Welsh Higher Education Brussels (WHEB)

Welsh Higher Education Brussels (WHEB) is located in Wales House, Brussels, and employs two members of staff. The office was launched in March 2006 and has been fully staffed since August of that year. WHEB is a partnership, established with the support of Welsh Higher Education Institutions, Higher Education Wales, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and the Welsh Assembly Government.

The key aim of WHEB is to maximise the benefits to the Welsh Higher Education (HE) sector of engaging with wider Europe, by adding value to existing capacity and service provision in Brussels. In pursuit of this aim, WHEB:

- Assists the Welsh HE sector to build strategic relationships with wider European and Bologna country partners
- Enables the Welsh HE sector to engage more fully with stakeholders, institutions, and processes in Brussels, including the Lisbon/Jobs & Growth Agenda of the EU
- Briefs the EU on the priorities of Welsh HE
- Proactively identifies EU funding opportunities and enables the development of EU and Bologna-related projects and initiatives for Welsh Higher Education Institutions
- Raises the profile of Welsh HE in Europe

WHEB delivers these objectives by grouping its activities under three priorities. It gathers and disseminates intelligence and relevant information to the Welsh HE sector. It contributes to the promotion of Welsh Higher Education Institutions throughout Europe, in particular through hosting events in Wales House, Brussels that involve key European actors. Finally, the organisation facilitates and coordinates activity designed to achieve its objectives, harnessing the networking opportunities available with public and private sector actors that are represented and have influence in Brussels.

WHEB works with networks in Brussels that have a strong profile with policy-makers and are sources of potential transnational partnerships. These are:

- European Regions Research and Innovation Network in Brussels (ERRIN)
- European Policy Centre Innovation Task Force
- Informal Brussels-based group on eLearning (BRELNet)
- Brussels based informal network for education and training (BBInet)
- Brussels HE representatives' monthly meeting
- UK Regions Brussels Offices Group

In the UK, WHEB also has an ongoing dialogue with:

- UK HE Europe Unit
- British Council Wales

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Welsh Higher Education Brussels (WHEB) Annual Report 2006-7

WHEB is unique in Europe, as the only Brussels office that specifically represents an entire national Higher Education (HE) sector of the equivalent to one of Europe's regions.

WHEB has been providing services to the Welsh Higher Education sector for twelve months, building on the set-up work and high-profile launch during the first half of 2006. This report summarises the achievements of WHEB over 2006-7.

Particular highlights of the past twelve months include advising academic and European staff in Welsh Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on EU funding, who in four cases have gone on to apply to Brussels in 2007. Each recognised the role of WHEB in building their capacity to submit proposals. Furthermore, the fourteen study visits arranged by WHEB for Welsh HE staff have illustrated the range of contacts that can be made in Brussels and have given access to privileged information and potential new partnerships for FP7 and other funding. The variety of opportunities for universities in Brussels was illustrated by three well-attended Brussels events organised by WHEB. These explored how the EU promotes regional economic development from research and culture-related education.

Ongoing dialogue with the HE sector has enabled WHEB to focus on a number of particular issues of widespread interest, such as eLearning, EU maritime policy, and knowledge transfer, including through the mobility opportunities offered by the Bologna Process. The work programme for 2007-8 will also address other areas of strength in Welsh HE such as high level skills development and eHealth. In addition, WHEB will work on the debate on the future of the EU and its budget.

*"Welsh universities are to be congratulated on taking the decision to set up a dedicated office in Brussels, which shows their commitment in wanting to engage with the European Union, its institutions, and the European project, and the importance they attach to European funding supporting their collaborative working research and development, education, training, innovation and in many other areas of activity." **Janez Potočnik, European Commissioner for Science and Research at the launch of WHEB on 28 March 2006.***

Gathering and disseminating intelligence to the Welsh Higher education sector

- The WHEB website www.wheb.ac.uk was launched at the October 2006 user launch event in Brussels. It functions as a repository of content resulting from WHEB activities. The publicly accessible pages describe Welsh HE, link to the sites of the WHEB partnership and contain details of WHEB events/documents targeted at a Brussels audience. The private pages include the WHEB monthly report, funding schedule and policy guide, as well as other briefings and presentations prepared by WHEB staff.

- Nine issues of the WHEB monthly report 'The Month in Brussels' have been produced. The report has included an introductory article on a key issue of interest from a prominent representative of Wales in Brussels such as an MEP or a member of the EU Committee of the Regions. The main part of the report is the series of four articles based on the Lisbon Strategy, the Lifelong Learning Programme, Research and Innovation and Regional Policy.

