The future of higher education today, series 2

Episode 4: What are the benefits and challenges of a coordinated tertiary system? – Transcript

Aaron Porter

Thank you for joining us for The Future of Higher Education Today, the podcast bringing together people to discuss the biggest issues facing universities and higher education. A series produced by Advance HE and Universities UK. My name is Aaron Porter, Associate Director of Governance at Advance HE and I'm your host for this four-episode series focusing on governing and leading change and transformation in the higher education sector.

Our final episode looks at the opportunities and challenges presented by a coordinated tertiary system. Today's guests will be talking about how their institutions and organisations are meeting the needs of students and communities, while adapting and innovating in light of different policy and funding approaches across the UK and Ireland.

Joining us today. We have David Denieffe, Vice President for Student Experience at South East Technological University in Ireland.

David Denieffe

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Aaron Porter

David Hagendyk, CEO of Colegau Cymru (Colleges Wales).

David Hagendyk

So, they've changed a threshold for educational maintenance allowances. So around about 3000 more students will be eligible to claim that £40 a week maintenance

support within further education, which is, which really is transformative for lots and lots of families.

Aaron Porter

And Vicki Nairn, Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University and Highlands and Islands in Scotland.

Vicki Nairn

There's two types of change: there's evolution and revolution. And when you are based in communities you have to be very alive to the heartbeat that is in those communities and the needs of those communities.

Aaron Porter

Thanks very much for joining us each of you. And we're going to dive straight into the conversation today. And I'd be really interested to hear from each of you to say a little about how your organisation or institution is connected to the tertiary landscape in which you find yourself in.

David Denieffe

I'll kick off Aaron. The tertiary system in the Republic of Ireland is a relatively new concept and it was shaped by government policy from 2022 and basically was the establishment of a system that united further and higher education with an effort to create a more flexible and clear progression pathways between further and higher education in the Republic.

My university was one of those universities. We gigged with this on a pilot basis in 2023, setting up degrees with local further education providers with what are known as education and training boards, which are regional boards that basically manage further and lower education, including secondary education. So we work with, in Ireland, we work with education training boards to provide basically programmes leading to degrees where students commence in further education and then finish in higher education. And there's a range of programmes that are provided in almost all Irish universities now.

Aaron Porter

And David Hagendyk in Wales, I know similarly, a new transition there to a tertiary sector. I wonder if you might say a little about the situation in Wales.

David Hagendyk

Yeah, thanks Aaron. I was going to say very similar, actually, in terms of timescales and change. So, as of August last year, August 2024, we had a new body called Medr which was established, which is the new regulator for all post-16 tertiary provision. So, it goes from school sixth forms colleges, universities, work-based-learning, and you know, all that kind of space really from like 16 onwards.

And it is a new regulator. So, for us, it's a real challenge. So, it's been bringing together what was the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales with the kind of regulatory bits of Welsh Government have all come into one new organisation. So, our role at Colegau Cymru is to really help the FE sector navigate through that change.

So, at the moment that is working with Medr on things, for example, like the new quality framework, new governance reporting arrangements, but also how do we navigate the kind of crisis in universities in Wales and make sure we have a proper tertiary response to some of that and a solution to that. So, a big change for us at the moment. So, we're only, you know, six or seven months into the new system. So, we are just kind of finding our way around it at the moment.

Aaron Porter

And same question to you, Vicki. And obviously you're a really interesting organisation as a whole operating in an interesting system. So, I wonder if you might say a little about the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Vicki Nairn

We're a quite young university and we were very much formed because of the needs of our communities. So, in Scotland you have quite a distinct line between further education and higher education. UHI really overlays that, we are fully operating tertiary university partnership with a mixture of college partners, local authority partners, specialist research institutions and the university function.

And our philosophy is very much based on our founding values of creating sustainable education for students of all ages and all abilities. So, one of the reasons, the key reasons that we were formed was also to drive sustainable communities. Some of our communities occupy rural and island locations as well. And until UHI came along as a university, there wasn't another option for some of our students in terms of actually being able to access higher education without moving out of their homes and their communities.

Aaron Porter

David, you were talking a little about how it's a relatively new innovation in the Republic of Ireland to move to this tertiary system. And I wondered how, for an individual institution, how easy it was to sort of clot into that when often you might be particularly having a history of delivering at a certain level. And I wondered how relevant and germane that was to you with your university.

