

Routes into post-16 education and training

November 2025



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Children, Young People and Education Committee
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1SN

Tel: **0300 200 6565**
Email: **SeneddChildren@senedd.wales**
X: **@SeneddChildren**

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November 2025



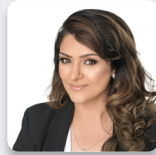
About the Committee

The Committee was established on 23 June 2021. Its remit can be found at:
www.senedd.wales/SeneddChildren

Current Committee membership:



**Committee Chair:
Buffy Williams MS**
Welsh Labour



Natasha Asghar MS
Welsh Conservatives



Cefin Campbell MS
Plaid Cymru



Russell George MS
Independent Member



Vaughan Gething MS
Welsh Labour



Carolyn Thomas MS
Welsh Labour

The following Member was also a member of the Committee during this inquiry.



Joel James MS
Welsh Conservatives

The following Member attended as a substitute during this inquiry.



Peter Fox MS
Welsh Conservatives

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Chair's foreword

On 12 August 2025, as we were drafting this report, we lost a cherished colleague and a dear friend. The death of Hefin David shook us all across the Senedd. We feel his loss particularly strongly on this Committee. Hefin was a former Committee member, during both this Senedd and the last. His influential report 'Transitions to employment' was a key starting point for this piece of work. It continues to shape the Welsh Government's response to improving post-16 participation, and is referenced frequently throughout this report. Many people have contributed to this inquiry, and many others have worked to improve participation in post-16 education and training more widely. Hefin has done a great deal more than most.

This report is the culmination of nearly a year of evidence gathering about young people's routes into post-16 education and training. It has been a particularly broad inquiry – deliberately so, to recognise the significance of the many different paths young people can take after compulsory education, and the barriers and challenges that many face.

We are a child and young person-focused Committee, so the report has been written to follow learners' journeys as they prepare to leave the compulsory education system and take their steps into post-16 education and training. The complexity of the report is a reflection of the complex landscape that young people are expected to navigate.

The report makes 16 focused and realistic recommendations that centre around three key themes.

The first is the importance of parity of esteem between vocational and academic post-16 routes. This is the fundamental principle that underpins our report. We have rejected bias towards either route, and we challenge the categorisation of learners into pre-determined pathways based on unhelpful stereotypes and assumptions. Learners should be able to choose vocational or academic routes, or routes that combine the two, and those choices should not prevent them from progressing to higher-level education or training if they want to do so.

The second is that young people should be well-prepared to make decisions about what they want to do after leaving compulsory education, with their families receiving the information they need to help them to do so. High quality careers advice should begin in school at a young age, and should be

complemented by a supportive, independent and knowledgeable careers advice offer in secondary school. We were shocked to find that only around a quarter of young people are given the chance to carry out work experience, an important type of careers advice in and of itself. More should be done to identify and address the barriers preventing so many young people from getting that invaluable insight into the world of work.

The third is that a successful tertiary education and training sector in Wales depends on schools and colleges working collaboratively. We conclude in this report that the current system of post 16 education funding must not be an unintentional barrier to collaboration between schools and colleges. These institutions must work together to give the best and broadest offer to young people and to remove incentives for biased advice to young people in the fight for post-16 funding. In doing so, school and colleges can also benefit by putting their post-16 provision on a more financially stable footing and, ultimately, drive up participation at all levels.

I would like to thank my fellow Committee members for their dedication to this crucial area of policy, for their willingness to seek compromise across party lines, and for the thoughtful and considered way they engaged with the evidence we heard.

Of course, none of that would have been possible without the time and expertise of the numerous professionals, academics, parents, and – most of all – young people themselves, who gave us such a robust evidence base to work from. As with all our work throughout this Senedd, this report is infinitely richer and more nuanced because of their ongoing support and engagement.

While we call for changes in this report, we also stop to recognise best practice across the sector, and where real progress has been made by the Welsh Government and others. We look forward to working with this and successive Welsh Governments to raise ambition for our young people and deliver the tertiary education and training system they deserve.

Buffy Williams MS

Chair

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should create a robust, over-arching, national strategy for post-16 education and training which includes, but is not limited to, pathways into employment. The strategy should encompass both academic and vocational pathways, thereby creating a strategic vision for a coherent and collaborative post-16 sector that encourages learners to obtain education and skills via whichever educational pathway is right for them.... Page 27

Recommendation 2. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should set out its assessment of whether there would be benefit in expanding the good practice by the Cardiff Commitment and the Ynys Môn Career Pathways pilot programme to other areas of Wales, and any barriers that exist to doing so at a local authority or regional level..... Page 28

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should expand the Junior Apprenticeships scheme to ensure that it is available to learners across Wales who are at risk of disengaging with their education. In doing so, it should address Estyn's concerns about Junior Apprenticeships, including about inconsistencies in the referral criteria, in the information provided to parents and in quality assurance processes; and ensure that robust safeguarding measures are embedded into the programme to protect 14-16 year-old learners as they experience education in a post-16 setting..... Page 40

Recommendation 4. The Welsh Government should clarify its approach to Wales-wide pre-16 vocational education. In doing so, the Welsh Government should set out clearly how provision such as Junior Apprenticeships, other college-based pre-16 education, and VCSEs form a coherent and holistic vocational offer for compulsory school-age learners..... Page 40

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government, working with Medr, should carry out a review of post-16 funding and legislation to explore:

- whether, and to what extent, the current funding system incentivises competition between providers that affects the impartiality of careers advice for learners;
- how individual schools and colleges have overcome funding challenges to work together effectively;

- whether any changes should be made to the post-16 funding system and legislation to incentivise collaboration between post-16 institutions (e.g. by moving away from a funding model based on pupil numbers, by providing grant funding to reward collaboration, or otherwise).

.....Page 98

Recommendation 6. The Welsh Government should expand the existing 14-16 Learner Entitlement to include the wider package of advice, guidance and opportunities that learners are entitled to in Key Stage 4. This extended 14-16 Learner Entitlement should include the fundamental components of a high-quality and effective transition to post-16 education, such as the right to high-quality careers advice from their schools and Careers Wales; access to representatives of colleges, work-based providers and universities; and work experience. The specific entitlements should reflect the Welsh Government's wider policy offer, be promoted to learners and their families directly, and used by Estyn and others to hold service providers to account for the support they provide to learners.....Page 99

Recommendation 7. The Welsh Government should commission Estyn to carry out a thematic review of Careers Wales' careers advice service. The review should focus specifically on Careers Wales' 'standard' offer, and should consider whether it meets the needs of all learners and their families, and what changes, if any, could be made to improve the provision.Page 100

Recommendation 8. The Welsh Government should commission a focused piece of research to better understand why some employers are unable or unwilling to offer work experience placements, and what steps can be taken by the Welsh Government or others to overcome those barriers.....Page 102

Recommendation 9. The Welsh Government should explicitly include the impact on young people's access to post-16 education and training amongst its terms of reference in the forthcoming independent evaluation of its pilot of £1 maximum single fare/£3 maximum daily fare bus travel for young people.Page 104

Recommendation 10. Medr should improve the quality and timeliness of published data about learners' education and training between the ages of 16 and 18, in response to the concerns set out in this report. In doing so, Medr should pay particular attention to:

- data that follows learners' pathways at each stage after they leave year 11, to help understand learners' choices and where, why and when learners may be leaving or dropping out of education and training; and
- data about learners in FE colleges and work-based learning, particularly learners who are undertaking level 1 and 2 courses, including destinations for those on one-year courses.Page 130

Recommendation 11. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should set out an analysis of:

