



# Factoring Future Generations Into Universities' Strategic Intent: Could a Law Help?

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Wales is the first country in the world to have put into law the protection of future generations through its Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015; the first country to have a legal mechanism through the Act to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals and the first country to have put the Brundtland definition of sustainable development into law. What does this mean for the values taught in Welsh universities, and how can the university role be repurposed in the interests of future generations? Building on her research for the book *#futuregen: Lessons from a Small Country* which was published this year, Jane Davidson, who, in her previous role as Minister in Welsh Government, proposed what is now the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, will explore the opportunities from this new values framework to transform the university sector, in particular, the student experience in Wales, and whether there are further lessons that would be valuable elsewhere.

**Keywords:** future generations, well-being, Brundtland, #futuregen, universities, Wales, law, Act

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## INTRODUCTION

Wales is the first country in the world to have put into law the protection of future generations; the first country to have a legal mechanism through its Welsh Government (2015) to deliver on the United Nations General Assembly (2015) Sustainable Development Goals and the first country to have put the Brundtland definition (Definition of 'sustainable development' from World Commission on Environment Development, 1987) of sustainable development into law—"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." When the law was passed in 2015, Nikhil Seth, UN Assistant Secretary-General, said, "What Wales is doing today, the world will do tomorrow."

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act proposes simply that the needs of future generations are factored into all public sector decision-making processes in the responsibility of the Welsh Government and gives guidance on how to do that. It is revolutionary because it enshrines into law that the well-being of the current and future people of Wales is explicitly the core purpose of the Government of Wales—the value principle at the heart of government.

Such a core principle is revolutionary in its own right, but the Act goes further: it enshrines both the intention and the means, thus becoming a framework for collective action. If you ask the question, "What does the Act do?" its primary focus is the creation of seven goals linked to health, prosperity, resilience, communities, language and heritage, equality, and Wales' role in the world, requiring action to tackle climate change, enhance biodiversity, and live within environmental limits. The goals enable organisations' funding, policy, and implementation to focus on the delivery of sustainable outcomes.

If you ask the question, “How should people comply with the Act?” it directs five statutory ways of working to reach decisions: prevention, long termism, collaboration, integration, and involvement—to achieve positive outcomes for as many goals as possible. The seven goals are the “what”; the five ways of working are the “how.” The “what” and the “how” are underpinned by four domains: environment, society, economy, and culture. “Culture” is critical in capturing identity, heritage, and experience to support behavior-change.

This is a moral agenda, predicated on what is right, not in the short term nor for individual benefit, but for the well-being of our communities, countries, and our long-term existence as humans in nature. Independent oversight of the Act is provided by a Future Generations Commissioner, the Wales Audit Office, and the courts, through Judicial Review).

However, two notes of caution:

- The Act applies only to those public bodies in the direct responsibility of the Welsh Government. Thus, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales must comply with the Act, but the universities as autonomous institutions are not.
- The Act was passed in 2015 and commenced in 2016. The delivery of the first round of the required well-being plans started in 2018. Thus, the Act has only been in a delivery mode for 2 years.

## UNIVERSITIES IN WALES AND THE ACT

As the person charged with the responsibility of leading sustainability in the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD) over most of the last decade, I can with confidence say the challenges and opportunities in embedding sustainability throughout a university in relation to the institution’s culture, campus, curriculum, and the relationship with the wider community are huge. Universities are organic, messy institutions, often growing up around individual power bases, disciplines, and needs. Their academics are their beacons—but not necessarily beacons able to shine a light on the wicked challenges of the early twenty first century. As the public appetite grows and wanes for specific disciplines, so does the potential fate of the institutions themselves without a determined vigilance, sufficient student financing, and alternative funding routes. The oldest university in Wales—Lampeter, founded in 1822—is also part of the newest university in Wales—the merger of four universities and two colleges in the last decade to become my own university, the UWTSD.

In this current climate, made immensely more difficult by the effect of coronavirus disease 2019 on the student experience, how can universities create the appropriate structures to embed futures thinking in everything they do, not least when the pandemic has led to their focus being increasingly reactive? Despite many universities’ councils passing resolutions led by student movements to decarbonize their investments and to declare climate emergencies<sup>1</sup>, somehow, these initiatives are still

<sup>1</sup>For a list of universities who have declared climate emergencies, see University Fossil Fuel Scorecard, People and Planet. Available online at: <https://peopleandplanet.org/fossil-free-scorecards> (accessed May 14, 2021).

at the periphery rather than at the center of the universities’ operations. It could be argued that without fundamental principles, a clear mechanism, and systems in place to change behavior, we will continue with the best climate science coming out of universities, whereas those same universities explicitly do not make the commensurate changes to their own institutions on the basis of the science.

For the purposes of looking at a systemic approach to embedding any strategic aim into a university’s culture, I will use the phrases “well-being of future generations” or “sustainability” as shorthand for a commitment to designing in future-proofing, systems thinking, creative problem solving, self-awareness/open-mindedness toward difference, understanding of global issues/power relationships, and optimism and action for a better world—i.e., the skills and graduate attributes needed for a constrained future and the role universities should play in that.

