

15 January 2021

Economy Infrastructure and Skills Committee

The Clerk

UCU Response - Remote Working: Implications for Wales

The University and College Union (UCU Wales) represents almost 7,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians, and postgraduates in universities, colleges, adult education and training organisations across Wales. UCU Wales is a politically autonomous but integral part of UCU, the largest post-school union in the world. We welcome this opportunity to respond to the Committees call for evidence.

The Covid-19 crisis poses a double challenge. Beyond the public health emergency, the immediate response has been an unprecedented economic shutdown. When the medical emergency passes, the challenge will be to restart a severely stressed economy, with the risk being that the inequalities of wealth, power and opportunity we struggled with beforehand have been newly amplified.

In the effort to draw long-lasting lessons from Covid, it is clear that that remote working presents both opportunities and risks. During a short period, we have seen how adaptations under conditions of shock can boost the pace of innovation. In the same way that the pandemic has replaced physical distance with digital proximity, our exit from the European Union is likely to accelerate developments in automation. Tomorrow's Industry 4.0 & 5.0 will require new patterns of working and habits of mind. Capabilities such as agility, collaboration and creativity are essential to the success of a modern economy. Whilst [Prosperity for All](#) and '[Fair Work Wales](#)' provide useful frameworks, just transition must be complimented by a collaborative post-16 education sector which makes use of creative pedagogies.

In many cases, this will require a move away from the heavy-handed performance management systems, which currently drive practice in the post 16 sector. Managerialism is a product of the past 50 years where its practices were used to address the concerns of low productivity. Brexit's impact upon migration makes this model unsustainable suggesting that business will adapt with increased automation. Post 16 education provision must be ready to address these new demands.

Refurbishing our industrial base infers additional challenges. Welsh Governments recently published its Regional Investment Framework, partly seeking to implement recommendations in the [OECD Future of Regional Development Report 2020](#). The document makes the following observation;

“Pay progression is generally greater for those who move employer rather than those who stay in the same job or move into a new job with the same employer, and is even stronger for those who move employer and region. Management practices such as the provision of training, development of internal labour markets and flexible working have also been identified as important determinants of progression opportunities.”

Clearly, if Wales is to grow a high-quality industrial ecology in which good jobs are retained, it is imperative that we develop organic industries at the same time as attracting external investment. This is crucial when considering how remote working in high-value industries diminishes the importance of physical factors such as space and transport communications. However, skills partnerships and FEI’s currently model provision on the basis of historical and short-term vacancies. Accepting that we cannot build the houses of today with the bricks of tomorrow, thought needs to be given to how students will be best equipped to prosper in high-value, networked industries where matrix management and remote working are the norm.

Adjusting to the demands posed by the crisis, many UCU members have switched to delivering online or blended learning. Following this experience, we have heard concerns around workload (particularly with respect to planning and delivery) and the blurring of traditional boundaries. Building relationships with students outside the context of familiar institutional structures can introduce a demanding element of immediacy. Staff describe feeling compelled to take calls or answer emails sent by distressed students prior to important academic deadlines, begging the question whether digital availability might come to constitute the new presentism.

Less obvious, but just as pernicious, there is a body of UK and international evidence suggesting the degree to which remote working has catalysed underlying gender inequality in academia. Both the [Lancet](#), [WonkHe](#) and [New Scientist](#) have reported studies which indicate a dramatic fall in published research by female staff. The explanation offered often involves the extent to which a ‘double burden’ (i.e. balancing paid with ‘gendered work’ such as childcare) becomes so much greater in a home environment. Whilst UCU can offer no Welsh evidence, there is little reason to suppose that our experience differs from that of England and other European comparators.

Moving on to the experience of online teaching, whilst remote learning cannot be confused with remote working, it is worth noting that post compulsory education will be one of the means by which the Welsh Government achieves its long-term ambition to see around 30% of Welsh workers working from home or near from home, including after the threat of Covid-19 lessens.

Focusing on further education, UCU members have found that digital teaching carries specific limitations beyond the provision and availability of hardware. Lacking the opportunity for non-verbal communication, lecturers are frequently

unable to gauge whether a learner has fully understood the course material. This places a far greater onus on students to either speak up or risk progressing without having grasped core concepts. As one lecturer put it “the most withdrawn students tend to blossom in a face-to-face environment”. When asked why this was, she cited a subtle process of constant and incremental assessment, emphasizing the importance of facial expressions and self-reflection. During the interview, the same lecturer noted the recent emergence of ‘hybrid-teaching’ – an innovation whereby a lecturer simultaneously presents to face-to-face and online groups. She described the experience as utterly disconcerting, suggesting that it was almost impossible to engage either cohort to the extent that the whole exercise became a “waste of time”.

Similarly, in addition to providing an enhanced opportunity to develop soft capabilities such as politeness and social negotiation, face-to-face teaching also allows a wider range of pedagogic techniques. ‘Scaffolding’ – the practice of supporting a struggling student in mixed ability groups provides one example although there are many more.

Face-to-face teaching also encourages students to develop deeper time management skills. In contrast, online learning not only requires the student to establish their own learning system but also manage their environment to exclude distractions and external demands. Whereas personal commitment might seem like the determining feature in a successful online experience; whether in terms of domestic arrangements or access to wider support structures, it is clear that students can start from very different places depending upon the advantages that they can access. Given the difficulty in addressing structural factors such as poverty, limited human capital and poor housing, this risks reinforcing systemic inequalities.

The urgent move towards online presents a paradox. As mentioned, employers demand for digital competence has massively increased under conditions of Covid. Moreover, this demand is only likely to increase in line with accelerated automation and new 4.0 and 5.0 practices. However, there is every indication that many of the capabilities and habits of mind (for example, team working, self-perception and self-control), which networked industries value as essential are best and most equally learned in a face-to-face teaching environment. UCU has emphasized collaborative styles of pedagogy and is fully engaged with Digital 2030. We believe that this focus on quality enhancement will be essential to new and older learner’s as they seek to thrive in an increasingly digital economy.

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