- why it believes that there is such a discrepancy between the proportion of learners who want to undertake an apprenticeship and the proportion of learners who end up doing one; and
- the extent to which barriers facing employers (such as the funding for apprenticeship programmes, and a lack of awareness amongst small to medium businesses) have contributed to the significant discrepancy between the demand for apprenticeship amongst young people and the actual number of apprenticeships available.Page 132

Recommendation 12. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should set out:

- why it believes that young men appear to be consistently more likely to become NEET than young women;
- how its work to improve the rates of participation in post-16 education and training has taken into account the different challenges facing young women and men; and
- whether it believes that any further work needs to be undertaken to better understand why some young become NEET, particularly in relation to variations in rates between young women and men in Wales.Page 133

Recommendation 13. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should set out its expectations of how post-16 education and training providers should provide careers advice and guidance to young people to help them make informed decisions about their steps post-18. In doing so, the Welsh Government should outline clearly where responsibility lies for that advice and the role of Estyn in holding institutions to account for the support they provide.Page 145

Recommendation 14. Medr should work with ColegauCymru to evaluate where there are gaps in data about learners in FE colleges (such as their destinations post-18), and take steps to address those gaps by developing an accurate, timely and reliable dataset with a view to making that an annual release by the end of the 2025/26 academic year.....Page 163

Recommendation 15. As part of its approach to developing a degree apprenticeship framework for August 2027 onwards, Medr should carry out an assessment of the benefits or otherwise of the following in relation to increasing the number of degree apprenticeships available:

- employers contributing to the cost of degree apprenticeship tuition fees, alongside the salary they pay the apprentice; and
- giving HE institutions the autonomy to develop degree apprenticeships independently of the Welsh Government.Page 165

Recommendation 16. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should provide an update on its ongoing discussions with the UK Government about how the financial pressures facing Higher Education institutions can be addressed at a UK-wide level.Page 166

1. Introduction

Chapter 2 of this report sets out the general policy context relevant to post-16 education and training in Wales. From chapter 3 onwards, the report is structured to reflect a young person's journey from compulsory school age, as they receive careers advice and start to consider their post-16 options, and onwards into post-16 education and training.

Background to the inquiry

1. In March 2024, Universities Wales wrote to us to express concerns about the level of participation of Welsh young people in higher education ("HE"). In summary, the letter set out concerns about:

- The percentage of Welsh domiciled 18 year olds entering HE in 2023/24 was 29.9%, compared to 49.5% in London, 40.2% in Northern Ireland and 38.5% in South East England.
- In the UK overall, those in Index of Multiple Deprivation ("IMD") category quintile 1 (the most deprived) enter HE at a rate of 26%, whereas in Wales it's 18.9%. There is significant regional disparity too: quintile 1 young people in south Wales are more likely to access HE than quintile 1 young people in north Wales.
- Post-16 destination data for 16-17 year olds is currently patchy.¹

2. We agreed to conduct an inquiry into post-16 participation on 6 November 2024. However, given that HE is one of a range of options open to young people after they leave school, we decided to broaden the inquiry beyond the concerns set out in the letter to consider the wider post-16 education and training landscape. We also wanted to focus specifically on compulsory school age

¹ 'Letter from Universities Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee', 12 March 2024

children and what helps them to – and hinders them from – making the decision to continue their education and training after year 11.

3. Our inquiry has focused on:

- quality of information given to learners about the full range of post-16 options;
- how effective careers support is at compulsory school age;
- changes in routes post-18;
- Welsh-medium provision;
- equity of access;
- post-16 destination data; and
- the role of the Welsh Government.

Full terms of reference are available online.²

Evidence gathering

4. We launched a call for written evidence on 3 December 2024, which closed on 27 January 2024. We received 47 responses, all of which have been published (see Annex 4).³

5. We held a series of formal oral evidence sessions between January and March 2025. We took oral evidence from 17 organisations in total (see Annex 3).

6. We also held a stakeholder event and went on visits to talk directly with learners and staff involved in post-16 learning. We published a summary report of those informal activities in May 2025.⁴ More detail about who attended those activities is set out at annex 1 and 2 of this report.

² Welsh Parliament, '[Routes into post-16 education and training](#)'

³ Welsh Parliament, '[Routes into post-16 education and training](#)'

⁴ Welsh Parliament, '[Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits](#)', May 2025

- 7.** We have asked certain stakeholders to send us additional information following oral evidence sessions, the stakeholder event or engagement visits. This additional evidence has also been published as ‘additional information’.⁵
- 8.** The Senedd Commission’s Citizen Engagement Team carried out citizen engagement activities on our behalf. They launched two surveys: one aimed at parents/guardians of 16–20-year-olds and another aimed at young people. We received 331 responses from young people, and 140 responses from parents and guardians. The team also conducted face-to-face interviews with the facilitators and young people of an alternative education setting to complement the surveys. A summary report of the Citizen Engagement Team’s findings has also been published.⁶
- 9.** In spring 2025, in response to cost-cutting announcements by Welsh universities, we launched an inquiry into issues facing the HE sector.⁷ We have drawn on much of the written and oral evidence we gathered as part of that inquiry in this report due to the significant implications of the challenges facing universities for learners’ participation in post-16 education and training.
- 10.** We would like to thank all of the organisations, professionals, parents and guardians, and in particular the young people who shared their views with us and supported our evidence gathering throughout this inquiry.

⁵ Welsh Parliament, ‘[Routes into post-16 education and training](#)’

⁶ Welsh Parliament, ‘[Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings](#)’, March 2025

⁷ Welsh Parliament, ‘[Issues facing the Higher Education Sector](#)’, 11 March 2025

2. Policy context

The national policy context frames young people's journeys into and through post-16 education and training. The Welsh Government has paid significant attention to the post-16 sector in recent years, launching the flagship Young Person's Guarantee and restructuring how the sector is regulated and funded.

The Young Person's Guarantee

11. The Young Person's Guarantee ("YPG") is one of the Welsh Government's flagship policies. The YPG aims to provide everyone aged 16 to 24 who is living in Wales with support to gain a place in education or training, or help to get into work or self-employment. The YPG is an umbrella structure that includes a number of options, including:

- apprenticeships, the training costs of which are covered by the Welsh Government, while the wages for the apprentices are provided by the employer;
- Big Ideas Wales, which helps people under the age of 25 to start their own business;
- Communities for Work+, which provides specialist employment advice for people over the age of 20 who are not in education, employment or training ("NEET") and have a complex barrier to employment;
- further education ("FE") in either a sixth form or college;
- HE in a university;
- Jobs Growth Wales+, which provides those between 16-19 with skills, qualifications and experience to get a job or further training. As part of the programme young people are able to receive a training allowance depending on the hours of training they do and the strand they are on; and

- ReAct+, which offers tailored support for people over the age of 20 who have recently been made redundant, or are an ex-offender or an offender serving a community sentence.⁸

12. The YPG is a wide-reaching and comprehensive policy, much of which falls outside our remit. But we asked stakeholders for their views on whether families and schools are aware of the support the Welsh Government offers via the YPG.

