduate, franchise, mature and non-traditional students, students with protected characteristics, students undertaking higher education through the medium of Welsh, or wishing to receive Welsh language services and communications.4. The SU should be sufficiently resourced to undertake its core functions effectively, fulfil its mission and support students in being full partners in their learning.5. The SU will be financially transparent and able to justify the funding it receives. |
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6. The SU will play its full part in delivering the objectives of WISE through its funded activities.
7. The partnership between the institution and the SU will be supported through a Relationship Agreement.

13. In some cases, students at partner colleges may be best represented by a local SU. In this case there should be a formal agreement between the HE SU and the local SU clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each SU in relation to these students.

The Relationship Agreement

14. In accordance with the principles above, from 2012/13 we expect the relationship between the institution and the SU to be supported through a Relationship Agreement, which should be published on both the institution's and the SU's website.
15. The NUS Good Governance project identified [principles that underpin excellent working relationships between HEIs and SUs](#). These are detailed below, and have been endorsed by NUS, the Committee of University Chairs, Universities UK and GuildHE.

1. Strategic partnership: Spirit of partnership between HEI and SU informing the strategic direction of both parties and informing service agreements. Informed engagement of SU representatives in key institutional decision-making bodies.
2. Student-centred: Shared commitment to developing and improving students' experience of academia and extra-curricular aspects of their lives.
3. Respect and understanding: Clarity about, and mutual understanding of, the distinct roles of the HEI and the SU and the value that each party brings to the relationship.
4. Openness and Trust: Full, open, regular communication on relevant issues, in particular issues likely to have an impact on the other party, the student population and/or other joint stakeholders.
5. Mutual support and commitment: Constructive interactions, and demonstrable commitment to making the relationship work through investment of time and resources.
6. Independence: Recognition of the value of a strong, student-led SU empowered to determine and manage its own affairs. Recognition of the need for the HEI to balance the interests of a range of stakeholders within an increasingly challenging external context.
7. Accountability: Accountability of SU to HEI as supervisor (under the 1994 Education Act) and principal funder, within a mutually agreed framework which is robust, effective, efficient and compatible with the

reporting requirements of other regulators (where relevant), such as The Charity Commission, the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator and/or Companies House. Acknowledgement by HEI that the SU is a major stakeholder and primary body representing the student voice.

8. Diversity and equality: A shared commitment to equality and diversity and the fair treatment of all staff and students.

16. We expect Relationship Agreements in Wales to include these principles. In addition, the following two principles should also underpin the relationship agreement:

9. Student voice: the partners will work collaboratively to recognise the student voice through a range of methods, to ensure that students are partners at every level of the institution.

10. Funding: the partners will consider the core and additional functions of the SU and agree appropriate funding.

17. Both partners will need to ensure they make appropriate and timely information available to each other to support the relationship agreement.
18. The Relationship Agreement should be reviewed annually in conjunction with the annual review of the Student Charter, and quinquennially in conjunction with the review of the SU constitution. It should be endorsed by the institution's governing body.

Minimum expectations of Student Unions

19. All SUs are required to comply with Part II of the [Education Act 1994](#) in their conduct and operations.
20. In addition, NUS provides its member institutions access to a model constitution, which includes objects and powers of the SU. These objects are:
- Promoting the interests and welfare of students during their course of study and representing, supporting and advising students;
 - Being the recognised representative channel between students and their higher education institution and any other external bodies
 - Providing social, cultural, sporting and recreational activities and forums for discussions and debate for the personal development of its students.
21. We expect all SUs to provide a common core set of functions by 2012/13. These address the objects above, and should be provided regardless of whether or not the SU is a member of the NUS.
22. The minimum expectations are that the SU will be empowered to deliver:

11. Democratically elected officers to deliver the mission of the SU in line with its constitution.
12. Promote and protect the interests and welfare of students at the institution during their course of study.
13. Provide professional, trained advisors to give independent advice on academic issues.
14. Provide and support an effective system of student representation in order to achieve its object of being the recognised representative channel between students and the institution, and any other external bodies.
15. Write and review the Student Charter jointly with the institution.
16. Support, represent and advise students.
17. Provide welfare advice and support which links effectively with the services of the institution, and is underpinned by an agreement between the SU and the institution.
18. Promote student involvement in surveys, including the National Student Survey, as appropriate.
19. Provide or support social, cultural, sporting and recreational activities and fora for discussions and debate for the personal development of its Students.
20. Ensure its advice and services, and access to these, meet the needs of the diverse student body.
21. Identify an appropriate range of commercial activities and other streams of funding to support SU activities.