David Denieffe

Yeah, I mean the Irish Technological University sector would be very close in many respects very similar to what Vicki has described there. We're very much connected to the regions. And as a result, we are very connected already to the education and training boards that provide further education. So, it was relatively easy to come together and to put together the necessary structures to put that in place. That said, we went with probably a couple of very focused areas of activity. We didn't do this across the board. So, we would only piloted three degrees initially and focused with three different FE partners to try and get coherence across that and learn from it.

And what that's led on to then is that in the subsequent academic year, which is this academic year, we're now up to an 11-degree programmes. And again, it's still a relatively small. But it is significant in terms of it's actually happened. It's connected now across 11 different FE colleges as well. So, it gives us a lot more connectivity there.

Putting in place the structures did take time. So, we're operating from the strategic level right down to the operation to the day-to-day running of the actual individual programmes in the individual colleges. And that's taking some time to work through the nuances associated with the administration and quality assurance and student support necessary for a tertiary provision like this.

Aaron Porter

I mean, I think each of you have set out really helpfully and clearly the way in which you're structured across different levels, your connection to your local geographies, how you're serving in that sense, communities around you.

I wondered, David Hagendyk if you might say something around how easy it's been to connect into a system, a national system that is changing in terms of regulation and how that operates for you. Because I suppose there's a little bit of kind of having to do businesses as usual, whilst also adjusting to something that's changing at the same time.

David Hagendyk

Yeah, we've definitely seen a real increase in workload in terms of trying to navigate a whole new body in Medr. But also working, you know, as well with the Welsh Government. So, we need to input an influence into that. I think Medr are being quite sensible though, in probably not trying to run too fast with some of their changes. So, we've got, you know, it is a quite a short time frame, some of the consultations and their decisions.

But we have a quite a lead in and they aren't looking to rush into making lots of big changes to the way we're governed, the way we are regulated, the way we are funded. So, I think it's a, it's almost feels like there's been there's been this big change. But on a day-to-day basis, perhaps, you know, colleges aren't really seeing that kind of massive step at the moment.

One of the things we are doing a lot of work with is the way Medr has come together, it's got lots of staff from former Higher Education Funding Council, which, you know, they've got a real expert, a real deep expertise in higher education. They don't have that same kind of connection and understanding of further education or work based learning or adult community learning. So, we're actually educating some of that, some of the former HEFC staff, getting them into a college, and they can really see the breadth of provision and the breadth of things that colleges do on a day to day basis. So, there is also that kind of language change as well. You know, where universities talk about civic mission.

I don't think, we don't talk in that way about the work of colleges. We don't talk about civic mission. We talk about social value and the things that we do are kind of really intrinsic to the day-to-day work of a college. You know, university's talk about students, we talk about learners. And, that feels semantics, actually, they are different. I think universities have got a quite sophisticated national approach to learner voice. But actually how do you – you can't have the same approach. Some of our learners are level one learners with really poor, 16 years old, really poor literacy and numeracy and the way you engage with them is very different to how you would engage with a PhD student talking about the quality of their provisions.

So, there are lots of different sort of ways we're engaging. And I suppose the final thing on this is the big fear for the FE sector is that it will be a drag and drop of HE arrangements onto the system. Some of that I think will happen, but I think Medr are very live to – they need to have different solutions, not the same solution for different sectors.

Aaron Porter

And Vicki, David was just speaking about consistency there. And of course, you're an institution that was born out of some individual institutions that had previously developed their own cultures and approaches. But of course, you're now leading a joined up, holistic institution. But I wonder if you might say a little about the journey that you've been on and I'm sure, continue to go on, to ensure that there is that greater degree of consistency across an institution.

Vicki Nairn

I talk a lot about evolution, and I think that's really important because there's two types of change: there's evolution and revolution. And when you are based in communities and that's especially important for FE colleges, you have to be very alive to the heartbeat that is in those communities and the needs of those communities. And as David has said, you know, you'll have learners of all different ages and abilities who were perhaps at the start of their learning journey right through to mature students coming in.

We're going through quite an activity at the moment, which is to review and reshape our curriculum, really needs to be shaped by what that demand is out there because we can deliver the best programmes in the world, but if they're not relevant and fit for purpose to the needs of business and industry in our communities then that's not really going to help our role in economic development.

When you look at the combined power of colleges and universities where they can work together, that is a really powerful sort of anchor inward attractor. Because business and industry are looking to engage on the skills that they need to power the economy. So that's where colleges and universities can really move into that sector.