13. Stakeholders were broadly supportive of the YPG, but felt that more could be done to improve awareness of what it meant in practice for learners amongst learners themselves, their families and school and college staff.⁹ Coleg Sir Gâr's views were representative of the evidence we received:

"The Welsh Government's initiatives, such as the Young Person's Guarantee, have provided valuable resources to support learners in accessing a full range of post-16 education and training options. Programs like the Employability Bureaus are particularly effective, offering impartial advice and guidance, connecting learners with employers, and promoting clear progression pathways. Continued efforts are needed to ensure widespread awareness among learners, families, and schools about these resources and programs."¹⁰

14. However, despite these concerns, Careers Wales reported that there are long waiting lists for programmes such as Jobs Growth Wales, and that additional funding had been provided accordingly.¹¹

15. The Welsh Government stated that since the launch of the YPG, over 48,500 young people have been supported through employability and skills programmes that fall under the YPG umbrella. They explained that the primary referral mechanism is provided by Working Wales, which offers free and impartial careers advice and guidance for those aged 16 or above.¹² The Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership told us that the YPG was a "real success story" in engaging

⁸ Welsh Government, 'Young Person's Guarantee'

⁹ Written evidence: RET.12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL); Written evidence: RET.31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET.26 Powys County Council; Written evidence: RET.40 National Training Federation Wales (NTFW)

¹⁰ Written evidence: RET.35 Coleg Sir Gâr

¹¹ Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales

¹² Written evidence: RET.47 Welsh Government

young people who may otherwise be NEET, and that Jobs Growth Wales and the YPG are “something to be commended by the committee.”¹³

Regional Skills Partnerships

16. There are currently four Regional Skills Partnerships (“RSPs”) in Wales:

- Cardiff Capital Region Skills Partnership
- Mid Wales Regional Skills Partnership
- North Wales Regional Skills Partnership
- South West Regional Learning and Skills Partnership

17. Each RSP is a voluntary, non-statutory board made up of employers, education providers and others. Established by Welsh Government, their role is to drive investment in skills based upon local and regional need. The boards make recommendations to the Welsh Government about full-time college and apprenticeship courses and learner numbers. Each RSP was created at different times between 2014 and 2022 and has evolved independently, shaped by their own regions and respective City and Growth Deals.¹⁴

18. Again, detailed consideration of the remit, makeup and activities of RSPs is outside the scope of this inquiry. But we did receive consistent evidence from some stakeholders highlighting the importance of linking regional labour markets to the advice given to learners about post-16 education.¹⁵ Stakeholders also regularly flagged the effectiveness of the Cardiff Commitment and the smaller Ynys Môn Careers Pathways pilot, both of which are supported by their respective RSPs. They both aim to create links between learners and employers in local areas to improve learners’ career readiness and better involve employers in careers

¹³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 26 and 197

¹⁴ Welsh Government, ‘Regional Skills Partnerships’

¹⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 22 (UCAC); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 211 (Estyn); Written evidence: RET 23 Horticultural Trades Association; Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru; Written evidence: RET 14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)

advice and guidance.¹⁶ Estyn suggested that it is no coincidence that those two schemes are in the areas with the strongest RSPs:

“I would say you’ve got the stronger regional skills partnerships there, so, that actual joined-up, more forensic, analytical, research-based thinking at that more regional level about what the skills gaps are, what the industry needs are, which then are actually impacting on the curriculum that is being offered in schools and colleges”¹⁷

Case study 1: the Cardiff Commitment

The Cardiff Commitment is a city-wide alliance of over 400 organisations that have pledged to work together to improve the educational outcomes and career prospects of children and young people across Cardiff, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Cardiff Commitment’s priority of ‘Learning Pathways’ intends to reintroduce work experience into schools with a commitment to scaling this initiative across the city.

Key achievements reported by The Cardiff Commitment include work experience expansion (providing 450 placements in the Summer of 2024 across four schools), tailored programmes for young people with Additional Learning Needs (“ALN”) and Children Looked After, partner engagement (the network has grown to 588 partners including employers from key growth sectors), social value impact and being awarded Public Sector Organisation of the Year at the 2024 UK Social Mobility Awards.

Some measurable impacts between 2022-24 include:

- 152 work experience placements delivered, with 100% positive feedback on student readiness for work; and

¹⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 231 (Careers Wales); Written evidence: RET.07 Educ8 Training Group; Written evidence: RET.31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET.40 National Training Federation Wales (NTFW).

¹⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 211

- 39 ALN interns have participated in supported employment pathways, with 12 successfully transitioning into employment.

The Cardiff Commitment team is funded through the Shared Prosperity Fund until March 2026. Funding has been identified as the Cardiff Commitment's most significant challenge.

Case study 2: Ynys Môn Career Pathways pilot programme

The Ynys Môn Career Pathways (YMCP) pilot programme aims to enhance local career readiness, align educational paths with workforce needs, and bolster economic growth in Anglesey with an objective of highlighting career pathways. The YMCP pilot programme aims to achieve this by:

- supporting young people to understand all local opportunities;
- ensuring post-16 progression pathways are understood, and that there is a parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes;
- encouraging engagement opportunities between teachers, learners, and employers;
- developing labour market intelligence for teachers;
- supporting teachers to embed careers and work-related experiences into the curriculum and learning plans; and
- supporting employers to shape the local curriculum and help young people realise the skills and qualities they need to enter the workplace.

While the pilot programme is comprised of eight workstreams, only one of these workstreams ('Inspire to Build') incurred costs. These costs amounted to just £1,400, mostly paying for taxis to transport the young people from school to college and back.

Key outcomes for the pilot include:

- enhanced career-readiness among learners;
- closer alignment of education and regional workforce needs;
- strengthened partnerships and community engagement;
- improved learner outcomes and pathway visibility; and

- potential for expansion and model replication.

Success of the pilot suggests a promising foundation for future programmes aimed at aligning education and employment pathways in other local authority areas across North Wales.

19. Some stakeholders raised concerns about the effectiveness of RSPs in relation to supporting learners into post-16 education and training. Cambrian Training told us that data time lags (see paragraph 248 onwards for discussion of data) make it difficult for RSPs to fulfil their remit.¹⁸ Make UK suggested that inconsistent approaches between local authorities can make it difficult for manufacturers who operate across multiple sites. They argued that Medr will have a “vital role” in ensuring consistency across Wales in its work co-ordinating the RSPs.¹⁹

20. We asked the Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership whether he thought there was potential to roll out the Cardiff Commitment model to other regions across Wales. The Minister explained to us that RSPs should be focussed “on the employer engagement side, finding what the skills are tomorrow”, whereas Careers Wales and others should focus more on “bringing business and industry into schools”.²⁰ The Cabinet Secretary for Education added that the Cardiff Commitment was “impressive”, and that she was particularly interested in it from the point of view of learners with additional needs.²¹

Medr

21. The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (subsequently named “Medr”) was established by the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (“the 2022 Act”). Medr became operational in August 2024, and has responsibility for the funding, oversight and regulation of all post-16 education and training. This includes FE, local authority maintained sixth forms, HE, apprenticeships, adult community learning, and research and innovation.

¹⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 221](#)

¹⁹ [Written evidence: RET 33 Make UK](#)

²⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 20-21](#)

²¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 23](#)

22. In September 2024, Medr published its Draft Strategic Plan for consultation. The plan was finalised in March 2025, and includes a foundation aim and 5 strategic aims:

- Foundation aim: To establish Medr as a highly effective, respected organisation and trusted regulator.
- Strategic aim 1: To focus the tertiary education sector around the needs of the learner.
- Strategic aim 2: To create a flexible and joined-up tertiary system where everyone can acquire the skills and knowledge they need for a changing economy and society.
- Strategic aim 3: To ensure learners receive the highest-quality provision in a tertiary education sector that strives for continuous improvement.
- Strategic aim 4: To grow internationally-acclaimed research and inspire innovation throughout the tertiary education sector
- Strategic aim 5: To encourage greater use of the Welsh language, and increase demand for, and participation in, learning and assessment through the medium of Welsh.²²

23. Medr was referenced repeatedly throughout the evidence we received in a series of different contexts and by numerous different organisations. We consider the more specific points about Medr’s role in the relevant sections of this report.