- WHEB has availed itself of the regular public briefings given by the European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy to communicate its expectations to Welsh HE. In response to requests from the sector, WHEB has disseminated Commission guidance on good practice in using the structural funds for innovation. It has also elicited Commission advice on synergies between structural funds and FP7 by organising a Brussels seminar involving three influential European networks of regional authorities and universities, and four Welsh HEIs.

- WHEB is an active member of the Brussels based eLearning regional network (BRELNet). The network has organised seminars and project market places for the participating regions and has collaborated with the European Commission and EU key players in the sector. Following a BRELNet conference in May 2006, an article from a Welsh HEI has been placed on the EU eLearning portal. WHEB organised a BRELNet seminar in April 2007 on new pedagogical approaches related to eLearning, including blended learning. Attendees included European networks such as the Coimbra Group of universities, which presented the work of its eLearning working group.

EU Research Commissioner Janez Potočnik speaking at WHEB launch, March 2006

Promoting Welsh HEIs throughout Europe

- WHEB enabled Welsh HEI staff to be briefed by a European Commission official dealing with two themes under the 'FP7 Capacities' programme: 'Research Potential' to build international research capacity in Convergence regions, and 'Regions of Knowledge' to develop and 'Europeanise' research-driven clusters. Following liaison between WHEB and the Commission, colleagues working on both programmes took part in a Commission briefing in Wales on these funding streams in January 2006.

- Through participation in two networks in Brussels, WHEB has met with officials to discuss input to EU policy initiatives on the modernisation of universities and the future of the European Research Area.

- The innovative nature of WHEB has resulted in presentations given to several delegations visiting Brussels, from Sweden, France, Italy, The Netherlands, and the UK. WHEB also spoke at a conference on FP7 organised by the Lithuanian government.

- WHEB has been monitoring developments in the Bologna Process and liaises regularly with the Bologna Promoter for Wales and the UK HE Europe Unit. Together with stakeholders, WHEB is enabling and informing discussion within Wales on the Bologna Process.

A look forward to 2007-8

WHEB will continue in its second year to support HE in Wales to identify and engage in current and forthcoming European opportunities. Planned activities include:

- Briefings on selected EU education, research and innovation calls for proposals in priority areas for Welsh HE

- Actively participate in seminars and exhibitions to celebrate St David's Day in Wales House, Brussels

- Promote good practice in knowledge transfer initiatives involving Welsh HE

- Stimulate and respond to demand from the sector for European information and meeting programmes in Brussels

- Meet with individuals in the HE sector in Wales to build capacity for engaging with Europe

- Brief those representing Wales in European policy debates relevant for HE

- Track the debate the future of the EU and its budget in relation to the priorities of Welsh HE

Facilitating and coordinating activity

- WHEB has devoted a significant amount of time to researching responses to information requests from the Welsh HE sector. The WHEB monthly report and website have been designed to stimulate enquiries on particular aspects and opportunities by giving a broad overview of EU activities in many domains.

- All of the MEPs for Wales welcomed the invitation to dine with the WHEB Interim Board in Brussels in October 2006. All have written articles for editions of the WHEB monthly report.

- WHEB has actively supported the consultation response of Welsh HE to the EU Maritime Green Paper, launched by the Commission in June 2006. WHEB helped to organise a meeting in Wales for the sector with a representative of the Commission on the main features of the Green Paper. This gave the sector the opportunity to discuss the process of responding to the consultation.

- Following meetings at all of the HEIs in Wales, WHEB has produced a detailed report with requested information on a variety of areas of EU activity.

- Most of the HE sector in Wales was represented at the WHEB user launch in Brussels in October 2006. The aim of the user launch was to highlight the opportunities for the sector to engage with EU development in Brussels. Presentations were given by organisations supporting university strategy, while others focused on bringing academic experts into the development and implementation of EU policy. The final section concentrated on networking between European regions.

- WHEB, together with the Welsh Assembly Government, the Arts Council for Wales and the support of the British Council, organised a one-day seminar entitled "Culture and Creativity for Jobs and Growth". This took place during the 2007 St David's Day celebrations in Brussels. The seminar followed the publication of the 'Study on the economy of culture in Europe', and reflected Wales' strengths in the cultural and creative industries. The second half of the seminar was devoted to discussing the role of HEIs in providing the appropriate skills, expertise, research and development for the employability of future workers.

WHEB annual conference 2007 - Culture and Creativity for Growth and Jobs