23. In addition to the core functions, the partners may agree funding for additional activities or services, which may vary with local needs and circumstances. These additional activities or services must align with the powers of the SU, which are helpfully defined in the model constitution.
24. The SU, and the institution as funders, need to consider the core functions and any additional activities or services to be provided by the SU, and agree a mechanism for allocating appropriate funding.

Impact assessment

25. We are committed to contributing to advancing equality and diversity agendas. In addition to meeting our statutory responsibilities, our intention is to drive cultural change and proactive approaches to ensure that equality and diversity issues are fully integrated into our own and the sector's policies and practices and meet Welsh Government priorities. Our Equality Scheme confirms our commitment and statutory responsibilities regarding the 2010 Equality Act.

26. As part of our policy development process, we have undertaken an internal equality impact assessment screening to consider the impact of this document on learners with protected characteristics and groups underrepresented in higher education. The outcomes of this screening are available upon request.
27. We also considered sustainability matters as part of the impact assessment screening of this document. You will need to ensure that sustainability is adequately addressed within the Student Charter and that the document is consistent with and links to the policies, values, and actions set out within your institution's own sustainability policy, and environmental management plan.

Further information / responses to

28. Please submit responses by 8 February 2012 to Dr Cliona O'Neill (tel 029 2068 2283; email cliona.oneill@hefcw.ac.uk).



WISE – The Wales Initiative for Student Engagement

WISE is an approach which engages students as active participants in the leadership, management, development and delivery of their own educational experience and is a defining feature of further and higher education in Wales. The power of WISE is in the collective strength of further and higher education to drive innovation and enable widespread adoption of good practice in student engagement.

The aim of WISE is to ensure Wales remains at the forefront of student engagement in order continually to empower students to participate in the enhancement of their own learning experiences. WISE therefore provides students in Wales with an excellent and distinctive experience. It involves engagement at many levels, in many different forms and will primarily take place at individual institutions. WISE therefore facilitates diversity as well as providing a common aim.

The cross-sector group, formed in 2009, includes representation from Colegau Cymru/Colleges Wales, the Higher Education Academy (HEA), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), Higher Education Wales (HEW), the National Union of Students in Wales (NUS Wales), and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The partners work closely and collaboratively with learners to achieve joint aims and goals, reinforce, share and build upon current good practice in student engagement in further and higher education, and learn from partners across the UK, Europe and elsewhere to help Wales enhance and improve the student experience.

WISE is underpinned by three principles: working in partnership, valuing feedback, and harnessing expertise.

Working in Partnership – the concept of working together for the greater good

Students know that in Wales their voice enhances further and higher education. There is a commitment to partnership working between students and staff that opens up possibilities for authentic and constructive dialogue. This enables students to be active contributors to improving the learning environment and, collectively, to be a force for influence and change.

To engage students as partners, the further and higher education sector will:

- be responsive to changes in the role and identity of students in a rapidly diversifying education sector;

- ensure that all students and staff are aware of their mutual roles and responsibilities, and those of their institutions;
- enable active student involvement and promote constructive channels of communication to improve feedback mechanisms between students and their institutions; and
- enhance student representation, including through working jointly where appropriate, to achieve common goals and share good practice.

Valuing Feedback - output from an event or occurrence in the past will positively influence the same event in the present or future

Giving feedback is the most common way in which students participate in the development and enhancement of the student experience. There is wide diversity in how and when students give feedback. Effective structures are in place at institutions in Wales to gather and consider feedback from students at all levels of decision making. This is supplemented at a nationwide level by student involvement and representation at senior decision-making fora of sector bodies and agencies.

The further and higher education sector will build on the approach through:

- diversifying, and seeking continually to enhance, the ways in which students are consulted on and involved with decisions about developments in their learning;
- identifying and sharing effective practice to enable its broader uptake;
- using the outcomes of surveys and reviews to improve engagement and enhance the whole student experience;
- increasing and enhancing the opportunities for students to contribute fully to quality reviews and audit processes;
- providing students with clear information on how their feedback has been used and addressed; and
- using innovative means of communication and feedback mechanisms to support the needs of a diverse student body.

Harnessing Expertise – to control and use something or someone of extensive knowledge, ability or experience

The focus of student engagement is to enhance the quality of learning for current and future generations of students. Students are best placed to know what they want when it comes to their own learning and experiences and needs. They know how they have reached their learning outcomes, how the teaching has assisted them in this process and how different approaches have affected their success in different contexts. WISE embodies a culture where students are treated as expert contributors to the student experience, with strong leadership and a positive attitude both from staff and students.

To support the WISE approach, the further and higher education sector will:

- enable wider take-up of good practice, including sharing guidance handbooks, policies and strategies for student representation and engagement;
- enable students to become fully involved in external review processes; and
- develop effective means of showing students how their expert contributions have effected change.