24. At a more strategic level, it is clear that organisations have high expectations of Medr to shape a more equitable and coherent post-16 education system in Wales. Organisations referenced the potential for Medr to resolve fundamental issues such as tackling inequality²³, HE participation rates²⁴, and the future of small sixth forms²⁵. Dr Hefin David MS’s 2023 report ‘Transitions to Employment’, meanwhile, recommends that Medr works with academic and vocational providers to “reduce the fragmentation of the sector”.²⁶

²² Medr, ‘[Strategic Plan 2025-30](#)’

²³ [Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales](#)

²⁴ [Written evidence: RET.15 The Open University in Wales](#)

²⁵ [Written evidence: RET.34 Colegau Cymru](#)

²⁶ Dr Hefin David MS, ‘[Transitions to Employment](#)’, June 2023, page 9

25. Medr itself has not shied away from these challenges. In their evidence, they acknowledged their responsibilities in relation to a broad range of challenges facing the post-16 sector:

“A central tenet of Medr’s strategic plan will be creating one cohesive system that can be more easily understood and navigated by learners, providers and employers alike. One way that Medr will improve that system is by making it more collaborative, recognising the roles that both local authority-maintained school sixth forms and further education colleges play in our post-16 landscape, and ensuring that learners have both choice and high-quality provision.”²⁷

26. The Welsh Government has been ambitious for Medr’s role in improving post-16 participation. They highlighted that one of Medr’s strategic duties under “the 2022 Act is to encourage increased, equitable participation in tertiary education.”²⁸ In 2024, under section 13 of the 2022 Act, the Welsh Government’s published its ‘Statement of strategic priorities for tertiary education and research and innovation’. The statement sets out “the key role Medr would play in ensuring pathways through post-16 education”²⁹, and includes the following commitments:

- “Develop a tertiary system that prepares learners for a dynamic and changing economy where all can acquire the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in life and work ...
- Maintain and enhance the quality of the tertiary system, continue and intensify work on widening participation and take steps to ensure a more equitable and excellent system for all ...
- Putting the learner at the heart of the system by focusing on the experience of learners in the tertiary system and their wellbeing”.³⁰

27. The Welsh Government referenced Medr in relation to numerous areas of work that fall within the scope of this inquiry, including local curriculum guidance, inequalities in post-16 participation, Additional Learning Needs (“ALN”), the Welsh language, mental health support, and vocational skills. As an indication of the

²⁷ Written evidence: RET.41.Medr

²⁸ Written evidence: RET.47.Welsh Government

²⁹ Written evidence: RET.47.Welsh Government

³⁰ Welsh Government, ‘Statement of strategic priorities for tertiary education and research and innovation’, 28 February 2024

importance of Medr to the tertiary sector in Wales, “Medr” was cited over 40 times in the Welsh Government’s written evidence to us³¹ and around 30 times during oral scrutiny³².

A national strategy

28. In 2023, the Steering Group for the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales, chaired by Sharron Lusher MBE, published its report ‘A Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales’ (“the Lusher review”). The steering group comprised professionals with expertise in vocational education and training from public bodies, professional organisations, and trade unions. The report argues strongly for a strategy for vocational education and training as part of a broader strategy for post-16 learning:

“Wales does not have a strategy for vocational education and training – indeed does not have an overarching strategy for post-16 learning. We need a strategy which brings together the divergent elements involved in vocational education and training and delivery of qualifications, into one coherent plan.”³³

29. The steering group recommended that:

“The Welsh Government should develop a national strategy for vocational education and training, which would in turn inform the strategic direction for vocational qualifications. This strategy should form part of a wider post-compulsory education and training strategy.”

Such a strategy, it argued, should include a vision for post-16 vocational education and training, expectations of learning providers, and progression route maps through vocational qualifications.³⁴

30. We received consistent evidence in support of a national strategy. But there was a clear dividing line between those who argued in favour of an over-arching, holistic strategy for post-16 education and training on the one hand, and others

³¹ Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

³² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 20-21

³³ Steering Group for the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales, ‘A Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales’, July 2023, page 8

³⁴ Steering Group for the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales, ‘A Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales’, July 2023, page 46

who argued for a strategy specifically focusing on vocational education and training.

31. Estyn argued that there is no clear national strategy for 16-19 learning, which leads to unclear expectations for schools and inconsistency between, and within, areas and providers. They criticised a “lack of coherent direction from the Welsh Government for learners aged 16-19.”³⁵ Similarly, Universities Wales urged the Welsh Government to look more broadly at what it wants the tertiary education system to achieve:

*“I think there’s a wider question for me here about actually what we’re trying to achieve from the system overall ... So, one of the things that, of course, we’re seeing, is a significant under participation of learners in higher education when you compare that to England. And I think that isn’t just an issue that is about education—that’s actually a strategic economic issue. ... If we ask ourselves the question, ‘What sort of economy do we want to build, and therefore what sorts of qualifications do we require in order to build it?’ ...”*³⁶

The National Training Federation for Wales agreed that Wales needs an overarching skills plan so that the post-16 sector can meet the needs of Welsh Government priorities.³⁷

32. However, ColegauCymru argued in favour of a vocational education and training strategy specifically:

“I think focusing on vocational makes more sense. I think that’s the bit of the system where it’s weakest in terms of the understanding of parents and stakeholders. So, I think that’s where we probably do need to focus. I understand the point around wouldn’t it make sense to have a broader [strategy],

³⁵ ~~Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn~~; Children, Young People and Education Committee, ~~5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings~~, paragraphs 193-4

³⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, ~~6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings~~, paragraph 301

³⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, ~~6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings~~, paragraph 423

but, actually, we think this is the area where you could make greatest progress and fill some more gaps quickest.”³⁸

They also advocated a new “14-19 Learning and Transition Pathway” to address weaknesses in the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education and training.³⁹

33. The Welsh Government’s written evidence makes no reference to a national post-16 strategy, vocational or otherwise. However, the Minister for Further and Higher Education told us that taking forward the recommendations from the Lusher review “remains a key priority”. She explained that the Welsh Government was engaging with Medr and others to explore the potential for a vocational education and training strategy, and added that an integrated, comprehensive strategy was “definitely a long-term ambition”.⁴⁰ Subsequent correspondence from the Welsh Government to us and the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee suggests that a draft vocational education and training strategy might be published during the first half of 2026 (although the Welsh Government adds that discussions with stakeholders may impact this timeframe). They make no further reference to a holistic post-16 strategy combining both vocational and academic education and training.⁴¹

Parity of esteem

34. During our scrutiny of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill in 2021/22, stakeholders across the post-16 sector emphasised the potential for the Commission for Tertiary Education (now Medr) to increase parity of esteem between vocational and academic pathways.⁴²

35. During this inquiry, too, stakeholders stressed the importance of vocational education and training, and of being careful not to assume that academic qualifications are more valuable than their vocational equivalents. Many felt that

³⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 219

³⁹ Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru

⁴⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 199-209

⁴¹ Letter from the Welsh Government to the Chair of the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 24 April 2025; Letter from the Welsh Government to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 19 May 2025

⁴² Welsh Parliament, ‘Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill: Committee Stage 1 Report’, March 2022, paragraphs 26-31

there was a deep-seated, cultural bias towards A levels and towards academic education in general.⁴³

36. Some felt that a lack of parity of esteem was having direct consequences for the quality and availability of provision for learners.⁴⁴ The Horticultural Trades Association advocated a better understanding of the application of academic subjects for environmental horticulture in particular.⁴⁵