And learning is changing, not all students, especially university students, now want the sort of degree that I did when I went to university. Actually, they want flexible learning. They want to learn and earn, they want graduate apprenticeships. So, they're not waiting for three or four years to be able to contribute to the economy and sort of stand on their own feet financially.

And then finally, we want to be an employer of choice where, our staff, who are from our communities that we serve, feel valued and supported and celebrated. And in order to do all that effectively, what we've said is that our partnership, our tertiary university partnership, which is very diverse, but comes together to make sure that everything that underpins us and that operational excellence that we all need to have

in what is a very challenging funding climate that will think, plan and act as well in delivering our mission and our vision.

Our sort of motto is lifelong learning. So, we find that we have a continuum and some of the students who come to us who are just dipping their toe into that learning journey, at whatever level that they may be comfortable at, right through up to PhD and beyond.

Aaron Porter

I mean, it's really interesting to hear about the positioning and the strategic objectives of the organisation. And in a way neatly takes us to what I thought I'd ask about next, which is your approaches to lifelong learning.

And we've heard a little bit of this already and you might say, well, it's kind of implicit in what we do because of the way in which we're structured. But I wondered if there's anything more that you wanted to say about the way in which your institution seeks to support and advance lifelong learning.

David Denieffe

Yeah, lifelong learning is crucial aspect of the technological universities in Ireland. And key to that is obviously meeting the regional needs. And the engagement with tertiary projects has allowed us to do that. But we are mindful that there's much more needs to be done in that space. Amongst that will be initiatives focused on micro-credentials and smaller awards and not just focus on the degree award. So, you're providing for that as well with the partners so that the industry can then connect into that as well. But really what it's about is trying to facilitate access to higher education for learners.

And that's kind of been the focus to provide the pathways right through. So small volumes of learning. And as Vicki described there, dealing with a call to learners who go from 17 to over 70, you know and providing for that. And that's been key. In our own university for example, in SETU, approximately 40% of our learners would be non-full-time students if that makes sense. So basically, people who are not here five days a week.

Aaron Porter

Vicki, I know you've already started to speak a little about the approach to lifelong learning at UHI and I was wondering if there's any more that you would want to add in terms of how central it is to the approach of what you're delivering.

Vicki Nairn

So, what we're seeing a lot of at the moment in our area and it will continue to grow, is that the skills agenda is huge. It's huge in Scotland, but it's especially huge in the UHI regions. And I say regions on purpose because as I mentioned before, we have some very diverse economic needs across our partnership. So, where I'm based at the moment, which is in Inverness, we have the new Freeport coming in, the Inverness and Chromarty in Freeport. And what that is doing is driving the level of investment which we have never seen before, billions of investment, thousands of jobs and attracting big international, global, organisations into the area who are skills hungry.

So, what they're wanting to do effectively is to create the workforce of the future. So that lifelong learning piece becomes more important because whether you want to train to be a plumber or a welder right now, or an electrician or a heating engineer, then you know, great that you start your journey with UHI, but what we really want to do is then engage with those individuals. So, if they then choose to continue education, and especially if they're sponsored, so graduate apprenticeships – from modern apprenticeships to graduate apprenticeships etc – then actually we keep them on that learning continuum. And it means then that they know that they can come back to UHI to actually continue to do that, supported by their employer or later in life.

So, and you have to have a balance and a diversity of curriculum that allows you to appeal to all of those different groups. And making sure that actually, as much as you possibly can, that you have a blended tertiary curriculum because organisations like ours, young organisations where HE and FE have come together, it's actually really difficult to integrate that curriculum to make sure that there is that lifelong learning pathways.

Aaron Porter

I guess there's similar question, similar considerations around wanting to structure something that speaks to a diversity of students in both in terms of background but also in terms of age, what their intention is for entering or perhaps re-entering education in terms of upskilling and reskilling and how you address that lifelong learning agenda.

David Hagendyk

Yeah, it's a real-life question in that tertiary context as well. So very much, you know, the kind of question is, do we all stay in our lanes as different parts of the tertiary

sector? I think when you start putting learners and employers at the heart of the system, I think those lines get necessarily blurred I think.

