

Session Title:	Session 3.3 The Dragon, The Thistle and The Shamrock
Speaker(s):	Ben Kibble-Smith Vicky Bannerman Niamh Gallagher
Reporter:	David Parker

Speaker/Institution Bio/Information:	<p>Ben Kibble-Smith Group Chair for HELOA Wales, Wrexham University</p> <p>Vicky Bannerman Group Chair for HELOA Scotland, University of Strathclyde</p> <p>Niamh Gallagher HELOA Digital Communications Manager, Edge Hill University</p>
Overview/Aim of session:	<p>Three tables were arranged, one each for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the three devolved nations. Delegates were asked to consider within their table groups what they knew, or thought they knew, about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Qualifications</i> • <i>Student Finance System</i> • <i>HEI Provision</i> • <i>Language spoken</i> • <i>Fun Facts or Myths about that nation.</i> <p>This was then followed by presentations from HELOA representatives running through the provision for each nation.</p>

Presentations

/ Wales

Ben Kibble-Smith

Group Chair for HELOA Wales, Wrexham University

Croeso!

Study can be in either English or Welsh. All students must study some Welsh until the age of 16, either as their first or second language. There are no academies, free schools or grammar schools, just high schools. Every county must have at least one Welsh medium school, with some counties offering more. There are 440 Welsh medium schools, predominantly at primary level. 110,000 students are educated in Welsh medium schools each year (22% of the total). Welsh speaking regions are more common in the western regions.

GCSE grades run from A* to G. GCSEs are taken at 16 years of age, and subjects must include Welsh or Welsh as a second language. In some areas, such as Wrexham and Torafen, a high number of high schools have been closed and amalgamated into larger colleges.

AS and A levels are studied between 16-19, with grades A* to E. T-levels are not currently studied in Wales.

The **Advanced Skills Baccalaureate Wales** is a new level three qualification which can be taken alongside A levels. This consists of three projects (Global Community Project, weighted at 25%, Future Destinations Project, weighted at 25%, and an Individual Project weighted at 50%), all graded A-U. The qualification is equivalent to one A level and will receive an overall grade A*-E. This qualification will be awarded for the first time in Summer 2025, replacing the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate.

There are eight universities and one conservatoire. Many of these are concentrated in South Wales. The most popular subject is Business Management. Half of the HE student population comes from Wales, and Wales is a net importer of full-time students from the UK. There were 44,080 full-time students from other UK countries studying HE in Wales, compared to 28,385 full-time students from Wales studying HE in the rest of the UK.

There is both Welsh and English provision, with some institutions offering degree study fully taught in Welsh, with others offering some modules in Welsh. Scholarships, funded by Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, are available for students who study a set number of

	<p>credits in Welsh. <i>CYMRAEG 2050</i> is a campaign with an aspiration to have one million Welsh speakers by 2050.</p> <p>There is an NHS Wales bursary for those studying an NHS course in Wales to pay for the tuition fees. Students who take this bursary must practice for two years in Wales following graduation. Students can also apply for Student Finance funding from their home nation.</p> <p>Tuition fees are £9250 per year, due to rise to £9535 in September 2025. As well as the tuition fee loan there is a combination of loan and grant available towards living costs for students taking their first undergraduate degree. In 2023/24 the amounts available were £12,150 for students living away from home, £10,315 for students living with their parents. Welsh students who are studying in London and not living with their parents are entitled to £15,170. The amount available as a loan and available as a grant will depend on the student's taxable household income.</p>
<p>Presentation 2</p>	<p>/ Scotland Vicky Bannerman Group Chair for HELOA Scotland, University of Strathclyde</p> <p><i>Fàilte!</i></p> <p>The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is the national curriculum for all schools, covering a student's entire education up to 18 years old.</p> <p>Primary education runs in years P1 – P7, and secondary education in S1-S6. There are no sixth form colleges. Students can leave education after S4 at the age of 16, although the majority stay on until 18 years old and S6.</p> <p>Scottish National 5 qualifications are usually sat in S4 and are equivalent to GCSE. Scottish Highers (1 year) and Advanced Highers are taken in S5 and S6 and are equivalent to level three qualifications such as A-levels. Students can take up to six Highers, or a mix of Advanced Highers and Highers. First sitting for Highers is in S5, Second sitting is S6.</p> <p>Students can also take the Scottish Baccalaureate, which adds an interdisciplinary project to their</p>

Highers/Advanced Highers. **HNC** and **HND** qualifications can also be taken at some schools and colleges at S5/S6.

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 was passed with a view to secure Gaelic as an official language in Scotland with the same status as the English language. In a country of 5.5 million, there are 60,000 Gaelic speakers, 1% of the population. These are mostly congregated in the Western Isles, the Highlands and Glasgow. Education can be delivered in the medium of Gaelic from Primary to Advanced Higher level in 14 of the 32 local authorities, and Gaelic can also be studied as a modern language. University courses can also be taught wholly in Gaelic at the University of the Highlands and Islands.