37. Other stakeholders argued that a lack of parity of esteem meant that learners taking vocational routes pre-18 were not always able to progress to HE. Careers Wales observed that while vocational qualifications can lead to HE, the pathway is less linear and less well understood than academic routes.⁴⁶ Educ8 Training Group, meanwhile, reported that they actively work to encourage the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (“UCAS”) to recognise the value of vocational qualifications for prospective university students.⁴⁷ The University and College Union (“UCU”) stressed that:

“... any successful tertiary system should enable arrival at the same destination via a variety of different routes. Moreover, some of those routes should be assessed as much based on a candidate’s ability to ‘learn through doing’, as more abstract methods which capture knowledge and power of recall.”⁴⁸

38. Universities Wales argued that the distinction between ‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ is fundamentally artificial:

“I think one of the things that I have to say I find frustrating sometimes is the semantics around this, this kind of idea that there are academic pathways and vocational pathways. Give me a non-skilled engineer, or a non-skilled nurse, or a non-

⁴³ Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Written evidence: RET 33 Make UK; Written evidence: RET 36 University and College Union in Wales; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 133 (Parents’ Voices in Wales); Written evidence: RET 18 Children’s Commissioner for Wales; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 93 (NEU); Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea

⁴⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 93 (NEU); Written evidence: RET 33 Make UK

⁴⁵ Written evidence: RET 23 Horticultural Trades Association

⁴⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 239

⁴⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 130

⁴⁸ Written evidence: RET 36 University and College Union in Wales

*skilled lawyer or a non-skilled cyber security expert. I think we have to be really careful about the language, because I think these things are actually important. The issue is qualification level. We're not pushing enough people through to graduation qualification level ... And if we don't, then we probably accept that we're in a situation where we're saying to our future generations that they're going to be in a low-skilled economy, and I'm not sure that's where I would want to be."*⁴⁹

Some of our stakeholder event attendees shared similar views.⁵⁰

39. The Welsh Government stressed to us repeatedly the importance of establishing parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications post 16. The Cabinet Secretary for Education placed discussions around learner choice, statutory guidance around the 14-16 Learner Entitlement and the new Vocational Certificates of General Education ("VCSEs") within the context of promoting the value of vocational pathways.⁵¹ The Minister for Further and Higher Education told us that it was crucial to embed parity of esteem in school culture by challenging assumptions about learners' pathways. She used the recent example of a public comment that implied that degree apprenticeships were not "proper degrees" to illustrate the cultural bias that she believes still exists.⁵²

Our view

Securing parity of esteem: a national strategy for post-16 education and training

40. As we explore throughout this report, one of the most consistent themes in this inquiry has been that the traditional labels of 'academic' and 'vocational' are at best poorly-defined, and at worst can actively undermine parity of esteem between different post-16 pathways.

41. We have heard stakeholders argue that traditional biases towards so-called academic routes can affect the quality of advice that children receive, and push

⁴⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 322

⁵⁰ Welsh Parliament, ['Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits'](#), May 2025, paragraph 4

⁵¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 28, 40-41 & 89-91

⁵² Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 30 & 206

them into education and training that isn't right for them. We know that some learners who struggle in school are unfairly cut off from academic post-16 routes when, with the right support and in the right learning environment, they could go on to thrive. Equally, we have heard about children who do well at their GCSEs, and who may benefit from moving into college or work-based learning, but are pushed into sixth forms to study A levels and struggle as a consequence. We have also been regularly reminded that vocational qualifications can lead to university, just as academic qualifications can lead into higher- and degree-level apprenticeships.

42. We believe that there should be an over-arching, comprehensive national strategy to bring together the various strands of post-16 education and training. The challenges falling within each strand may seem at first glance to be unrelated: how does the availability of apprenticeship placements relate to HE participation rates? Or how does the viability of small sixth forms link to the work of the RSPs? But they are linked, as this report explores in detail. If we are to encourage learners to reach their potential by obtaining the highest levels of education and training possible, we must enable them to move between different post-16 sectors as seamlessly as possible. To do this, we must link those sectors together within a single, national strategy.

Recommendation 1. The Welsh Government should create a robust, over-arching, national strategy for post-16 education and training which includes, but is not limited to, pathways into employment. The strategy should encompass both academic and vocational pathways, thereby creating a strategic vision for a coherent and collaborative post-16 sector that encourages learners to obtain education and skills via whichever educational pathway is right for them.

Regional Skills Partnerships

43. We were impressed by the evidence we received about both the Cardiff Commitment and the Ynys Môn Career Pathways pilot programme. These kinds of projects – projects that link employers with schools and post-16 education institutions to improve and harmonise careers guidance and provide vital work experience opportunities – demonstrate the value and potential of the Regional Skills Partnerships to improve outcomes for young people and the wider economy.

44. We were struck by Estyn's comments about these two projects: that it is no coincidence that the schemes have been established in the areas with the stronger Regional Skills Partnerships. The projects are having a positive impact in

two fundamentally different areas of Wales, with significantly different local challenges and opportunities. We see no reason why versions of these schemes – tailored to meet local needs – couldn't be established by other local authorities in partnership with their respective Regional Skills Partnerships.

Recommendation 2. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should set out its assessment of whether there would be benefit in expanding the good practice by the Cardiff Commitment and the Ynys Môn Career Pathways pilot programme to other areas of Wales, and any barriers that exist to doing so at a local authority or regional level.

3. Pre-16 education

The first crucial steps that learners take towards post-16 education and training occur well before Year 11. The Curriculum for Wales sets out a key role for schools in providing careers education from as early as 3 years of age. For some pupils, providing opportunities for vocational learning pre-16 may give them the best chance of progressing to higher level education and skills.

Early careers advice: the Curriculum for Wales pre-16

45. Careers and work-related experiences (“CWRE”) is a cross-cutting theme in the Curriculum for Wales for learners from ages 3 to 16. The Welsh Government’s statutory guidance for schools sets out that:

“A school’s curriculum should enable learners to gain experiences related to work and careers, developing knowledge of the breadth of opportunities available to them throughout their lives. This learning can help them make informed decisions about their career pathways.”

The guidance is clear that CWRE should be embedded throughout schools’ curricula and taught to children from the age of 3 across the curriculum, not taught as a stand-alone subject.⁵³

46. We heard widespread support for embedding CWRE into the curriculum and starting careers advice before Key Stage 4⁵⁴, including from learners.⁵⁵ Some stakeholders explicitly argued that careers advice should begin in primary schools,

⁵³ Welsh Government, ‘~~Cross-cutting themes for designing your curriculum~~’

⁵⁴ Following the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales, ‘key stages’ are being replaced by a single learning continuum. However, this report refers to ‘key stages’ for ease of understanding.

