Investigating Welsh international cultural activity: a historical institutionalist approach
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Abstract
Sub-state diplomacy, the international activity of the level of government immediately below the state level, forms part of a growing trend of diversity in the entities active internationally. Culture is a prominent aspect of sub-state diplomacy and cultural distinctiveness has provided an underlying basis for regionalist/sub-state nationalist claims that are inextricably linked to the expansion in sub-state diplomacy. However, the cultural aspects of sub-state diplomacy have received little detailed attention. This paper contributes to addressing this situation by utilising a multi-level framework of the opportunity structures for sub-state diplomacy (Lecours, 2002) to analyse the factors that enable and constrain sub-state government international cultural relations. The paper examines these issues in the context of international cultural activity associated with the Welsh devolved government. The findings highlight the continuities in Welsh international cultural relations, the ways in which since devolution autonomous international cultural relations have been enabled by opportunity structures at different levels, including the EU and international levels, and the continuing importance of UK bodies to Wales’ global cultural projection. They also point to the value of this historical institutionalist approach to analysing the multi-level opportunities for culture in sub-state diplomacy.
Introduction

This paper focuses on the international cultural activity of sub-state governments, the level of government immediately below the state level. It addresses a gap in the literature, as the attention to the cultural dimensions of sub-state diplomacy is limited. Another broader limitation is a lack of analysis of what shapes how sub-state governments engage and interact internationally, including in relation to culture. Therefore, this paper adopts a historical institutionalist approach to analyse the factors that enable and constrain sub-state government international cultural activity and develops its findings based on analysing the case of devolved government in Wales.

Sub-state governments vary in their propensity to be active internationally and in levels of regional authority. However, sub-state formal competences in international relations have increased in all European countries (Blatter et al 2008: 473). It has developed a global reach and is associated with regional governments across all types of political systems and continents (Cornago 2010; Blindenbacher and Pasma 2007; Michelmann 2009a). Whilst attention to sub-state diplomacy is expanding, the cultural dimensions of sub-state diplomacy have received less attention. This is surprising for a number of reasons. Recognition of cultural distinctiveness has been central to regionalist/sub-state nationalist claims that have contributed to the remarkable rise in regional authority in Western European states (Hooghe et al. 2010). Relatiedly, globalization has fuelled two trends: a more homogenized global culture and, in response, a heightened emphasis on indigenous and traditional cultural identities (Blatter et al. 2008: 465). Consequently, culture and a strong cultural identity can have a determining influence on sub-state diplomacy. Yet, culture in sub-state diplomacy is under-explored. As part of this, there is little understanding of the particular dynamics that shape how sub-state governments are involved internationally with regards to culture.

This paper examines the international cultural activity of sub-state governments and focuses on the factors that condition sub-state diplomacy in this area. It addresses the key research question: What are the factors that enable and constrain sub-state government international cultural activity? In accordance with a historical institutionalist approach, the paper applies Lecours’ multi-level framework of the ‘opportunity structures’ for the international agency of sub-state governments (2002) to analyse the international cultural activity of sub-state governments. Conceptualising culture and its role in diplomacy and sub-state diplomacy alike is surrounded by complexity, ambiguity and contestation. Therefore, the paper draws on the international cultural relations literature’s understanding of the roles of culture in sub-state diplomacy. In order to operationalize the research, the paper focuses on a core element, the arts, understood in this literature as ‘music, drama, dance, opera, film, video, folklore, television, and exhibitions of painting, sculpture, photography and graphics.’ (Mitchell, 1986: 175) The framework is applied to investigate the international arts and culture activity associated with the devolved Welsh Government. This under-investigated case is valuable given its comparatively limited constitutional autonomy and as establishing devolved government in 1999 became a context for reinvigorating and asserting Welsh cultural distinctiveness with potential external dimensions. As the greatest attention has been given to the most ‘advanced’ cases of sub-state diplomacy where culture plays a prominent role in their international activity (e.g. Catalonia, Quebec, Flanders and Scotland, see for example Criekemans 2010b), the Welsh can potentially provide a more comprehensive illustration of the multi-level opportunity structures that enable sub-state diplomacy than cases where strong constitutional autonomy is a key explanatory variable.

In terms of its structure, the first section outlines the limited discussion of culture in sub-state diplomacy and introduces Lecours’ framework of analysis. The second section outlines the research design and methodology. Then, the paper examines the Welsh case. The opportunity structures prior to establishing devolved government are examined before outlining the key features of Wales’ international cultural relations between 1999 and 2014. On this basis,
Lecours’ framework is used to analyse the multi-level opportunity structures for Welsh international cultural relations. The paper concludes by evaluating the significance of its findings for understanding sub-state diplomacy in Wales and the UK, sub-state international cultural relations and the merits of a historical institutionalist approach to analysing sub-state diplomacy.

**Culture, sub-state governments and diplomacy**

Largely ignored by the international relations literature, the international activity of sub-state governments has been the focus of the sub-state diplomacy, or ‘paradiplomacy’ literature. Despite the recent growth in this literature, international cultural activity has received little dedicated attention. Existing work points to culture as amongst the main motivations for sub-state diplomacy alongside economic and, in some cases, political interests (Kincaid 2009; Keating 1999). Culture is considered to support more functional objectives such as trade and investment opportunities or, as part of cultural diplomacy, can facilitate developing an international profile (Michelmann 2009). Some studies associate it with public diplomacy, either suggesting that its usage reflects a lack of dedicated competences and less developed sub-state diplomacy (e.g. Scotland, Criekemans 2010b: 40), or is important for strong sub-state governments due to the association between international recognition and identity and nation-building (e.g. Quebec, Huijgh 2010; Melissen 2011: 17). References to cultural diplomacy and public diplomacy reinforce the perception that sub-state governments emulate states in their international relations. Both conceptions are challenged by differences in interpretation, a lack of clarity surrounding their practices and a strong tendency for cultural and public diplomacy to be used interchangeably (Mark 2009, Goss xxxx).

