‘Small is Stupid’ is the title of a book written by Wilfred Beckerman in 1995, partly as a reaction to the well known ‘Small is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered’ by E. F. Schumacher. The second book is a critique of standard neo-classical economics and argues that small scale enterprises offer many advantages, particularly in relation to environmental and social factors. While many environmentalists supported the arguments made by Beckerman, many economists and business analysts would agree with Beckerman that, in many cases, small is stupid. The latter talk about cutting administrative costs, economies of scale in production and the role of market power in negotiations. Much of this may be true and, certainly in recent years, much of the university sector has followed this philosophy. In the UK and elsewhere, there have been mergers and acquisitions that have sought to deliver economies of scale in education and research. This has resulted in the formation of some very large universities, such as in Manchester, and within these universities, some very large departments covering extremely wide areas of interest.

Many people are interested in seeing if closer relations between Aberystwyth and Bangor universities can offer benefits to all involved. Closer working in the future will undoubtedly be helped by the similarities in the two institutions. For example, both were established in the late 19th century, neither recruit large numbers of students into degrees such as medicine or engineering, both are very rooted in their local communities and both have aspirations to be global players in their respective areas of excellence. A further similarity is that both universities have maintained research and teaching interests in agriculture and land management throughout their history. In many ways, this is remarkable given the massive disinvestment in agricultural education that has occurred across the UK in the last 20 years. Elsewhere in the UK, university agriculture departments have either closed down or been merged into larger biology departments, only to lose their identity at some later date. But somehow these two small universities in the extreme west of Wales have continued to attract undergraduates and postgraduates to study agriculturally-related subjects.

The social and political importance to the rural communities of Wales of having two universities working in agriculture cannot be over-emphasised. Both universities have contributed significantly to the rural economy across Wales and beyond over many years, but perhaps their greatest contribution to society is yet to come. Food security is high on the political agenda around the world and, when coupled with the implications of a changing climate and growing populations, it is apparent that the coming years hold many challenges for agricultural science and wider society. Having undergone more than a century of successes, trials and tribulations, it is now time for the scientists of Aberystwyth and Bangor to ‘step up to the plate’ once more to deliver benefits and solutions to Wales and across the world.

This process has been kick-started in recent years through a series of initiatives funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. These initiatives have enabled the relevant departments, IBERs in Aberystwyth and the College of Natural Science in Bangor, to act together in strategic planning for the future and in recruiting new talent. New cooperative appointments in recent years have acted as a glue to strengthen what was already a good fit of expertise. Bangor has particular expertise in topics such as forestry, fisheries, soil science, conservation and some social sciences, while Aberystwyth has strengths in crops, genetics and molecular biology, animal science and bio-energy. When these two sets of expertise come together, closer relations between the two institutions will be opened up to deliver benefits and solutions to Wales and across the world.
Two smalls make a smart

Together, they cover almost all topics related to food security and land management. Initiatives to bring the two universities closer enable both sets of scientists to work better cooperatively and form teams that can tackle the truly global challenges of our day.

This partnership is already bringing significant benefits to Welsh farmers as researchers and advisors collaborate on various initiatives under the Welsh Assembly Government’s Farming Connect scheme. There are also benefits at a UK level, as scientists from both universities work together on government-funded programmes related to greenhouse gases and coastal management. Hopefully, in the next few years, collaborative projects organised under European Union Convergence funding in these and other sectors will produce commercial opportunities for a growing number of local industries.

In many ways Beckerman is correct - small can be stupid. But small can also be smart. In terms of absolute numbers, neither group of applied scientists in Aberystwyth or Bangor is large, and even when they come together they don’t represent a major mass at the global scale. However, by working together more closely, they can gain real benefits from the natural synergies that exist between them. These synergies are more than just a mix of scientific skills - they also offer benefits through shared values of scientific excellence, applying science for society’s benefit and a pride in being well connected to local communities. My hope for the future is that the Aberystwyth-Bangor partnership can take the best from both Schumacher and Beckerman. We need size in order to provide breadth of coverage across agriculture and rural development and to develop critical mass in important areas, but we also need to try to keep the best of ‘smallness’, which relates to good communication, nimbleness of reaction and friendliness. Partnership working has been in vogue in Wales for a lot longer than it has in Westminster, and I am confident that the commitment of both institutions and staff to a better future based on partnership and collaboration will bring dividends to all.

References