⁵⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, ~~29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings~~, paragraph 23 & 29 (NASUWT); ~~Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru~~; Welsh Parliament, ‘~~Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings~~’, March 2025, paragraphs 22-24

as required by the Curriculum for Wales.⁵⁶ Careers Wales welcomed what it called the “introduction of ‘dedicated curriculum time’ for learners to explore post 16 options.”⁵⁷ They explained that CWRE as a theme for children aged 3 to 16 is “a massive step forward”, stressing “that young people make stereotypical limiting career decisions by the time they leave primary school”.⁵⁸ Similarly, Educ8 Training highlighted the importance of starting careers advice in primary schools to overcome gender inequalities:

“But, actually, if we don’t get these young children, even at primary—. You look at trying to get more women and young girls into science, technology, engineering and mathematics areas; if you haven’t got them before they’ve left primary school, good luck with that. I think there’s been data and some work done on—. By the end of year 7, a young person—a child at that point—pretty much knows where their pathway is going to be for the next six to eight years. That’s frightening.”⁵⁹

Others highlighted the advantages of early careers advice for certain groups of learners, such as those with ALN.⁶⁰

47. Despite this support for early careers advice, we also heard that schools may struggle to find the time in school timetables to do so.⁶¹ Careers Wales explained that they can support schools to deliver on their CWRE obligations. They set out that they have a team of “curriculum experts” who provide support to schools to help them fulfil their CWRE curriculum responsibilities:

“We are uniquely placed to support schools across Wales to implement CWRE and the contribution of the team, and the services we offer, is referenced in numerous Welsh Government policy documents including Curriculum for Wales guidance and 14-16 learning guidance. Discussions have also taken place

⁵⁶ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 3

⁵⁷ Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales

⁵⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 207-8

⁵⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 142

⁶⁰ Written evidence: RET.16 Down's Syndrome Association

⁶¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 22 (UCAC); Written evidence: RET.07 Educ8 Training Group; Written evidence: RET.45 NPTC Group of Colleges

to identify the current and potential future role of the team in the evolving approach to school improvement in Wales.”⁶²

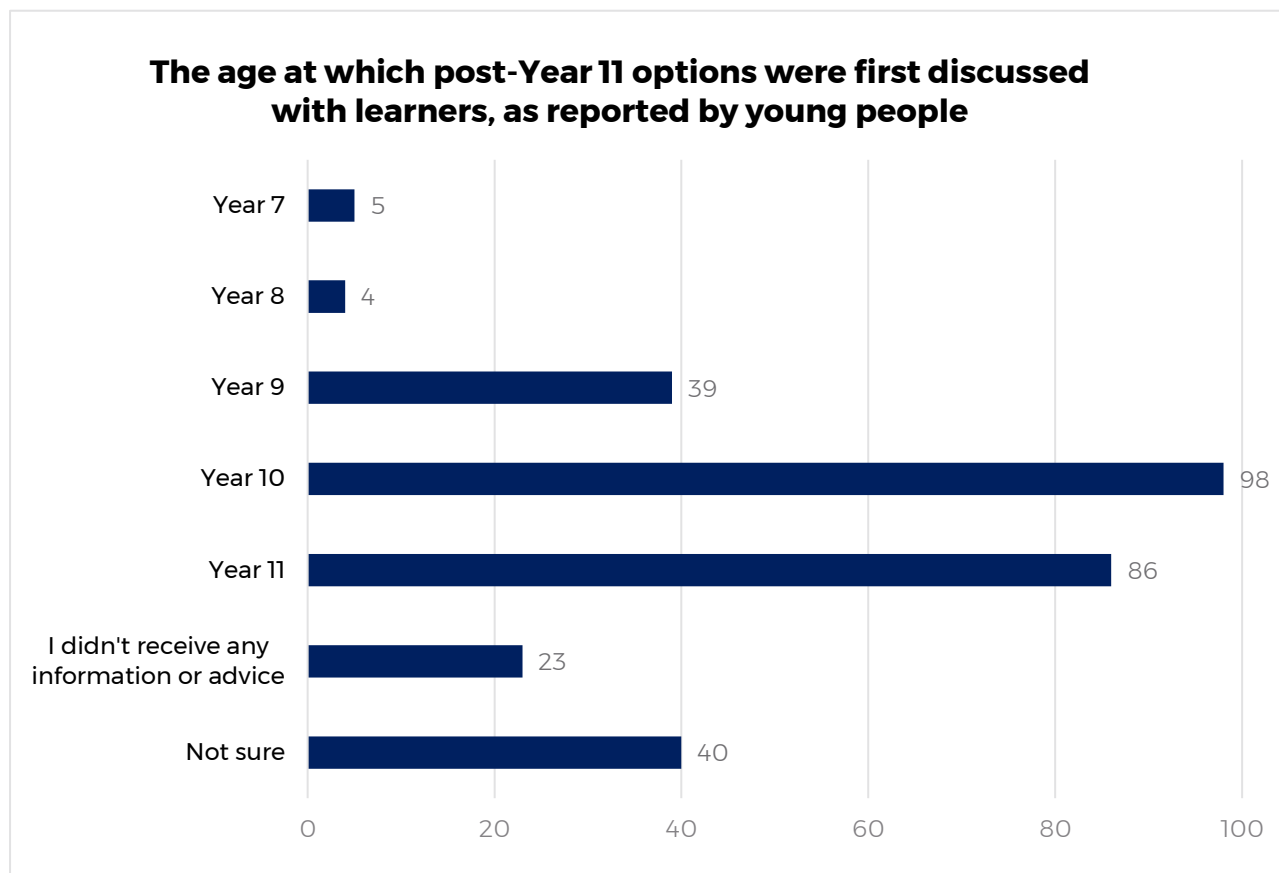


Figure 1. The age at which post-Year 11 options were first discussed with learners. Findings from the Senedd’s Citizen Engagement Team’s survey of young people. We received 311 respondents in total. Source: Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings’, March 2025, page 12

48. The Cabinet Secretary for Education stressed to us that the “the journey to post-16 education starts at the very beginning, in early years”. She added that the Welsh Government has developed a careers and work-related education toolkit in partnership with the Career Development Institute and Careers Wales, which support curriculum co-ordinators to work to support schools to embed CWRE in their curricula.⁶³ The Minister for Further and Higher Education later cited best

⁶² Letter from Careers Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 May 2025

⁶³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 4-13

practice examples of Wrexham and Cardiff Universities, which engage with young people at primary schools.⁶⁴

Qualifications

49. In response to the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales, Qualifications Wales has reformed the national 14-16 qualifications offer. Teaching under the new 'National Qualifications' has now begun, as of September 2025, with rollout of the full range of qualifications to continue until September 2027.⁶⁵ The National Qualifications comprise:

- General Certificates of Secondary Education ("GCSEs"), spanning Level 1 and Level 2, taught from September 2025.
- Vocational Certificates of Secondary Education ("VCSEs"), spanning Level 1 and Level 2. VCSEs will be taught from September 2027. Following completion of their VCSE qualifications, learners may progress to post-16 vocational study. Learners who take a combination of VCSE, GCSE and other vocational qualifications may also progress to AS and A level study.
- Skills Suite, spanning Entry Level to Level 2, to be taught from September 2027. The Skills Suite qualifications are designed to work for all learners and can be taken alongside GCSEs, VCSEs and/or Foundation qualifications. Learners taking these qualifications may progress to post-16 academic or vocational study.
- Foundation qualifications, spanning Entry Level to Level 1, to be taught from September 2027. Learners who are not ready to take a VCSE qualification will be able to study any of the 15 VCSE subjects as Foundation qualifications.⁶⁶

50. Echoing themes we've identified during our ongoing inquiry 'implementation of education reforms'⁶⁷, the National Education Union ("NEU"), UCU and some attendees of our stakeholder event expressed concern that the qualifications may be inconsistent with the flexible and learner-focused intentions

⁶⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 113

⁶⁵ Welsh Parliament, 'How will qualifications change under the Curriculum for Wales?', 17 July 2024

⁶⁶ With the exception of Performing Arts where there will be a Foundation qualification in Expressive Arts instead. Foundation qualifications are available at Entry Level and Level 1.