More specific to sub-state diplomacy is the literature that implicitly points to culture’s more prominent role in cases where there is a distinct national identity, ‘national’ or ethno-nationalist characteristics (e.g. Requejo 2009; Kincaid 2009; Michelmann 2007). Sub-state nationalism and territorial politics are posited as explanations for sub-state diplomacy as they create the conditions for more intense and extensive sub-state diplomacy of a qualitatively different nature (Lecours and Moreno 2003). Studies draw attention to how promotion of, and commonalities in language and culture can set the direction for sub-state diplomatic activities exactly in the most active and advanced examples (e.g. Quebec, Flanders and Wallonia, Catalonia and the Basque Country, see Lecours 2009; Bursens and Massart-Pierard, 2009; Aldecoa and Cornago 2009). Sub-state governments may be more likely to develop international activity associated with language and culture if the state level is unsympathetic to these distinctive features (Keating, 1999, 4-5). Relatedly, there are examples where culture has been the source of deeply political and tense relationships with the federal level, often linked with separatist goals (Lecours 2009; Michelmann 2007). These tensions aren’t unexpected given that culture evokes more symbolic dimensions and is associated with more normative aspirations that challenge the state level (Cornago 2013). Explicit discussion of the relationship between sub-state diplomacy and sub-state nationalism underlines that by promoting international recognition, culture can contribute to processes of sub-state nationalism, by contributing to forging identities and to legitimising nation-building projects (Keating, 1997: 708).

Whilst the existing literature indicates the significance of culture to sub-state diplomacy, there is little discussion of what shapes how they engage and interact internationally with regards to culture. The factors suggested to influence the international cultural activity of sub-state governments include sub-state competences and instruments for sub-state diplomacy (Criekemans 2009: 46; Twomey 2009: 58; Bursens and Massart-Pierard 2009: 109), intergovernmental mechanisms (Aldecoa and Cornago 2009), transborder cooperation with states and regions (Nagel 2009), and forging international relations centered on culture and language with other sub-state governments, with diasporas and with states (Requejo 2009; Hrbeck 2009; Kincaid, 2009). The lack of dedicated attention reflects broader limitations of the sub-state diplomacy literature as it tends to produce valuable descriptive accounts of the
main features of sub-state diplomacy in individual cases with less attention the the distinctive features and different dynamics at play in specific areas of international activity (Hocking 1993b: 32; Cornago 2010: 12). Moreover, explanations for sub-state diplomacy have tended to focus on identifying the causal factors associated with a particular sub-state government. Analyses of explanations for sub-state diplomacy and attempts at theory building have been limited (Lecours 2002: 94; Bursens and Deforche 2010: 154). As part of this, there is a lack of a theoretical perspective to explain how sub-state governments have become active internationally and what influences their external engagement. A likely explanation is a continuing strong focus on cases where federalism and the constitutional allocation of competences is considered as the central explanation for the international involvement of sub-state governments (Hocking 1993; Aguirre, 1999; Blindenbacher and Pasma 2007; Michelmann 2009a). However, in explaining sub-state diplomacy a more detailed analysis would give greater recognition to analysing the internal and external contexts.

Informed by the weaknesses of the existing literature and by historical institutionalism, Lecours’ multi-level framework (2002) provides a sound basis to investigate how sub-state governments have become active beyond their borders and what shapes how they engage and interact internationally. It takes two parallel developments into account: the way in which sub-state governments are "made" international agents' and how they can develop their international involvement by taking advantage of opportunity structures (2002: 92). To Lecours, understanding sub-state diplomacy benefits from an approach that recognises the theoretical importance of political institutions to the extent of making them the independent or key intervening variable (2002: 96-7). It posits that the structure-agency dynamic for sub-state diplomacy differs from states and emphasizes how political institutions at multiple levels condition both the likelihood of sub-state international agency and the nature, forms and intensity of international activity.

The multi-level framework of analysis of the 'opportunity structures' for the international agency of sub-state governments points to four levels: regional political systems, 'national' structures, continental regimes and the global system. At the regional political systems level, two key institutions affecting sub-state diplomacy are the formal powers and institutional development of regions and the party system, particularly nationalist/ regionalist parties (Lecours 2002: 101-2). At the state level, four ‘structural determinants’ for sub-state international activity are the formal constitutional framework; the nature of intergovernmental relations; sub-state representation at the level of central institutions; and, finally, the foreign policy agenda at the state level (Lecours 2002: 102). At the third level, continental political and economic regime structures, such as regional cooperation or integration schemes, provide sub-state governments with opportunities to extend their influence and legitimise sub-state diplomacy. Finally, at the global system level, sub-state diplomacy is influenced by international organizations; states that engage in diplomatic relations with sub-state governments; regional governments cooperating with each other, and the global economy (Lecours 2002: 103-4). To date, the framework has been utilised to analyse the sub-state diplomacy of Wallonia. Its emphasis on the importance of institutional factors at multiple levels of governance to understanding how sub-state governments have become and are active internationally deserves to be tested further.