We've got a bit of history on this in Wales as well. So about ten or eleven years ago we made massive cuts as part of that kind of financial austerity that the Welsh Government made some massive cuts to part-time FE and adult community learning. The numbers so that our numbers now in FE are part-time are half what they were, you know, a decade or so ago. And it takes a long time to recover from that, I think.

And every single time it comes around the need to invest in proper lifelong learning opportunities, whether it's, you know, the kind of pace of change in technology, whether it's you know, you're going to need to have 15 different jobs over your lifetime of your career. And yet, policymakers, I think, far too often revert back to we need to prioritise the needs of 16, 17, 18-year-olds, which is really, really important. You know, I would never take money away from that part of the system. But we do need to invest a lot more in flexible pathways and easy access points for adults to re-enter training and education. Now, that might be at kind of basic education level to those without a level two, for example, we've got members who do that brilliantly in adult community learning. But we're also going to have the people who are already in the workplace, who are going to need to access short form modular programs, a level four, maybe level five.

And I think the risk is that we all within Wales, we all kind of fight for that provision. We see it as a prize and we all fight for it across the different parts of the sector. And it's really where I think Medr and Welsh Government need to, although I wouldn't say force collaboration, but we need to really incentivise collaboration across the different parts of tertiary sector. Because, you know, if we're going to compete in Wales as a kind of part of a periphery, probably similar to Vicki in some ways, I think we've got big investments coming in in ports, we've got big investments in investment zones, city deals, all of those things. Skills hungry industries, for example in renewable technology, floating offshore solar panels, wind, all that kind of stuff in West Wales. You know, we cannot produce enough welders to meet that demand, even in the short term.

And I think, you know, we do need to have a proper plan about how we going to get there. We need to collaborate. We need to work together on that. But it does mean a step change in investment, I think, as well. If we're going to meet those needs and if, you know, if you're, we've had probably a couple of thousand people made redundant or about to lose their jobs in the steel sector in Port Talbot, where sort of virgin steel production is gone.

And these are, in the main, largely men, largely kind of in their 30s, 40s, 50s. How do they access the kind of, you know, the jobs of the future or the jobs nearby them of the future? They've got great skills, but they also need that kind of qualification base. They need that upskilling and reskilling. And at the moment, I don't think we've really got the flexible access points that they need to be able to adapt quickly.

Aaron Porter

I wondered if you might say some more about how easy it is to try and organise your organisations so that they address the skills needs and the shortages, or the skill demands that that exist. But also what some of the limitations are around that.

David Denieffe

I might give the Irish context on that Aaron that might be a bit slightly different. But the Irish government has a number of different schemes to encourage universities to develop courses as you described there, where you're reacting to particular skills need or there's a new industry coming in, a foreign direct investment or a somebody who's doing significant development in a particular area.

We have what's called the Springboard Initiative. And basically, the universities and other providers are basically incentivised to get involved in programme development and delivery for particular needs. And that's done at a national level. And we basically compete for that. And every year we take in thousands of students who are on springboard programmes.

The challenge is when the when they come, is being able to react quickly to develop those programmes, put them through the necessary processes to ensure that they're at the required standard. And then to deliver the programmes and deliver them with partners incorporating things like as David has referred to things like, you know, recognising prior learning, work based learning activities and fundamentally that people can progress either academically or professionally as a result of these programmes. And that's been quite successful. But there are challenges and some of the challenges have been having the right people to be able to develop and deliver at a moment in time and get through what sometimes can be cumbersome approval processes.

Aaron Porter

I'll finish with a final question, which again, actually builds on something that we've spoken about to some degree already. But I wondered if any of you might want to

just reflect on how easily and able institutions are able to cooperate with one another to provide opportunities for non-traditional students.

Vicki Nairn

I think, I mean, probably the thing to say is we don't necessarily differentiate between different types of students and learners.

And I think that's a really important point because we want all of our students to feel that they're getting the best possible experience that they can. So, the moment you start differentiating them, I think you do start to potentially dilute that offering. I think I mentioned before about how important it is that we look at being as inclusive but also supportive, caring and personal to our students because we really want to support them through that journey. And that, I think, is one of the challenges for a lot of institutions is how do you respond in a timescale that's acceptable to people who are looking for solutions to their lives that are linked to their incomes and jobs and livelihoods? Whilst navigating a tertiary academic structure and being able to move that forward.

