

RCE Wales and its work on informing Circular Economy Policy

Dr Gavin Bunting

Chair of RCE Wales and Associate Professor, Swansea University

Email: g.t.m.bunting@swansea.ac.uk

UNESCO ESD 2030 Roadmap Priority Action Area 1: Advancing Policy

1. Summary

This paper provides a background to RCE Wales and the unique Welsh political context which it is working within. RCE Wales has developed a structure whereby members lead work packages (orbits of interest), where they have significant interest / expertise, thus aligning with their roles in higher education and adding value to the RCE. This paper focuses on the work of the Circular Economy orbit of interest, led by Dr Gavin Bunting, and its focus on informing Government policy. It highlights learnings from the process and the challenges faced. Overall, it is hoped that this overview will provide an insight into ways in which it is possible to inform the policy process, and thus inspire other RCEs to seek to influence policy in their region.

2. RCE Wales and the Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act

RCE Wales has members representing all higher education institutions in Wales, along with the Welsh Government. This connection to the Welsh Government is highly important, with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015¹ providing a framework for RCE Wales' work. The Act commits Welsh public bodies to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. Each public body in Wales must also work to achieve all of the 7 Well-being goals, outlined below:

A prosperous Wales: An innovative, productive and low carbon society which recognises the limits of the global environment and therefore uses resources efficiently and proportionately (including acting on climate change); and which develops a skilled and well-educated population in an economy which generates wealth and provides employment opportunities.

A resilient Wales: this is about maintaining and enhancing a biodiverse natural environment with healthy functioning ecosystems that support the capacity to adapt to change (for example climate change).

A healthier Wales: A society in which people's physical and mental well-being is maximised and in which choices and behaviours that benefit future health are understood.

A more equal Wales: A society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances.

¹ <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/>

A Wales of cohesive communities: Attractive, viable, safe and well-connected communities.

A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language: A society that promotes and protects culture, heritage and the Welsh language, and which encourages people to participate in the arts, and sports and recreation.

A globally responsible Wales: Considering whether our actions make a positive contribution to global well-being.

Underpinning these are **ways of working** which encourage public bodies to adopt decision making which: considers the long term, acts to prevent of problems occurring in the first place, embeds integration, collaboration and involvement.

Interestingly, higher education isn't covered under the Act as it is not classed as a public body, however, RCE Wales recognises the importance of the Act and the legitimacy it provides to its work, and has therefore aligned its vision and objectives to it.

1.1 RCE Wales Vision

RCE Wales facilitates international collaboration, as part of the multi-stakeholder global network of RCEs, to research, develop and promote a greater understanding of sustainability and well-being of current and future generations, and is central to co-developing the sustainable 'Wales we want'.

RCE Wales will:

- Facilitate the creation of cohesive communities or orbits of interest, each community working to its strength and sharing that expertise so that individual strength becomes the strength of all.
- Seek to collaborate with RCEs internationally, to take forward thematic work related to orbits of interest.
- Developing a 'hub of expertise' for education on sustainable development and the well-being of future generations' across Welsh Universities which will work with the communities of interest across Wales to research and promote local and global citizenship.
- Using the Well-being of Future Generations framework – the one sustainable development goal, the four pillars, the five ways of working and the seven Wellbeing Goals enshrined in the Wellbeing of Future generations Act (Wales) 2015 to guide and shape the work of the RCE and to contribute to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

1.2 Orbits of Interest

The orbits of interest has been a very successful model to focus the work of RCE Wales, with members leading work that aligns with their interests/ expertise and their roles in higher education. This allows for members to devote time to leading the work, thus adding value to the RCE. The wide-ranging focus of these is outlined in figure 1, reflecting the broad nature of sustainable development.