Methodology and Case Selection
Given the lack of attention to culture and the limited systematic and theoretically informed investigations of the opportunity structures for sub-state diplomacy, the remainder of this paper applies Lecours’ framework to explore the multi-level opportunity structures for the international cultural activity of sub-state governments. The focus is on examining the factors that condition international cultural activity rather than the functions of culture in sub-state diplomacy. In order to circumvent challenges arising from the ambiguous and general ways in which culture is discussed, it draws on the international cultural relations literature. Whilst recognising differences in definitions, it can be understood as having the objective of:
‘cultural development...that of building a country’s competence and capacity for its own artistic expression through international exposure and collaborations abroad with other artistic and cultural professionals.’ (Higham 2001, quoted in Mark 2009: 17). It is also understood as a tool for achieving mutual understanding, to support other forms of diplomacy and to benefit trade (Mitchell 1986). These activities may be funded by governments, and conducted by governments or arms length agencies (Mark 2009).

The international cultural activity of sub-state governments is investigated by examining the Welsh case, focusing on activity funded by the Welsh Government and the main cultural agencies from its establishment in 1999 to 2014. This case has received limited attention and is valuable as a case of limited constitutional and fiscal autonomy but a distinctive culture. As a region within a devolved state lacking the entrenched sovereignty characteristic of regions within federal states, it provides an opportunity to investigate the dynamics surrounding sub-state international cultural activity in the UK context. Relatedly, the Welsh case counters the tendency within the literature to focus on sub-state governments with high levels of foreign activity based on extensive constitutional and fiscal autonomy. Instead, it provides an opportunity to consider the elaboration of sub-state diplomacy in different, less exceptional conditions of comparatively limited constitutional and fiscal autonomy. In 1999, executive devolution was introduced with the establishment of a 60-member directly elected National Assembly for Wales. Between 1999 and 2015, Welsh devolution operated on a conferred powers model, specifying, and thus constraining regional autonomy. Primary legislative powers were reserved and secondary powers devolved in eighteen pre-defined areas. In 2011, full primary legislative powers were granted to the National Assembly for Wales in twenty areas, though it continues as the most limited form of autonomy amongst the UK’s three devolved administrations. Up to 2015, it had comparatively low levels of fiscal autonomy. Without tax varying or borrowing powers it was dependent on block grant funding from the UK Government.

In addition, regional government formation provided the context for sub-state international cultural activity in the context of Wales’ distinct culture. Wales’ assimilation into the English state prior to the age of modernity positioned its culture, and foremost the Welsh language, as a critical signifier of identity and nationhood. Nevertheless, Wales’ strong integration with the UK in geographic, historic, economic and social terms creates a more complex situation as dual British and Welsh identities are extremely prevalent and the Welsh language at times has played a divisive rather uniting role. Consequently, regional government created a separate sphere of Welsh politics and provided opportunities for greater recognition and articulation of Welsh cultural distinctiveness that could contribute to strengthening national identity.

Lecours’ framework also indicates the need to take account of the nature of the party system. It can be characterised as centre-left, with parliamentary representation at the UK level that in recent decades has been dominated by the Labour Party. In addition, there is a clear territorial dimension to party competition, but the relative success of the nationalist Plaid Cymru is more modest compared to other cases such as Catalonia or Scotland. Its share of the vote has been around 10% in UK elections since the early 1990s. At a devolved level, whilst its vote share reached 28% in the first Assembly election in 1999, its only experience of government was as a junior coalition partner with the larger Labour Party from 2007-11. This was followed by a drop in electoral support, which relegated them to the third largest party in the National Assembly for Wales. Despite Plaid Cymru’s limited success, there is a broader recognition that nationalist parties and state-wide party adaptation to devolved government can influence the latter’s positioning in a devolved context. Indeed, sub-state governments and regionalist parties (either of their own volition or influenced by political dynamics at the devolved level) may use the arts as a way of expressing national identity, contributing to nation-building efforts and towards ‘regional’ autonomy objectives (Chaney 2014: 2)
The features of Welsh constitutional autonomy most relevant to exploring international cultural activity are its constitutional powers and intergovernmental arrangements. Under the devolution arrangements, culture is explicitly listed as a devolved competence. Foreign affairs and international relations, including relations with the EU, are powers reserved by the UK Government, with no guaranteed rights for the devolved administrations to have their voices heard. However, a Memorandum of Understanding agreed between central government and the devolved administrations (DAs) set out the formal relations. The Concordat on International Relations recognises the sub-state level’s international interests in areas of devolved competence and expresses ‘a mutual determination to ensure that there is close co-operation’ in promoting the overseas interests of all parts of the UK (Ministry of Justice 2010: 44). It explains that sub-state governments can establish overseas offices, can cooperate with other foreign state or sub-state governments, including making agreements. As regards international cultural relations, the concordat stipulates that ‘The British Council will continue to promote the UK and all its constituent parts.’ (ref) For the Welsh Government, the mechanisms are operational links through the Cardiff office and two Welsh Government senior officials having a consultative role on the British Council’s Welsh advisory committee. The devolved administrations may also contract the British Council to undertake tasks on their behalf. While concordats were regarded as the ‘centre piece of the new (post-devolution) governance of the UK’ (Bulmer et al 2002: 37), they are a statement of political intent and non-legal binding (Ministry of Justice 2010: 4). In sum, there is scope for international cultural projection but the expectation would be ‘Wales’ dependence on the UK Government owing to the limited constitutional and fiscal autonomy.