It's really important as a tertiary institution to be very clear about where your strategic focus is. The key part of that for us is about enterprise and growth. And we are now looking at non-traditional markets and non-traditional students because it links to that growth piece. And it also looking at how we can link up with private sector providers, how we can also drive some of that skills training ourselves. Because one of the biggest challenges that I see in tertiary and I don't know if it's the same in other parts of the UK, but the funding streams come through very different routes.

So, there's a very different funding for HE and a very different funding for FE. And trying to get the two to mix is almost impossible. So we've been having some really good discussions with the Scottish Funding Council about how we can enable that actually, because the more that you can do that, it means the more flexible you can be with your funded programmes, which then enables you to focus on growth and also the impact that the institution has, making sure that ultimately, you know, you're delivering the best teaching, learning, student support and research that you possibly can.

Again, it's that time right now for entrepreneurial thinking. And how do we take best advantage of it?

Aaron Porter

Thanks, Vicki. And for you in Wales, David across your institutions again, I'm sure, you know, engaging with non-traditional students is a core part of what you do. And I wondered if there's anything further you'd want to add to that.

David Hagendyk

Yeah, I think one of the areas I'm really passionate about in terms of our learner cohort is really those learners from the lower income backgrounds, lower income families. And this is where I think the tertiary model may not necessarily help us potentially, because I think it's almost like a cut-off at 16. So, it starts at 16 and it goes up to 70 or whatever age it is. But for us, that kind of 14 to 16, perhaps even earlier, is a really, really important piece of making sure those learners find the right, the right home for themselves when they get into post-season education.

And we have a real challenge in Welsh education, Welsh school system at the moment around levels of attainment. When we have some schools – talking to a principal the other day from one of our members, talking about a school governing body she's on, where the attainment rate of 5 A2Cs in that school is around about 30 to 33%.

But when you dig underneath those figures, we're not seeing increases at learners coming in, we're not seeing particularly big increases in learners coming in at level three. They're coming in at entry level, level one, level two, because they haven't got those 5 A2C's, they haven't got their English and Maths GCSE. And so we are, we have a real challenge there. And they are predominantly from low-income families.

So Welsh Government have made some more changes. So, they've changed a threshold for educational maintenance allowances. So around about 3000 more students will be eligible to claim that £40 a week maintenance support within further education, which is, which really is transformative for lots and lots of families. But we've got a big job of work to do, I think, in the school system.

And also, I think that kind of post-Covid legacy as well. When I talk to colleges and universities they're saying it's still working its way through the system even now. And obviously learners for us in what it's our year 12, so first year of full-time provision in the college. They are the learners who started their secondary education when Covid hit. So they are that generation and you know, and the levels of wellbeing support that they need still to manage and some of the mental health challenges, you know, the demands on our mental health services support teams are really, really high.

I think in terms of the cohorts that we have, they need to have, they need help and they need support. And often I think some of those lower income backgrounds in particular where I think we need to do more work.

Aaron Porter

I'll turn finally to you, David, in terms of Ireland and you know, again, you said at the beginning about the importance of technological universities in terms of engaging with their jurisdictions and their local communities and so on. I'm sure that extends to students from non-traditional or disadvantaged backgrounds.

David Denieffe

Yeah. I mean, the technological universities in Ireland have had a very strong tradition of serving what we call the non-traditional backgrounds. But, what I really liked about the points that David and Vicki have both said is a very much a learner centeredness today in recognising that you have to treat the student is a student, you know, and just work within that. Like if you think of one in five of our learners in HE within the university would come from FE, you know, both one and six are mature students and there's an overlap between those two cohorts. But it just shows you the diversity that we're dealing with.

We have a very high engagement with higher education, like about 60% of our school leavers and more will progress into higher education. And fundamentally, we have to we recognise that there has to be different pathways now to get people to engage in that one. So, the Irish context, while it's different in many respect, it's similar in that you still have a student and you still have to look after students.

Aaron Porter

That's really, I think, powerful note on which to finish about the centrality of our students, of understanding their different and diverse backgrounds. But also the way in which we can support them to maximize their experience. So, can I thank my panellists for their fantastic contributions, obviously, for the work they do in their institutions, but the way in which they are able to share those testimonies with us.

Thanks for your participation in today's episode on The Future of Higher Education Today. Throughout the series, we've explored how institutions are leading innovation and change in response to internal and external opportunities and challenges. And highlighted the impact universities and colleges have on their students, communities and society. You can find our other episodes wherever you find your podcasts on the various different platforms. Thanks again for listening. And all the best. Bye bye.