The Commissioner for Fair Access has set a widening participation target for 20% of HE students to come from the 20% most economically deprived regions by 2030.

There are 19 Higher Education Institutions in Scotland. This includes 15 universities, a college of Higher Education, an Art School, a Conservatoire and the Open University in Scotland. There are four ancient universities with St Andrews, the oldest, being founded in 1413. The newest, the University of the Highlands and Islands, was established in 2011. There are over 4000 degrees available, typically lasting for four years, with flexibility in the early years before narrowing down the subject. Entry requirements are typically 4-6 Highers, although this varies between institutions. The US university system is based on that in Scotland.

Study is “free” for Scottish domiciled students taking their first degree, with their tuition fees provided by the Scottish government through the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS).

Tuition fees are £1285 per year for HNC/HND and other courses below full degree level, £1820 for the first undergraduate degree and £1205 for courses at private colleges. Students can receive funding for a HND followed by an undergraduate degree, and students can access an extra year of funding if required to allow for a change of course or repeat year. Scottish students studying elsewhere in the UK are entitled to a tuition fee loan.

Maintenance support is a mix of bursaries and loans, based on household income. In 2024/25 loans range from £8400 to £9400 based on the household income, with an additional bursary of up to £2000 again based on the household income. The loan repayment thresholds is

	<p>£31,395, different to that for students in England, and the loans are written off after 30 years.</p>
<p>Presentation 3</p>	<p>/ Northern Ireland Niamh Gallagher HELOA Digital Communications Manager, Edge Hill University</p> <p><i>Fáilte!</i></p> <p>Controlled schools are managed and funded by the Education Authority, have a Board of Governors (BoGs). Primary and Secondary BoGs are representatives from the Protestant churches, along with parents, teachers and the Education Authority.</p> <p>Catholic Maintained schools have a board of governors nominated by trustees, normally from Roman Catholic churches, together with parents, teachers and the Education Authority.</p> <p>Voluntary (grammar) schools and Integrated schools have mixed Protestant and Roman Catholic students.</p> <p>School years are counted differently to the other UK nations. Primary education is P1-P7. High school education is year 8 – year 12.</p> <p>Irish was recognised as an official language in 2022, following the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) act 2022. There are 30 Irish-medium (Gaelscoil Rang) schools, 28 of these are primary, two are post-primary. There are 10 Irish-medium units linked to English-medium schools. Seven of these are primary, three are post-primary.</p> <p>Students can study Irish as part of modern foreign language classes from year P7. Some Irish-medium (Gaelscoil Rang) students can sit GCSE Irish in the final year of primary school when 10-11 years old before starting high school. Irish can be studied at both GCSE and A level by students who are not at an Irish-medium school. Irish-medium students can also sit the SAEG transfer test in Irish if wishing to go to a Grammar school.</p> <p>Level two qualifications are GCSEs, graded A*-G, together with vocational BTEC / OCN NI level 2 and NFQ</p>

level 2, all graded pass/merit/distinction. These are taken in years 11 and 12.

Level three qualifications are **A levels**, with AS taken in year 13 and A2 in year 14. There are also what are usually termed “**Applied A levels**” rather than BTECs, and **OCR nationals**. Most high schools have a sixth form attached, or students can choose to join a FE college. Where available, students have the flexibility to study one A level at another school while remaining with their original school sixth form for two A levels, allowing a wider variety of subject choices.

There are six FE colleges in Northern Ireland, regionally based, offering foundation degrees. There are three universities: Queen’s University Belfast, Ulster University and the Open University. There are two university colleges for teaching programmes: St Mary’s University College and Stanmillis University College. University courses can be taught in Irish (either in whole or in part) at most Higher Education Institutes and at St Mary’s.

The vast majority of university courses are three-year degrees. Higher level apprenticeships are also available.

The MaSN (Maximum Student Number) is a cap on student numbers from the island Ireland for each university, due to these fees being supported by the Stormont executive. UCAS forecasts suggest that there will be an increase to 14,500 18-year-olds in Northern Ireland in 2030 (a rise of 20% compared to 2023) with a likelihood that many Northern Irish students will move to the rest of the UK for their degree study.

Tuition fees are £9250 per year for UK undergraduate students across universities and most private providers. If students are resident in Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland, then this is reduced to £4750 with the remainder funded by the government. Maintenance support is available through a maintenance loan, with a grant available if the household income is below £41,065. There is a special support grant if the household income is below this threshold and the student also qualifies for certain benefits.

The threshold for students starting to pay back their tuition fee loans is when they earn over £24,990. Payments are cancelled 25 years after the April when students first started to pay back their loan.