Given the challenges of examining international cultural activity, the paper focuses on the core of this sphere: arts and culture. The evidence is based on an extensive analysis of documentary sources, including central and sub-state government reports, reports produced by the Welsh Select Affairs Committee and relevant National Assembly for Wales committees, alongside 16 semi-structured elite interviews with senior government officials, officials and representatives associated with key Welsh and UK-level cultural agencies, and key informants on Welsh cultural activity. The interviews enhanced knowledge of policy developments in an area that has received little attention, including the situation prior to 1997. They were important in gaining a better understanding of the dynamics between the institutional factors and political agency in enabling international cultural activity.

**Welsh administrative devolution and international arts and culture activity**

In line with a historical institutionalist approach, it is important to evaluate international cultural activity under administrative devolution prior to 1999. A system of administrative devolution had gradually developed and from 1964 the Welsh Office had executive competence and a policy implementation function for areas such as health and the Welsh language. It is considered as a small UK central government department engaged in implementing UK level policies with little scope for flexibility. However, it was also involved in external relations that, on further examination, had cultural dimensions (Mitchell 2009, Griffiths 1996: 64). Key examples from the 1990s include the Welsh Office signing agreements encompassing culture with the ‘Four Motor’ regions. As part of trade and inward investment activity, the Welsh Development Agency sponsored Welsh National Opera tours and held related receptions at British Embassies (Griffiths 1996: 97). A number of arts companies (e.g. experimental theatre) developed an European or international profile and were keen to position Wales alongside other stateless nations (Blandford 1999).

In evaluating the opportunity structures international cultural relations, despite limited competences, the Welsh Office engaged in inter-regional cooperation. The autonomy of non-departmental public bodies also enhanced the scope for international action. Further research is required into the Welsh Arts Council 1967-1994, but the suggestion is that had it a large degree of autonomy and its successor Arts Council for Wales (ACW) was independent from the UK level (Jones 1999: 93). Significantly, Welsh Development Agency established in
1975 had a broad scope of powers and autonomy to undertake external initiatives, and its leadership level appreciated how culture could support its activities. However, Welsh Office resistance to establishing a Brussels office is a reminder that external relations were not wholeheartedly greeted during this period.

On the impact of state level structures, the UK government set the framework for Welsh international cultural activity. A British Council office in Cardiff since 1944 (and their staff contributed to establishing the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod) suggested some recognition of Wales, but it was a limited presence. The Secretary of State for Wales was highly important. From the end of the 1980s onwards, the UK Prime Minister granted a strong degree of autonomy to Secretaries of State for Wales (Walker 1991: 202; Bradbury 1997: 87). This is most evident during Peter Walker’s tenure and explains decisions to sign agreements with other sub-state governments and how increases to the WDA’s budget facilitated drawing in cultural ambassadors.

At the continental regime level, from the mid-1980s onwards the EU’s increasing recognition of regions opened up opportunities for multi-level governance. In this context, in 1992, the Wales European Centre was opened in Brussels by a partnership of public sector organisations led by the WDA. Its activities included inter-regional networking, promotion and profile-raising (Lewis 1995: 12) and whilst the Wales Arts Council wasn’t a member of the partnership in its early years, it organised arts exhibitions in Brussels in this period.

Welsh international arts and culture activity increased immediately prior to 1997 against a background of growing support for devolution and a ‘minor Welsh cultural renaissance’ affecting perceptions of Wales in the UK and internationally (Blanford 1999: 111). A strategic partnership between Arts Council of Wales and British Council set up Wales Arts International in 1997 as a joint agency to increase Wales’ profile overseas and to promote international exchange and collaboration. By 1999, the ACW was a Wales European Centre partner with an Arts Officer post not replicated amongst other UK offices in Brussels. The Conservative-led Welsh Office joint project with the British Council in 1997 to support teachers to undertake Welsh language teaching placements in the Chubut province, Patagonia reflects the greater momentum of international activity.

Therefore, there was little concerted or coordinated international activity prior to 1999, and trade and inward investment was the main focus. However, examples of international cultural relations indicate that the Welsh Office’s existence (albeit with limited competences) alongside the autonomy of non-departmental public bodies provided the potential in the context of supportive of Secretaries of State for international activity. On the National Assembly’s inception in 1999 there was a basis for international cultural activity.

**Welsh International Arts and Culture Activity**

Reflecting and coinciding with establishing the National Assembly were different processes that promoted and strengthened Welsh identity. In the cultural sphere these included efforts to develop a cultural renaissance and to establish and recover a visual narrative for Wales (Lord 2000; Housley 2003). International cultural activity could potentially contribute to addressing problems associated with a lack of awareness and negative perceptions of Wales. Arts and culture were important to raise Wales’ profile, position Wales within high profile international arts contexts and contemporary arts could be incorporated into efforts to present Wales as vibrant and dynamic.

