

Why civic mission matters to Welsh universities

Good afternoon.

Firstly, I would like to thank the organisers of this summit and everyone who has contributed today.

It's been great to hear so many great examples of civic mission in practice

As Chair of Universities Wales I'm very pleased to be here to talk about what universities in Wales are doing and why our civic mission matters to us.

There's been a lot of discussion today on what civic mission is and what it looks like.

The history of universities in Wales is rich and varied.

We began in different ways, from universities founded to train for the priesthood, the great social experiment of universities founded on the voluntary contributions of local people, and the specialist colleges of higher education founded 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.

Much in Welsh higher education has changed over the past few decades, but our mission has remained constant.

Although constituted and governed in different ways, all of us share similar aims of advancing education in Wales.

For me, civic mission is a fundamental feature of our universities.

Throughout our history our universities have produced public goods – have achieved things through teaching and research that simply would not have happened in a purely economic market.

There are so many examples, not least the 23 years of international ‘bench to bedside’ research which led to one of USW’s spinout companies creating ‘safeMedicate’, an online tool that supports healthcare professionals to administer the correct drug dosage. ‘Safemedicate’ is now used by 150,000 healthcare students and practitioners across eight countries, helping to improve patient safety.

Higher education in Wales has grown to be a vibrant, successful sector generating £4.6 billion of output, supporting people from all backgrounds to study in university and delivering the highest percentage of world-leading research in the UK.

The wider civic debate in Wales often speaks sagely of a knowledge economy. There’s an undergraduate essay question there as if it were ever possible to base an economy on ignorance.

But debate aside, it is a fact that our universities are a fundamental asset for Wales PLC.

Another area of our work which has been a focus for public policy for many years is widening access to education.

I share the pride of families and graduates at my own universities when, like me, the first in their family to go to university walk across the stage and shake my hand to receive their degree.

This focus has been quite right.

Someone’s background or personal circumstances should not stop them from achieving what they are capable of.

Widening access can mean many things.

It can mean supporting pupils in schools to make sure they get the grades they are capable of

It can mean reaching out to communities to help young people understand that university is somewhere they can go, is something they can and should aspire to.

Widening access should remain a key focus, but now it is also important to look at the wider work universities do supporting people and communities in Wales.

The work universities do as part of their civic mission is diverse and spans Wales.

Today I want to give tangible, real examples of this work.

And more than that, I want to talk about why civic mission matters to our universities, and draw out key factors that influence our universities in their civic mission.

I'm going to focus on four prominent areas of our civic mission in Wales:

- The work our universities do on health and well-being,
- our work with local employers,
- our work with schools and, finally,
- what we do to support and develop communities.

If we take health and well-being in Wales, Wales faces many challenges.

Our population is older than the population of the UK, we have a higher proportion of people with a long-term illness, and a higher proportion living in deprivation.

These are significant factors that impact the health and well-being of a country.

Universities are working on the frontline supporting individuals.

That means The Centre for Health and Aging at UWTSD provides personal training, nutrition work and support for older people in Carmarthen.

It means Cardiff Metropolitan University providing Wales's only centre for training podiatrists with their new purpose-built podiatry clinic open to the public.

It means USW giving access for people in their communities to therapeutic services including CBT, children's therapies and online counselling.

These are all services which complement the work of our National Health Service, work that utilises the expertise of our universities to provide new kinds of support to people in Wales, and in doing so helps to improve the health and well-being of Wales.

And as well as supporting the health needs of a community, universities also support local businesses.

On a fundamental level, this sees universities working with local suppliers across Wales.

In many universities this approach is formalised whether through construction arrangements or through policies such as that at Aberystwyth University which only purchases eggs,

lamb, beef, milk and potatoes from within 15 miles of the university.

But the role of universities in local businesses is broader than purchasing.

Work by business students at Cardiff University has been exploring how to promote shopping at local, independent shops in the community, and some of these proposals were developed and put into action.

Wrexham Glyndwr University has been finding out ways to promote social enterprises both in Wales and internationally.

ASTUTE 2020, a pan-Wales partnership of universities led by Swansea University, has benefitted over 250 small and medium enterprises in Wales.