Changing expectations of the role of an education system is a long job. Employers recognize the excellence of knowledge acquisition and potential in university graduates but rarely contribute to the content of undergraduate courses, despite the prevailing narrative from business organizations that students do not come into employment with the right skills. However, those same businesses risk registers are acutely aware of the shifting contexts of climate change, resource depletion, globalization, insecure energy sources, and unstable fiscal mechanisms (Franco, 2020). A student who has been encouraged to think critically about these issues within and beyond their discipline has an experience of working in an intradisciplinary team, has developed values about social justice, diversity, and human rights, and is far better placed to explore creative solutions than one who has had no opportunity to explore such challenges.

Factoring the well-being of future generations into the present is seen as a difficult concept and one where people often feel powerless and frustrated when they see governments and institutions acting in what they perceive as unsustainable ways. If sustainable thinking is interpreted as a process leading to better resource management and better long-term decisions, there is a very important role for universities to reduce their own negative impacts and lead by example. Through the National Union of Students’ longitudinal research (Students Organizing for Sustainability International, 2021), there is a 10 year evidence-based to show students consistently demonstrating—92% in 2020—that they want their institution to be doing more on sustainable development with 40% reporting low or no coverage in their course curriculum. However, in universities, the sustainability agenda most commonly lies with estate management because there are real savings to be had by better carbon, energy, water, waste, and environmental resource management systems. As these changes are also visible to students, the university can avoid making fundamental intrinsic changes to prepare their staff and students for the growing climate crisis.

The Welsh experience may be able to offer some lessons here. As outlined in my book *#futuregen: Lessons from a Small Country* (Davidson, 2020), the journey to the Well-being of Future Generations Act took 17 years, from the original duty in Section 21 of the first Government of Wales Act (1998), —which

required the new National Assembly for Wales to “have a scheme setting out how it will promote<sup>2</sup> sustainable development in the exercise of its functions”—to the proposal for legislation to deliver<sup>3</sup>, now enshrined in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. The “duty to promote” did lead to currency for the phrase “sustainable development” across the Welsh public sector but not to the hoped-for action, not least because there was no clear understanding of what “promote” meant, what “sustainable development” meant—or how to get there.

Welsh universities commonly apply the term “sustainable” in their strategic plans, but generally as a strategic enabler to “deliver a financially, socially and environmentally sustainable university (Bangor University, 2015)” or, under the heading, Vision and Ambition, is committed to “being socially and environmentally responsible” (Swansea University, 2020). In my own university, our first key performance indicator (KPI) was “Institutional Sustainability” [University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD), 2017b] and the KPI for which I was responsible, “Embedding Sustainability,” so it is easy to see how there can be confusion about what words mean, what priority they should be allocated, and how you deliver on them. After all, universities are completely familiar with what needs to be done to create financial “sustainability”—senior management will be focusing on this every day of their lives—but have very little idea how to prepare either themselves or their students for the complex empirical challenges ahead. Rather than the measures taken to keep a university in business, “institutional sustainability” should mean that sustainability (as in delivering on the Brundtland definition) and ethical decision-making in the interests of future generations are at the heart of universities’ DNA.

Our experience in the UWTSD of embedding sustainability throughout the university is a classic example. Through our virtual institute, the INSPIRE (Institute for Sustainable Practice, Innovation and Resource Effectiveness) established in 2012, we sought staff buy-in, management buy-in, governors’ buy-in, student buy-in, and community buy-in whilst undertaking 5 years of mergers. Using mechanisms such as a Sustainability Skills Survey to understand our staff skills, expertise, experience, and appetite for change was crucial, as were the strategic plan commitments, KPI metrics to embed change in faculties, student champions, curriculum change pioneers, and staff delivering on the ground. In 2015, the university rose dramatically from 113th to 8th in the UK and 1st in Wales in the People and Planet University League and took three Green Gown (Environmental Association of Universities Colleges (EAUC), 2015) top awards for its corporate and academic leadership. We may have arrived meteorically, but with yet another merger being completed, with yet another set of problematic buildings, this success could not be maintained. Despite the external success, within the university, the agenda was still seen as peripheral, something that had to be continually fought for, i.e., not actually sustainable at all in either meaning of the term, as neither was it able to be sustained without

constant attention nor was it embedded sufficiently to deliver on the Brundtland ambition.

However, deep in the university, something was stirring; staff and students together were advocating radical curriculum proposals linked to the Well-being of Future Generations Act, capitalizing on the permission to think differently. The 2017–2022 strategic plan was explicit: “We have placed the seven goals and the five ways of working of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 at the core of our planning.” On each of the main campuses, new well-being oriented approaches were being delivered at the core of the UWTSD curriculum: whether through the School of Architecture in Swansea with its focus on sustainable development; the “Rethinking Business for a Changing World” ethical, sustainable, and profitable emphasis at the Carmarthen Business School [University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD), 2017a], or the Harmony Institute based in Lampeter.