Examining the different programmes for government between 1999 and 2016 indicates the intentions and commitments made by respective governments regarding international cultural relations. The Partnership Government between Labour and the Liberal Democrats (October 2000 – May 2003) was the first to position arts and culture in international activity. Prior to this, in the initial programme (May 1999 – October 2000) pointed to developing an ‘outward-
looking Wales’ and Wales’ European and international profile, but with no explicit reference to arts and culture (ref). In addition to recognising the contribution of culture and arts to wealth creation and employment, the Partnership Government document viewed cultural industries as central to projecting a modern international image of Wales. The first National Cultural Strategy committed to expanding the international audience for Welsh arts.\(^\text{11}\) The second term Labour government programme (2003-07), includes strengthening Wales’ cultural identity as one of its visions, that included as a specific aim promoting visual arts abroad, complemented by a broader aim of promoting Wales to the world. The final programme that featured international cultural dimensions was the Labour- Plaid Cymru ‘One Wales’ programme for 2007-11. It committed to supporting artistic producers to be involved internationally through the role of Wales Arts International and participation in British Council-led programmes. These efforts were supported by the broader aim of promoting Wales in the world by projecting ‘a confident and outgoing nation’, with a more strategic and coherent approach to international relations. The fourth term programme for government (2011-16) represents a clear shift. Arts policy has shifted to a solely domestic focus on participation and access to culture with no reference to European or international-level activities. The international dimensions of the Welsh Government’s agenda focus on the economy, business and Wales as a tourism destination (ref).

Clearly, devolved government has been enthusiastic to pursue international cultural relations and raise Wales’ profile. The relative emphasis placed on arts and culture in international projection has varied with ambition continuing up to 2011, followed by a subsequent shift. Evaluating the impact of international activity is difficult and therefore key international culture activities and events discussed in documentation and interviews can be highlighted as outcomes. The Welsh Government supports the biennial Artes Mundi International Exhibition and Prize held in Cardiff since 2002. Since 2003, Wales has been represented at the Venice Biennale. This is considered as a substantial platform for Welsh artists, which affects the image of Wales in the cultural world. There has also been a growth in the presence of Welsh artists at showcases, for instance the Edinburgh showcase organised by the British Council at which only very rarely did Welsh artists feature prior to 1999. Culture also features quite strongly in Wales’ most active relationship post-devolution with the Chongqing municipal government, China with memoranda signed between key cultural institutions.\(^\text{12}\) In July 2009, the Wales Smithsonian Cymru programme was held in Washington in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institute in a 10-day event that presented the cultural identity of Wales (followed by a trade mission). Finally, in 2013, WOMEX, the World Music Expo, the largest cultural event hosted in Wales, was held in Cardiff by a multi-stakeholder Cerdd Cymru partnership (led by Wales Arts International).

**Analysing Welsh international cultural relations opportunity structures**

Analysing the opportunity structures for Welsh international cultural relations at the regional political system level points to the institutional dimensions that have enabled and constrained activity. In terms of formal powers, as a well-established devolved competence, culture provided the potential for devolved government to interpret its ability to support culture as encompassing international activity. In addition, despite their limitations, the fiscal powers were also enabling. The first decade of devolution coincided with the Labour UK Government’s increased public spending and consequently the funds transferred to Wales. The Barnett formula utilised to determine the grant block of unhypothecated funding provided the flexibility to determine spending priorities. Therefore, funds were available to match the ambition of Ministers in promoting Welsh culture, including internationally. The changes evidenced in the latest programme of government (2011-16) are indicative of the changing circumstances of devolved finances.

On the basis of these devolved powers, a combination of factors associated with Welsh institutional development contributed to the level of ambition for international cultural projection. The semi-proportional electoral system meant that following the first Assembly
election in 1999 the Labour administration lacked a clear governing majority. Structurally, the Assembly was organised as a corporate body with all-party subject committees. This context provided opportunities for key political parties and subject committees to influence the governing party’s agenda. Thus, the commitment to developing a ‘Wales in the World’ programme in the Assembly’s first strategic plan (May 2000) is amongst those attributed to the nationalist Plaid Cymru that used their political leverage emanating from the 1999 election result to encourage international activity. The general verdict on committees is that they had limited decisive impact. However, the potentially powerful position of committees and their Chairs (Osmond 1999: 12) was realised in the Post-16 Education and Training Committee with the culture remit, and chaired by Plaid. Its Arts and Culture review had ‘reinforcing the national identity and international status of Wales’ as the first theme, followed by social cohesion and access to the arts. Its ‘far reaching’ report established ‘raising the profile of Welsh arts and culture both at home and abroad’ as one of the four key principles of policy development (Richardson 2000: 33). These recommendations informed the Labour-Liberal Democrat Partnership Agreement between October 2000 and May 2003 and the ten-year Culture Strategy produced in 2001. The Liberal Democrats held the Culture portfolio within the cabinet (as recommended in the review) and interviewees commented that ministers were strongly committed to culture.

Another aspect relating to Welsh institutional development is the organisation of Wales’ international cultural activity. The development of Wales Arts International post-1999, supported by Arts Council of Wales committed to an international agenda, is regarded as having enabled the development of international cultural activity. Other features of the institutional arrangements, however, seem to have constrained activity. First, some interviewees commented that institutional restructuring in 2006 when key internationally focused organisations (Welsh Development Agency and the Wales Tourist Board) were absorbed into government partly limited the extent to which culture was integrated into other international activity. Despite growing examples of partnership and joint working across sectors in international cultural initiatives, the assertion that the merger (also considered for ACW) would strengthen coordination around international activity did not seem to have been realised. Rather, a second issue is difficulties in coordinating international cultural work. As the 2009 Communities and Culture Committee Review into promoting Welsh arts and culture on the World stage explained:

whilst there are clearly structures in place to promote Welsh arts and culture abroad, the arts and culture landscape is a complex and cluttered one and it is difficult to make sense of it, especially if you are an arts practitioner or company helping to deliver Wales’ aspirations… complicated jigsaw of government (NAfW 2009: 19).