Every university in Wales will work with a huge number of employers in their local area.

Whether through procurement, providing skills and continuing professional development, or collaborating on research and development.

These relationships, these different kinds of investment and collaboration, greatly benefit communities.

And just as universities bring benefits to the businesses in their local communities, they also bring benefits to local schools.

On the panel after this, you're going to hear some fantastic examples of the work that universities are doing with schools such as the modern foreign languages mentoring project and Technocamps.

These are great examples of how the work universities do with schools is more than widening access or recruitment.

We can also look at the work Aberystwyth does providing revision classes to Year 11s about to sit their GCSEs,

or cyber security experts at USW providing internet safety education to school children,

or the Profi Project at Bangor University that develops employability skills in young people in Year 12 in schools.

The benefits of these collaborations with schools are varied, from supporting children and young people in pursuing their goals and ambitions, to making universities a visible presence in their community and, in doing so, broadening the horizons of young people who may have once thought that university was not for them.

Finally, universities also support and develop communities more broadly.

Many universities in Wales provide support for refugees and asylum seekers in communities across Wales.

The Open University for Wales has been working in partnership with the Wales Refugee Council to support refugees into education.

Cardiff Metropolitan University provides support to asylum seekers and refugees through sport with 2,880 student placement hours as students are deployed in local communities.

And universities create many opportunities for people and communities to participate in the arts.

These range from theatre productions in our national conservatoire and film showings, to free lectures and public art displays.

These programmes are a staple at universities across Wales, such as the ‘Creative Bubble’ initiative by UWTSD. ‘Creative Bubble’ hosts mixed-art exhibitions, pop-up shops, and free talks from prominent local people in an empty shop in Swansea and has seen 11,000 people through the door since 2013.

Universities have a valuable impact on communities not just through the work they do aimed at communities, but also in how they facilitate opportunities for students to participate in and engage with civic society.

Universities in Wales have a long history of partnership with students, as reflected in Wales’ strong student voice results in this year’s national student survey.

By promoting the values of partnership, collaboration and engagement in students, universities can make an important contribution to the health and strength of civil society in Wales.

These many examples can only be a snapshot.

The scope and breadth of the work that universities do in this area is huge.

But often it is very local, and linked to a particular school in a university, a particular degree programme, or individual staff members.

The challenge for us in Welsh universities is in finding opportunities to recognise, expand and grow what is successful.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education has quite rightly highlighted the success of the modern foreign languages

mentoring project, and the brilliant outcomes it has had for pupils in Wales.

There is work for us to do in identifying what other activities would work successfully when delivered in a collaborative, national way.

Earlier I mentioned the changing environment of higher education in Wales.

There are some things that are inescapable.

The changing HE market and Government policy over the previous two decades has required universities to think in more business-like ways.

A large proportion of university funding now follows the student.

This makes student recruitment in an ever more competitive market - that knows no national boundaries - fundamentally important to our very existence.

Of course, universities continue to deliver their key missions of education and research.

But in a world that places such competing pressures on our universities, we must make sure that the good work our universities do as part of their civic mission is not lost.

That it continues, is recognised, and given the space and opportunity to grow and strengthen.

That's why events such as this, and the Cabinet Secretary's call for universities to recapture and reinvent civic mission, are so important, giving us the space and the opportunity to identify what work is being carried out across Wales.

It is vital that we use events such as this as not just a time to highlight the good work that's been carried out across Wales, but as an opportunity to plot out where we go next.

A University plays its role in schools, communities and businesses, not just in the lecture theatre or seminar room.

Let me close by reminding us you why that is important.

Rowan Williams, my own chancellor, speaks of the role of a university being

to educate citizens who can cut through the confused mass of propaganda that swirls around us,

and debate great issues in an atmosphere of tolerance and respect.

In the world around us this has never been more needed.

In the coming years there will be many decisions that will need this intellectual curiosity and ability to engage with great issues.

The current economic instability 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 how we can achieve growth and create jobs, how we can rebuild 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.

In this a time of uncertainty, as Wales's knowledge generators university, we will all be stepping up to play our part.

As part of our communities and key players in Wales's future, that's our most important civic mission.

Thank you.