⁶⁷ Welsh Parliament, 'Implementation of education reforms'

of the Curriculum for Wales.⁶⁸ Qualifications Wales, meanwhile, urged for clarity on GCSE re-takes to ensure that learners' post-16 participation isn't inappropriately affected.⁶⁹ The Institute of Physics, meanwhile, argued that the decision to offer three different routes relating to the sciences compromises progression to post-16 education in a scientific discipline.⁷⁰

51. Some stakeholders were positive about the introduction of VCSEs from September 2027. Educ8 Training and UCU welcomed them as an opportunity for schools, colleges, and providers supporting vocational progression post-16 to collaborate to broaden the offer to learners.⁷¹ Others argued that ultimately it was unrealistic for every school to offer every qualification, so VCSEs would prompt collaboration between post-16 institutions.⁷²

52. However, we also heard a number of concerns about VCSEs from some professionals, generally representatives of the further education ("FE") sector, including that:

- there is a lack of capacity, expertise and facilities to teach VCSEs well at schools;
- VCSEs may affect the junior apprenticeships programme, which we heard was very effective for some learners;
- VCSEs may create a two-tier system if they are valued less than GCSEs; and
- VCSEs are 'tasters' rather than a route into employment (i.e. they will not make you occupationally competent).⁷³

53. The Welsh Government noted increases in the proportion of learners leaving year 11 to study Level 3 qualifications has decreased since 2021/21, and that Level 2

⁶⁸ Written evidence: RET.06 National Education Union (NEU) Cymru; Written evidence: RET.36 University and College Union in Wales; Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, page 4

⁶⁹ Written evidence: RET.20 Qualifications Wales

⁷⁰ Written evidence: RET.42 Institute of Physics (IOP)

⁷¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 152; Written evidence: RET.07 Educ8 Training Group; Written evidence: RET.36 University and College Union in Wales

⁷² Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 6

⁷³ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 7; Written evidence: RET.36 University and College Union in Wales

tertiary provision has increased in that same period. However, the Welsh Government also stressed that Level 2 is a “necessary precursor to increasing the number of 16-24-year-olds with a level 3 qualification”. They state that both the new ‘made-for-Wales’ GCSEs and VCSEs aim to facilitate progression into post-16 education and training.⁷⁴

54. The Cabinet Secretary for Education linked the introduction of the new VCSEs to establishing parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications. She told us that the VCSEs are designed to be “reasonably deliverable by schools and other pre-16 settings”, and reminded us that there are already Level 1 and 2 vocational qualifications delivered across many schools. She acknowledged that “there are some tensions in the system, concerns amongst colleges and schools”. She told us that VCSEs will involve more partnership working between schools and colleges, and consultation with education providers by awarding bodies. However, she stressed that VCSEs were the “right thing to do to give that recognition to the work of the young people who are more inclined to go down the vocational route.”⁷⁵

Junior Apprenticeships and vocational pathways at 14-16

55. Our evidence has highlighted that some learners, including young people who are at risk of disengaging from school, may benefit from vocational education before they leave compulsory school. The Senedd’s Citizen Engagement Team’s engagement findings documented support from parents and learners for a vocational offer at compulsory school age. Some respondents reported that schools were more inclined to help academically focused young people and there weren’t always options to meet young people’s diverse needs. One parent told us that their child hates school, and that “He feels it is only for the academically inclined and not for the kids who can’t sit still or quietly for 6 hours a day.”⁷⁶

56. There are various types of vocational provision for learners aged 14-16 across Wales whereby schools collaborate with local colleges, often with the support of funding from either local authorities and/or Welsh Government.

⁷⁴ Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

⁷⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 89-91

⁷⁶ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings’, March 2025, paragraphs 14-15

57. The Welsh Local Government Association (“WLGA”) and the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (“ADEW”) flagged one such programme running in Gwynedd and Ynys Môn.⁷⁷ Similarly, Colegau Cymru set out that 900 learners from schools across Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion spend between two and four hours a week in vocational learning. Participating schools either arrange for bus transport for their pupils to the colleges, or college staff deliver the vocational qualification within the schools.⁷⁸

58. Junior Apprenticeships are a vocational, full-time learning programme for young people in years 10 and 11. Participating learners attend college on a full-time basis. The programmes offer work-related education with work experience built in, alongside a Level 2 course that is equivalent to four or five GCSEs. Each learner also studies GCSEs in maths and English.⁷⁹ The programmes are run – and funded – in partnership between schools, colleges, local authorities and the Welsh Government.

59. Junior Apprenticeships are targeted at learners who are at risk of becoming NEET, but who show an interest in vocational education and training. The option of a Junior Apprenticeship programme is often considered as an alternative route to other Education Otherwise Than At School (“EOTAS”) options, such as pupil referral units (“PRUs”).⁸⁰ In May 2024, approximately 150 learners were engaged on a Junior Apprenticeship programme across five colleges in Wales.⁸¹

60. Estyn’s 2024 thematic review of Junior Apprenticeships concluded that the programmes have been “effective in extending pre-16 vocational opportunities to learners struggling to engage with the mainstream school curriculum”. They noted that learners’ feedback on their Junior Apprenticeship experience was “exceptionally positive”. The report also commends learners’ qualifications success rate and rates of progression directly into post-16 education and training, which it calls a “considerable achievement and [one that] reflects a major impact of participation in these programmes and a marked change in these learners’ attitudes to and perceptions of learning”.⁸²

⁷⁷ Written evidence: RET 14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)

⁷⁸ Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru

⁷⁹ Letter from Colegau Cymru to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 18 May 2025; Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

⁸⁰ Letter from Colegau Cymru to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 18 May 2025

⁸¹ Estyn, ‘A review of the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales’, May 2024, pages 1-2

⁸² Estyn, ‘A review of the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales’, May 2024, pages 24-26

61. However, Estyn also stressed that the impact of the overall impact of the programme is limited because it is only available in five of the 22 local authorities across Wales. They raised concerns about a lack of open access to the programme; inconsistencies in information, advice and guidance; and about “underdeveloped” quality assurance arrangements.⁸³

62. We heard regularly, from various different stakeholders, that the Junior Apprenticeships programme is an effective way to re-engage some young people with learning who are at risk of becoming NEET, and to open opportunities for them to progress to post-16 education and training.⁸⁴ ColegauCymru set out some statistics about outcomes for learners on some Junior Apprenticeships programmes:

“Bridgend College has seen 86% of their learners on a JA [Junior Apprenticeship] programme progress into another full-time course during the academic year 2022/2023.6 The JA program at Cardiff and Vale College has seen high success rates, with an average of 86-88% of learners achieving vocational qualifications and GCSEs. The majority of these learners have progressed to further education or employment opportunities.”

They stressed the importance of collaboration and transition between schools, colleges, parents and learners themselves. They also advocated that the learner’s parent school should act as a safety net throughout the learner’s participation in the Junior Apprenticeship programme.⁸⁵

63. ColegauCymru explained the cost of the Cardiff and Vale College Junior Apprenticeship programme is between £10,500 and £12,500 per learner per year (including all delivery, transport and provision of free school meals). This funding comes from the local authority with top-up funding from Medr. Junior Apprentices remain enrolled at their host school throughout the programme.

⁸³ Estyn, ‘[A review of the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales](#)’, May 2024, pages 24, 16-17, and 22-23

⁸⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 222-224 (Estyn); Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 147 (Medr); Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 147 (National Training Federation for Wales); Welsh Parliament, ‘[Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits](#)’, May 2025, paragraphs 8-13

⁸⁵ [Letter from ColegauCymru to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 18 May 2025

Therefore, these costs are in addition to the per pupil funding that the learner's parent school receives from the local authority.