It reflects broader challenges arising from a tendency for departmental rather than joint working on international issues across Welsh Government departments. The division of responsibilities for international cultural activity across a number of different ministers exacerbates this. Some of the issues that interviewees associated with this were the absence of an overarching (long-term) strategy and planning, and a lack of clarity regarding the Welsh Government’s international aspirations and priorities. Greater coordination across government and with external organisations would enable stronger linkages across different international activities, joint initiatives and maximising resources.

The approach to Welsh international culture relations have been two-pronged: to pursue its own distinctive activities and to participate in UK-wide activity that complements Welsh interests. Consequently, the key institutions at the state level, the formal constitutional framework and inter-governmental relations, have been extremely important. Recognition of sub-state government interest in the international (including EU) dimensions of their competences has enabled external cultural projection within the framework established by the UK Government. As regards intergovernmental relations, the main formalised structure is the British Council Cultural Diplomacy Group. As competences are devolved and policy agendas are increasingly divergent, contact between the Welsh Government and DCMS is
relatively limited. This might explain the examples such as Welsh cultural organisations not being included in UK trade delegations (House of Commons, 2014a). Interviewees commented on a constant need to remind UK (and particularly London based) bodies about Wales. Generating greater awareness was also recognised as requiring Welsh organisations to escalate their efforts to engage with DCMS and other UK bodies.

The main UK-level relationship is with the British Council. The British Council Wales office plays a constructive role in implementing programmes funded by the Welsh Government and seeking to identify opportunities to involve Welsh interests in British Council programmes internationally. As part of the latter, it part-funds WAI. Relations with the British Council centrally are channelled from the Welsh advisory committee through the Director in Wales to the Council management board. The interests of the devolved administrations are directly represented by one individual on the BC Trust, rotating annually between one of the three devolved administrations’ advisory committee chairs. Despite supportive interpersonal relationships, interviewees questioned whether BC adhered to promoting the constituent parts of the UK equally. Was Wales benefiting fully from the resources deployed overseas? Did BC cultural priorities equate with English cultural priorities or did they reflect a more diverse, inclusive and multilingual UK? Was there adequate recognition of Wales’ potential contribution to the UK’s international agenda? Some of these issues were attributed to the institutional organisation of relations that limited the ability to influence the BC’s strategic agenda.

The continental regime level has provided a positive context for international cultural relations. In general terms, the EU encourages promotion of culture, for instance in promotion of culture as a catalyst for creativity in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs and promotion of culture as a vital element in the Union’s international relations. A related emphasis on diversity is reflected in multilingualism as a EU priority. Welsh sub-state diplomacy has been influenced by this context in different ways: opportunities to represent the UK in EU official working groups; the role of the Brussels office in promoting Welsh arts and culture through its strong interregional networking; the benefits gained from engagement in European culture networks and in European Union cultural programmes for enhancing the capacity to support international cultural activity.

Firstly, given that EU issues are non-devolved, the intergovernmental arrangements facilitate close working between Welsh Government and UKREP officials in Brussels on issues related to devolved powers. Officials have diplomatic status and access and are able to contribute to formal meetings as representatives of the UK. Welsh Government officials have therefore been aware of the opportunities for representatives from Wales to represent the UK on different committees. These opportunities have been influenced by the broader attitude of the UK towards the EU. The often negative and increasingly Eurosceptic attitude of the UK Government can limit its engagement in European policy areas considered of lower importance. This provided some opportunities for Wales to be engaged in EU-levels working groups representing DCMS, on EU culture-related committees such as Open Method of Coordination working groups.

(Short sub-section in note form)
- Wales EU office – Arts officer and networking
- Engagement with European Networks
- Benefits from European cultural programmes

**Global system level**
Relations with states: some linkages and interest by states around culture (e.g. Estonia) but not formalised
Regional Government cooperation: extensive inter-regional working around culture (mainly in EU context. Beyond EU: culture featuring in formalised relations with Chongqing province, China; continuing project in Chubut, Patagonia.

The global economy: the effects of digital technology as another medium facilitating international promotion of culture, current economic climate limit the funds available to support international cultural relations.

An additional aspect not covered by Lecours’ framework: Networks: British Council, ITEM, IFACCCA.

Discussion

The paper’s focus was analysing the influence of institutions at multiple levels on the opportunities for sub-state international cultural activity according to a historical institutionalist approach. It provides valuable insights into the Welsh case and underlines the strengths of a historical institutionalist approach to interpreting culture in sub-state diplomacy.

Firstly, although further research is required into the pre-1999 period, the findings suggest that distinctively Welsh international cultural activities were undertaken during the Welsh Office period. Despite the structural constraints of the territorial governance arrangements, examples of international cultural projection were enabled by the existence and functions of the Welsh Office complemented by the autonomy of non-departmental public bodies. A historical institutionalist approach would expect the establishment of devolved government to be a ‘critical juncture’, a crucial moment of institutional formation that can spur different and alternative developmental paths (Thelen 1999). Rather, the evolution and development of the institutional arrangements (including the Brussels office) highlights continuities in the pre- and post-1999 arrangements for international cultural activity. It suggests that the Assembly’s establishment cannot be conceptualised as a critical juncture in this context. Instead, it underlines the importance of understanding the historical background and recognising the continuities from the pre-devolution period (Mitchell 2009: 13-5).

