

Good evening everyone, as Chair of Universities Wales I'm very pleased to be here to extend a warm welcome to you all and to thank you for joining us here tonight.

Occasions like this evening provide us with an opportunity to come together with colleagues and friends, old and new, from across our sector and beyond.

You may even be from an organisation that we may not have had the pleasure of working with yet so I hope that we get the opportunity of exploring potential new relationships.

Tonight is a chance to reflect back on a year of change in Welsh higher education,

to acknowledge the successes of our sector,

to share in our collective achievements

and to look forward to the challenges and opportunities ahead of us.

It's probably fair to say that 2017 has been a significant year for education in Wales, with big changes announced to student finance and regulation. These changes help to sharpen our attention.

They also provide a backdrop for a reflection on the essential role that universities have to play

in contributing to the government agenda,

and indeed the central role they play in our society more broadly.

We have a lot to be proud of.

Higher education in Wales continues to be a vibrant, successful sector.

Our universities are institutions for the public benefit, with proud and far-reaching histories of delivering for Wales, and for its people.

Through the provision of world-leading research and innovative teaching, our institutions further individual aspirations and we facilitate individual prosperity.

We help realise a collective ambition for a Wales that is more equal, and more fair.

Because higher education in Wales is more inclusive than ever,

and Welsh campuses are among the most vibrant and diverse in the UK

our universities continue to have higher proportions of students from the most under-represented groups compared to the rest of the UK.

Our students get a world class experience

Our student satisfaction surveys and our completion rates bear this out.

Last year's National Student Survey figures showed an overall satisfaction rate of 84%,

and Wales' innovative approach to student partnership is reflected by students in Welsh universities responding with satisfaction rates for the student voice that lead the sector.

This matters to us.

But our universities don't just help realise individual talent;

We are critical agents of economic regeneration and growth, as well as creators of knowledge and prosperity.

Universities are not just an optional add-on to a government's economic and social policies. They are absolutely fundamental to achieving social and economic progress, and to establishing the kind of country that can compete and prosper in the future.

Some 97,000 students graduate from our universities each year, enabling the Welsh workforce to remain competitive in an increasingly well-educated global environment.

That global trend towards jobs that require higher level skills is going to continue and we must be part of it.

We help to develop the existing workforce and foster the new talent that our economy needs to grow and become more productive.

Welsh graduates – of all ages and backgrounds – power the machinery of Wales' economic prosperity, whether that is through a traditional undergraduate degree or the wide range of part time, postgraduate, apprenticeship and employer-led training.

This teaching takes place at the forefront of cutting edge research, and we have a key role to play in generating curiosity-driven research and knowledge transfer, and in turn, furthering innovation and development.

Welsh universities translate this world-class research into new products, services, processes, and ways of working; pushing medical and scientific boundaries and meeting ever changing challenges in society

For a small nation, we consistently punch above our weight in global league tables, with a sectoral research output which has a greater impact than the UK average.

Our graduates are some of the most entrepreneurial in the country. University courses, enterprise support and the wider university experience all help to encourage graduate start-ups, which go on to benefit the Welsh economy, and drive Welsh trade with the rest of the world.

In 2015/6, Welsh graduates went on to create 308 start-ups, out of the total 3890 UK graduate start-ups for that year. This means Welsh university graduates are generating almost 10% of all UK graduate start-ups, a higher proportion comparative to our size than the rest of the UK.

But universities do not only drive national prosperity through their activities. They act as growth leaders for their local areas, attracting high-quality investment and talent, investing into the regeneration of their towns and cities, supporting local businesses to grow and export, and improving the well-being of local communities.

Locality is important, because even within a globalised economy, skills, knowledge and industry are often concentrated in the area local to the university.

All of this means that universities in Wales are playing a crucial role in powering the Welsh economy, contributing to generating growth and the development of individuals as well as the nation, as demonstrated by the findings of the economic impact report we have launched today.

The report shows the significant value of universities, which in 2015/16 generated over £5bn of output for Wales, and created almost 50,000 jobs. These aren't small numbers, and whether it's universities research activities driving innovation, or the off-campus expenditure of students supporting local businesses, our universities contribute every day to the economic fortune of our country.

And this impact is felt in every corner of Wales. This report shows that over 21% of all GVA created by universities is generated in regions without a university presence.

I'm proud that this demonstrates that our universities are truly working for the whole of Wales, and that even those towns and regions which may not have a campus on their doorstep can still benefit from the value generated by the sector.

And so it's right that we come together to acknowledge and celebrate the significant economic contribution our institutions make to Wales, but we must also recognise the less quantifiable benefits, the differences our institutions make to their local communities, and Welsh society as a whole.

No-where is this more evident than through our sector-wide commitment to the civic mission, which has enabled universities to rearticulate our roles in our communities. The history of universities in Wales is rich and varied. We have a long and proud history of being community institutions. We began in different ways, from universities founded to train for the priesthood, to the great social experiment of universities created through the voluntary contributions of local people, and the specialist colleges of higher education established by the leaders of the great industries of their day.

Our institutions were born from their communities and they have served those communities across many decades, and in some cases centuries. We are committed to supporting local people and places, in partnership and through collaboration.

Occasions like this evening provide us with an opportunity to reflect on and recognise the value of the partnerships which underpin the successes of our sector. We often talk of the distinctiveness of the education sector in Wales, what makes us unique and different.

One of the most valuable of these characteristics is the value we all place on seeking new opportunities to work in partnership to meet our collective ambitions.

These shared beliefs in the value of partnership offers us a strong foundation for all of the work that we do. But it also underpins the way we work as industries and businesses. - we innovate, seek out new opportunities to collaborate, support start-ups and enable local businesses to thrive.

Just last week, our universities participated in the 'Be the Spark' event at Newport, which showcased over 50 examples of innovative industry-education partnerships,

We seek partnerships in our communities. But we also look further afield for opportunities to collaborate and work together.

We think local. But we also act globally.

We are a sector with a strong Welsh Identity, but one which also maintains an international outlook, demonstrated by our world renowned reputation.

But these international partnerships serve not only to benefit our universities, but can prove vital as Wales as a nation seeks to carve a new path in the world post-Brexit.

The international activities of our universities can be central to the strategies which will shape Wales' future

acting as a bridge between Wales and the global economy,

increasing the country's presence on the world stage

and furthering opportunities for global partnerships, as seen through our recent work with the Vietnamese Government.

Whether it's forging new relationships to further Wales' place in the world, or strengthening our ties to our local communities, as a sector, we place high value on the relationships we hold.

The instability created by Brexit may be short-lived, or it may be long term. There is no precedent for this, so none of us can know.

But whatever happens we will need to think afresh in Wales about how we can continue to achieve growth and create jobs,

how we can work even harder within our communities,

how we can make education genuinely open to all who can benefit from it.

So whatever the challenges we face,

whatever else is changing,

now, more than ever,

Wales needs its knowledge economy and it needs educated citizens.

And so we look forward to continuing to work with you all in the coming year,

to strengthen these partnerships

Enabling Wales's universities to sustain and build on the economic contribution this report highlights

and to realise our collective ambitions for Wales.