## HOW THE ACT IS INFLUENCING UNIVERSITY RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

These important changes linked to the Act are being reflected across Wales. New partnerships are being developed and actions taken to deliver on the Act’s required ways of working. Academics in the Sustainable Places Research Institute in Cardiff University worked with civil society on exciting proposals to create “A Welsh Food System fit for Future Generations” (Sanderson Bellamy and Marsden, 2020) linked directly to the Act and then with Welsh Government and the Future Generations Commissioner to build the Act into a Welsh procurement system focused on social value (Welsh Government, 2020) underpinned by new themes, outcomes, and measures.

What perhaps is most important in this context is that the universities may not be legally accountable directly under the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, but there is a clear government expectation on them to engage and deliver as partners, protectors, and enhancers of the opportunities of future generations and to deliver on government priorities linked to the legislation:

- Welsh universities are delivery partners on the Public Services Boards created by the Act to maximize cross-sector collaborative delivery in each local authority area in Wales.
- Welsh universities are required to have civic missions (Williams, 2017) in partnership with their communities and public services to deliver place-based outcomes, contribute to raising school standards, develop active citizenship, and act as the engine of social enterprise and innovation. Universities are mandated to maximize their civic contribution<sup>3</sup> with clear action plans on achieving this, for which they are held accountable by governors, students, and Welsh Government.
- Universities are key partners in the four economic regions of Wales, which are charged by the Act to deliver innovative low carbon prosperity within environmental limits.
- Universities are encouraged to lead by example, e.g., all are now accredited Living Wage employers and signatories to the

<sup>2</sup> Author’s emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

## Welsh Government's Code of Practice on Ethical Employment in Supply Chains (Welsh Government, 2017).

Oversight arrangements in Wales are due to change, as the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (which currently has oversight of universities) is likely to be replaced by “a new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research as the independent regulatory body responsible for the funding, oversight and regulation of tertiary education and research in Wales, tertiary education will encompass post-16 education including further and higher education, apprenticeships and mainstream sixth forms (Welsh Government, 2020a).” Section 7(4) of the Draft Bill defines (Welsh Government, 2020b) “civic mission” as “action for the purpose of promoting or improving the economic, social, environmental or cultural well-being of Wales (including action that may achieve any of the well-being goals in section 4 of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015”. There is a real opportunity for all Welsh higher education institutions to embrace this challenge and make it an explicit part of their own offer as universities in the only country in the world with a law to protect the interests of future generations.

## CONCLUSION

Universities' historic role and value—as educators of the next generation and the ones after that—are under scrutiny as never before. With young people, the length and breadth of the United Kingdom (UK), involved in climate movements such as the Mock COP (Mock, 2020), universities need to make sure that their core curriculum and campus experience is fit for purpose, recognizing the current and future challenges of the times. Universities start with a significant advantage—academics are trusted hugely by the public. In 2019, Parr (2019) found that 86% of people trust engineers and professors and 84% scientists. It is university academics who have brought both the climate challenges and solutions into the public domain. Universities could and should be partnering with governments the world over to deliver evidence-based solutions from their trusted experts, as we are starting to see in Wales in the context of the Act. What an opportunity it would be to demonstrate the influence of the climate expertise of UK universities on the UK Government when it hosts COP26 in Glasgow in 2021.

In Wales, the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act are starting to drive changes to behaviors and systems. A new Welsh statutory school curriculum based on areas of learning rather than traditional disciplines will be in place by 2022, enabling much more flexibility to adapt the curriculum to current and future challenges. Schools and colleges

are already directly subject to the Act—as agencies of local authorities and government—and there are major opportunities for the new Tertiary Commission to ensure that future students will leave school, college, or university both with in-depth knowledge of their chosen fields, and an approach to life that is adaptable, resilient, and understanding of the need to stay within environmental limits.

For 3 years now, my INSPIRE interns at the UWTSU have gone on to become Presidents of the National Union of Students in Wales. The current Welsh President, Becky Ricketts, is one of 140 people who contributed their views on the Welsh Act and the opportunities it creates in my book, *#futuregen: Lessons from a Small Country*. Her final act as the Student Union President in UWTSU was to persuade the governing body to not just declare a climate emergency but to create an action plan commensurate with the challenge. In her contribution to the book, she says, “My question to you is this: why are we preparing our children for a world that may not be able to support life as we know it? If I were to have the power, my primary decision would be to include real climate education and education of the Act into our schools, colleges, universities and even workplaces—the Well-being of our Future Generations depends on us all, and we have an obligation as a ‘Globally Responsible Wales’ to only positively contribute to this crisis.”

This challenge from our student president is one that should be heard in every Vice Chancellor's office. We have 10 years of evidence of students wanting universities to rise to the challenge—now those same students are taking to the streets. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act provides a values framework to drive future legislation in Wales in the interest of current and future generations. We already see Welsh universities start to rise to its challenges, but the opportunity is there for them to go further and faster, to be the beacons whose lamps shine far and wide from a small country. As John Rawls, the American philosopher, said, “Do unto future generations what you would have had past generations do unto you.” For all our benefits, and for the benefits of those after us too, that is the least we can do.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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