The Welsh Office period also highlights the dynamic relationship between political institutions and political agency. In many respects, the support and promotion of external relations activity by (English) Conservative Secretaries of States is unexpected. Further examination reveals that this agency wasn’t necessarily isolated to one individual. It is also visible in Wyn Roberts, who as a long-serving Welsh Office Minister, led in forging links with other European regions. These weren’t couched as fully autonomous activities as they for example utilised UK consulates and embassies and Invest in Britain activities. In Roberts’ words (2006: 259), they ‘harnessed the strength of the United Kingdom to our legitimate ambitions’. These efforts suggest that the dynamic between the Welsh institutional context and the agency of key politicians as they pursued an explicitly regionalist aims prior to 1997 deserves greater appreciation.

After 1999, the regional political systems level enabled more ambitious and distinctive Welsh international cultural relations than would have been expected on reading the Government of Wales Act 1998. This points to how culture as a devolved power was an adequate basis for international cultural relations. The ambitious agenda was facilitated by, what were in retrospect, somewhat exceptional financial circumstances during the first decade of devolution. However, the emphasis on culture in the allocation of funding underlines the relevance of the assertion that regionalist parties and devolved governments support cultural activities with international dimensions in the Welsh case. Examining the party system points to evidence of Plaid Cymru’s early influence on the governing Labour party in line with the expectations regarding nationalist parties and international cultural relations. This is reflected more broadly in Plaid’s emphasis in Assembly election manifestoes on the links between arts policy and nation building aims (Chaney 2014). The corporate body structure, the electoral and party system generated a context in which the Plaid-led education committee’s
recommendations arguably had a ‘path dependent’ influence on the devolved government’s subsequent international cultural agenda.

The continuity of the agenda until 2011 can be associated with path dependence and Plaid’s governing position within the 2007-11 coalition. However, it is important to recognise the support of the state wide parties for international activity, reflecting the extent to which they have become regionalist parties in a devolved Wales and their broader support for international activity. The rhetoric of ‘nation-building’ was not the language used in government documents alongside terms such as ‘cultural identity’ and Wales as a ‘world nation’. International cultural projection was considered as contributing to nurturing cultural confidence as part of positioning Wales as a ‘forward-looking and out-looking, a truly internationalist nation’ (Morgan 2009). Finally, the problems of coordination associated with the institutional organisation of Welsh sub-state diplomacy efforts are long recognised. Despite different efforts, it remains a challenge. It contrasts with the high level of coordination associated with the organisational structuring of sub-state diplomacy in advanced cases (Duran et al 2009).

Welsh international cultural activity is also contingent on the state level as it seeks to strike a balance between autonomous activity and involvement in UK-level activity. The flexibility of the UK’s constitutional arrangements is evident in the acceptance of the devolved governments’ international interests in areas of devolved powers. This generated opportunities for autonomous international culture-related activity. The extent to which the flexibility of these arrangements allow for international activity deserve examining further, particularly given the presumption that the entrenched sovereignty and international competences assigned in a federal constitution is more enabling. As regards intergovernmental relations, issues regarding lack of coordination and engagement between Welsh and UK government departments or UK bodies were raised in the Welsh Affairs Committee inquiry into UK bodies promoting Wales (House of Commons 2014), and there are strong commonalities with other policy areas. The tendency for Whitehall departments to be less aware of and pay less attention to Wales has been associated with relations characterised by comparatively low levels of institutionalisation in contrast to more formalised intergovernmental relations in federal contexts (Bolleyer 2009). This informality is compounded by the extent of policy divergence in a policy area such as culture and by the effects of political incongruence. Welsh international cultural relations also highlight the complexities and multi-dimensional nature of intergovernmental relations as they include agencies and arms length organisations at different levels of government.

What seems more of a concern in this case given the important role of the BC in representing the devolved governments internationally is the potential limitations of their formal channels to influence the UK’s international cultural relations priorities, British Council strategic planning. Greater recognition of devolved interests on the BC Board of Trustees is a matter of debate (House of Commons 2014: 31-2) but may be developed in response to the FCO review of the British Council. However, the situation to date points to the validity of Blatter et al.’s (2008: 474) argument that classic centralised states like the UK have opened the opportunity for autonomous international relations without (or indeed perhaps instead of) providing opportunities sub-state influence on state-level foreign policy as is the case in federal contexts, a dimension also included in Lecours’ framework.

The continental level also facilitated Welsh international cultural relations. In the EU context, dual routes were pursued, the ‘indirect’ UK route and Wales’ direct representation. The positive contribution of an office in Brussels that can identify and develop opportunities to utilise both routes proved to be extremely important in this context. It is currently unclear as to whether the level of activity surrounding culture is shared with other ‘regional’ offices. The value of inter-regional networking in relation to culture, either own initiative or in the context of transnational projects funded by European funds, cannot be under-estimated. The extent of
Welsh engagement in networks is broader than the Brussels office, with a range of more specialised networks spanning different areas of arts and culture within which Welsh Government funded organisations can develop their activity and enhance their capacity and expertise. Networks are also becoming increasingly important to Wales at the broader international level.