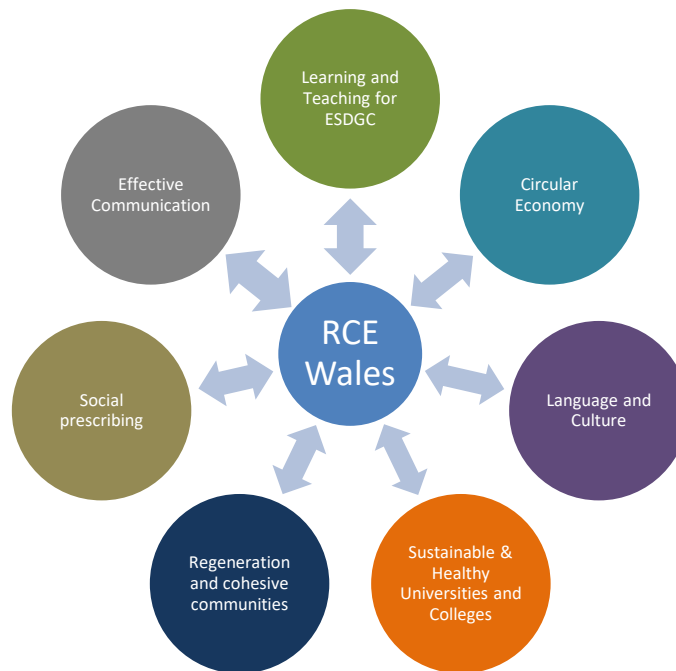


Figure 1. RCE Wales Orbits of Interest

3. Circular Economy

Circular economy is aimed at keeping materials and resources in use, avoiding incineration and landfill. This is achieved through designing products for reuse, longevity, repair, remanufacturing and ultimately recycling. This is achieved through designing products with longevity in mind, embedding modularity and ease of separating materials at end of life.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation highlighted in their report, [Completing the Picture: How the Circular Economy Tackles Climate Change](https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/Completing_The_Picture_How_The_Circular_Economy_Tackles_Climate_Change_V3_26_September.pdf)², that **45% of our emissions are associated with making the products that we consume**. Circular Economy principles are therefore a critical component of the overall strategy to mitigate climate change and move to net zero emissions.

The RCE Wales Circular Economy orbit (also known as the Circular Economy Research and Innovation Group, Wales³ (CERIG)), like RCE Wales, has members which represent all higher education institutions in Wales, along with WRAP⁴, and the Welsh Government. CERIG was established in 2018, with the aim of members working together to connect complementary expertise and experiences to facilitate circular economy innovation and research in Wales.

² https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/Completing_The_Picture_How_The_Circular_Economy_Tackles_Climate_Change_V3_26_September.pdf

³ <http://www.rce.cymru/circular-economy-research-and-innovation-group-wales/>

⁴ WRAP is an organisation that works with governments, businesses, and communities to deliver practical solutions to improve resource efficiency, www.wrap.org.uk

One area the group has focussed on is informing Government policy related to circular economy. This has been through a [formal response to the Consultation on reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system](#); a consultation event for CERIG members to respond to the Welsh Government's Circular Economy Strategy consultation, and discussions at CERIG meetings. The feedback from Government colleagues has been positive, with it being highlighted that the free and open critique has been valued. Ultimately, it has been good to see how many of the issues raised by the group have been considered.

4. What have we learnt from this Government policy focus?

A key learning from this process is to take a long-term view to influencing policy. The policy development cycle doesn't start with a formal consultation, it starts much earlier than this. It is therefore important to develop relationships with policy officials to inform their thinking early on in the process. We also know that developing robust evidence to inform and support our advocacy can be a long process, it is therefore important to, where possible, develop an overview of likely policy being considered in the medium term, so that research and evidence can be developed to align with this. It is also important to recognise the role that academia can play once policy is being delivered. For example, academia can help with monitoring and evaluation, thus providing independent research-based evaluation of progress. In addition, many policy programmes will need to develop the capacity and capabilities of people to effectively deliver against the policy, with academia being well placed to deliver higher level training.

At the heart of higher education's ethos, is that the knowledge we create is contested, debated and critiqued so that there is academic rigour behind what we produce, which importantly provides legitimacy to what we disseminate. However, this ability to contest and critique, means that we are not always in agreement. One of the benefits of responding as a group, rather than individually, is that we have been able to provide coordinated responses on areas where we are in agreement, thus making it easier for policy makers to see which aspects are less contested.

The main challenges associated with developing policy advice, is that this type of work tends to be on the peripheral of most academic's /higher education professionals day-to-day work, thus finding the time to focus on it can be challenging. However, it is worth remembering that this type of work can add value to Research Excellence Framework impact case studies. Bearing this in mind, the process CERIG found works best is for meetings to focus on writing the policy advice document, with members expected to have prepared beforehand and whatever is produced at the meeting being very close to the final document. The benefit of this is that members get to see an immediate outcome of their involvement and it gives an energy and focus to the meeting – there is nothing like a deadline or a constrained time period to focus the mind. For those who are leading this process, it needs strong, clear and focussed chairing of the meeting, supplemented by thorough preparation.

5. Conclusion

Informing Government policy can be a rewarding process, especially when it is possible to see how one has influenced frameworks and guidance which have national importance on topics we care so passionately about. If there is one key learning from the process, it is that effective communication,

engagement and relationship building is critical, both externally with policy officials, and internally with RCE members and the academic community. The resulting effective relationships allow for robust and open discussions in an environment of mutual respect, thus resulting in consensus building and transparent policy advice.