Applying Lecours’ framework provided a comprehensive understanding of the institutions that enable and constrain Welsh international cultural relations. The historical institutionalist approach was valuable in emphasising the historical context and the degree of continuity in international cultural relations, thus questioning whether devolution can be understood as a critical juncture. The concept of ‘path dependence’ also informed understanding the influence that particular institutional dynamics had on the course of Welsh international cultural relations. The context of particular institutional conditions. The framework’s strengths are highlighting the opportunity structures at multiple levels as the opportunity structures at the EU and international levels underline Lecours’ argument that the international institutional context is equally important for sub-state diplomacy. Moreover, its stress on the structure-agency dynamic is particularly important for understanding how sub-state and state level politicians could facilitate sub-state diplomacy in particular institutional conditions.

There are commonalities between the findings developed through a historical institutionalist analysis and aspects indicated in the broader literature as conditioning international cultural activity: competences, an ability to open offices and intergovernmental relations. There was less evidence of transborder cooperation in the Welsh case, which may be associated with geographical factors and is reflected in the Welsh case in the value placed on networks. The importance of inter-regional networks in the Welsh case suggests that there are merits in reconsidering Lecours’ category of ‘regional governments working with each other’ (2002: 104). The opportunity structures for international cultural suggests that this category could benefit from being broadened at the continental and international levels to include bilateral relations and sub-state governments involvement in inter-regional networks. Indeed, a larger study equated regional cultural activities with transnational partnerships and networks when examining economic, cultural and political strategies (Blatter 2008: 475). This paper has demonstrated that this is only one, albeit important, dimension of the opportunity structures that enable sub-state international cultural activity. Involvement in networks is recognised elsewhere in the literature as providing opportunities for policy learning and is associated with more explicit political motivations (Hocking 1999: 29; Cornago 2010: 28). Incorporating this aspect into Lecours’ framework could provide a deeper analysis of the opportunities created for sub-state governments at the continental and international levels.

**Conclusion**

Prior to devolution, the assertion was that it was difficult to identify international activity and objectives for Wales beyond commercial and economic objectives (Griffiths 1996: 65). Post-devolution, work on UK sub-state diplomacy has questioned whether culture would form its own distinctive sphere beyond the role of promoting and supporting economic and tourism activity (Jeffery 2009: 114). This paper has drawn attention to the multiple roles that culture can play in sub-state diplomacy and the ambitious international cultural relations agenda of the Welsh Government.

This paper aimed to contribute to addressing the lack of detailed attention within the current literature to the role of culture in sub-state diplomacy by utilising Lecours’ framework to assess the factors that enable and constrain international cultural activity. Applying the framework to the Welsh case has drawn attention to key features of sub-state international cultural relations in an UK context. It has pointed to the flexibility of the constitutional arrangements in enabling sub-state government to be active internationally in areas of devolved powers, including the EU compared to the formalised arrangements in federal states. It has pointed to the importance of UK bodies to sub-state international cultural...
relations alongside their own autonomous activity in contrast to the solely autonomous initiatives of some sub-state governments in circumstances of higher intergovernmental tension. It has also indicated some of the challenges emanating from the UK’s relatively less formalised intergovernmental relations and arrangements for devolved governments to influence UK-level international agendas. The paper has demonstrated that a multi-level institutionalist approach can strengthen our understanding of sub-state diplomacy. Its emphasis on agency also suggests that the answers to the key institutional challenges that currently face Welsh international cultural relations are in the hands of Welsh and UK level politicians.

1 Mitchel (1986:7) outlines cultural relations as including: ‘arts, libraries and information services,
2 Footnote on terminology
3 Some limited borrowing and tax-varying powers were granted in the Wales Act 2015.
4 In the National Assembly for Wales election in 1999, Plaid Cymru’s vote share was 28.4% on the constituency vote and 30.5% on the second, regional members vote.
5 Schedule 2 of the Government of Wales Act 1998 refers to culture as including museums and libraries. A broader interpretation of culture would encompass other devolved competences such as the Welsh language, ancient monuments and historic buildings, education and training and sports and recreation.
6 The first Memorandum of Understanding and related concordats were agreed between 1998 and 2001. There only was a limited degree of change in the revised version (Ministry of Justice, 2010).
7 EU issues are covered in a separate Concordat on Co-ordination of European Union Policy Issues.
8 The four motors were Catalonia, Rhone-Alpes, Badden Wurttemberg, and Lombardy.
9 From 1946, when the Arts Council of Great Britain was established to 1967, there was a separate advisory committee for Wales and Scotland. In 1967, the Welsh Arts Council was established by Royal Charter and though associated with the Arts Council of Great Britain, it was considered to be largely autonomous, until it became independent and renamed as the Arts Council of Wales in 1994.
10 Walker cites the political context of the poor performance in the 1987 General Election in Wales and Scotland for this greater level of autonomy whereas some of the literature argues that it was due to Wales being less important electorally and Thatcher’s lack of personal interest in Wales, compared to Scotland (Bradbury 1997: 87; Mitchell 2009: 62).
11 The 2001 Plan for Wales set the aim of ‘Substantially increase international knowledge and appreciation of Welsh music, film, art, drama, cultural heritage and sport’ by 2010 (Ref).
12 An indication of the cultural relations aspect of this connection are the Memoranda of Understanding signed between the National Museum of Wales and Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum, and the links between the Wales Millennium Centre and Grand Theatre.
13 This Committee and its Chair (Cynog Dafis) also had a decisive impact on the ETAG proposals that determined the direction of post-16 education in Wales.
14 This group is composed of UK Arts Councils, government departments, Foreign Office and some national museums.

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