64. Despite this 'double-funding', ColegauCymru argued that the total cost of the programme is £4,633 to £6,333 less per learner per year compared to "comparable EOTAS provision". It also points to a study by Dr Steve Garner that suggests that the Cardiff and Vale College Junior Apprenticeship programme will save the economy £570,000 per person in preventative spend over the course of a 40-year working life and 60-year adult life, in addition to providing other benefits to participants.⁸⁶

65. Nevertheless, we heard from key stakeholders that funding was the primary barrier to national rollout.⁸⁷ Estyn explained the challenges facing public bodies who are involved with Junior Apprenticeship delivery:

*"So, we didn't just visit those that were currently providing the programme, but we talked to those who aren't about why. Inevitably, funding comes out as part of the issue, because the grant that supports junior apprenticeships doesn't really cover the full cost to all the providers involved, whether you're talking from the school perspective or from the college or the local authority perhaps, as a co-ordinating body. So, there were additional moneys needed to be found from somewhere to help make it happen, whether that was individual schools or the college or the local authority, businesses, or a combination of all of those. So, there's a cost implication there."*⁸⁸

66. Other concerns about the Junior Apprenticeships programme centred on the qualifications that participants receive. Some stakeholders told us that Junior Apprenticeships are not guaranteed stepping stones onto higher level post-16 qualifications.⁸⁹ Universities Wales told us:

⁸⁶ Letter from ColegauCymru to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 18 May 2025

⁸⁷ 'Letter from ColegauCymru to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee', 18 May 2025; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 77 (WLGA)

⁸⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 225

⁸⁹ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 10

“So, the issue is where does that journey take people: can you progress from a junior apprenticeship; can you move your skill level up; can you move into those higher level skills; and are we building those ladders? ... how do we build those ladders so that people can potentially progress from vocational pathways into higher skilled work.”⁹⁰

67. The Cabinet Secretary for Education told us that she was a “massive fan” of the Junior Apprenticeships programme, and stressed that she is “really keen that we have an offer of junior apprenticeships across Wales”. She told us that the Welsh Government had increased the funding for the programme by 50% (to £600k for 2025/26), and was working with Medr towards a staged rollout to offer Junior Apprenticeships in all parts of Wales. She cautioned that it was important to consider Welsh medium provision and to ensure collaboration across institutions as the programme is expanded. She also stressed that Junior Apprenticeships are part of a broader non-school provision landscape, which includes EOTAS and PRUs.⁹¹

68. The Minister for Further and Higher Education also noted that many colleges offer vocational programmes for 14–16-year-olds, even if they are not formally badged as Junior Apprenticeships. She cited examples from Coleg Cambria, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, and Coleg y Cymoedd.⁹²

Our view

Vocational education and qualifications between 14-16

69. We have focused a significant proportion of our scrutiny throughout this inquiry on the education experiences of learners who do not follow a traditional academic pathway. We are pleased to see that there *are* alternative routes available for some young people whose needs are not met by mainstream education, and which can help them progress into post-16 education and training. We know from our recent inquiry ‘Children on the margins’ that disengaging with school can place children at risk of exploitation.⁹³ We believe that everything

⁹⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 335

⁹¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 72-73

⁹² Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 74-84

⁹³ Welsh Parliament, [‘Children on the margins’](#), December 2024, paragraphs 223-239 & 282-287

possible should be done to avoid young people being put in that position. One way to do so is by creating credible, valuable vocational options for young people aged 14-16 who are struggling to reach their potential in a traditional academic school setting.

70. We were impressed by the Junior Apprenticeship programme. We were struck not only by the outcomes of the programme in terms of attendance, transition to post-16 learning, and so on (which are very encouraging), but by how learners on the programme seemed to be engaging with their learning. The young people we spoke to on a Junior Apprenticeship programme seemed happy, engaged, and excited about their futures. Estyn's thematic review suggests that the findings of our engagement work are representative of junior apprentices on other programmes across the country.

71. However, there is work to be done to refine, clarify and standardise the Junior Apprenticeships offer. It is not acceptable that Junior Apprenticeships are not available to learners who might benefit from them across the whole of Wales. We are also wary of Estyn's concerns about the lack of clear and consistent referral criteria for learners who might benefit from a Junior Apprenticeship, inconsistent information provided to parents about the programme, and the absence of quality assurance measures.

72. We must also remember that many learners on Junior Apprenticeships programmes may be vulnerable young people, who are being placed in a more independent learning environment with older teenagers and young adults. We have no reason to believe that safeguarding on Junior Apprenticeship programmes is anything other than robust. But if the programme is to be scaled up, it will be absolutely crucial to ensure that learners are appropriately protected.

73. On the balance of evidence, we believe that Junior Apprenticeships are an exciting and promising approach to compulsory education for a limited number of pupils who are disengaging with education.

74. We do not support a wholesale extension of Junior Apprenticeship programmes to learners who are not at risk of disengaging with education at this time. However, we do support the Welsh Government's intention to standardise a broader offer of vocational education for all learners before they leave year 11. There are different ways to do so.

75. Some colleges offer vocational experiences to school pupils on a part-time basis, outside the official Junior Apprenticeship scheme. We did not receive

enough information about those specific schemes to come to a conclusion about them.

76. In 2027, the new VCSEs will clearly become a key part of how vocational education is delivered in schools. In public, stakeholders seem to welcome the new qualifications as a way to provide a more varied suite of options for pre-16 learners, and improve parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways. In private, informal settings, stakeholders seemed noticeably more anxious. We noted the concern amongst some about the capacity of the school workforce and the physical resources available to teaching staff to deliver truly vocational educational experiences. We, like many of the people we spoke to, are hopeful about VCSEs, but are not entirely confident that they will be able to provide a widely available, meaningful vocational alternative to GCSEs.

77. There is the real possibility for a better, broader offer for 14-16 year old compulsory school age learners across Wales that supports them to progress to HE and skills post-16. But that offer is not clear or transparent enough. We urge the Welsh Government to build on the promising Junior Apprenticeship programme, and to set out more clearly how that programme fits in with others, including the new VCSEs, in delivering a coherent and consistent pre-16 vocational offer.

Recommendation 3. The Welsh Government should expand the Junior Apprenticeships scheme to ensure that it is available to learners across Wales who are at risk of disengaging with their education. In doing so, it should address Estyn's concerns about Junior Apprenticeships, including about inconsistencies in the referral criteria, in the information provided to parents and in quality assurance processes; and ensure that robust safeguarding measures are embedded into the programme to protect 14-16 year-old learners as they experience education in a post-16 setting.

Recommendation 4. The Welsh Government should clarify its approach to Wales-wide pre-16 vocational education. In doing so, the Welsh Government should set out clearly how provision such as Junior Apprenticeships, other college-based pre-16 education, and VCSEs form a coherent and holistic vocational offer for compulsory school-age learners.

4. Transitions to 16-18 education and training

Currently, learners receive most of their careers advice and guidance while they are in Key Stage 4. Schools, Careers Wales and others have key roles to play in ensuring that learners are well prepared for post-16 education and training. Unfortunately, conflicts of interests between institutions, staff workload and funding issues have become barriers to young people getting the support they need.

Careers advice and guidance pre-16

The role of schools

Schools' role in providing advice to learners

78. Research consistently finds that learners are more likely to turn to school staff for advice and guidance about their post-16 options than to any other source of advice.⁹⁴ Our own research found that 31% of the 311 young people surveyed by the Senedd's Citizen Engagement Team reported that their school was the primary source of post-16 advice – more than any other source of advice.⁹⁵ Underlining the crucial role schools play in providing advice to learners, Estyn agreed that learners' awareness of the choices available to them varied considerably, depending on the quality of information provided to them by their school.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ For example, see: Careers Wales, 'Young Person's Guarantee: National Conversation', March 2024, page 47 Institute of Physics, 'Support young people to change the world', October 2020, page 26;

⁹⁵ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings', March 2025, paragraphs 25-30

⁹⁶ Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

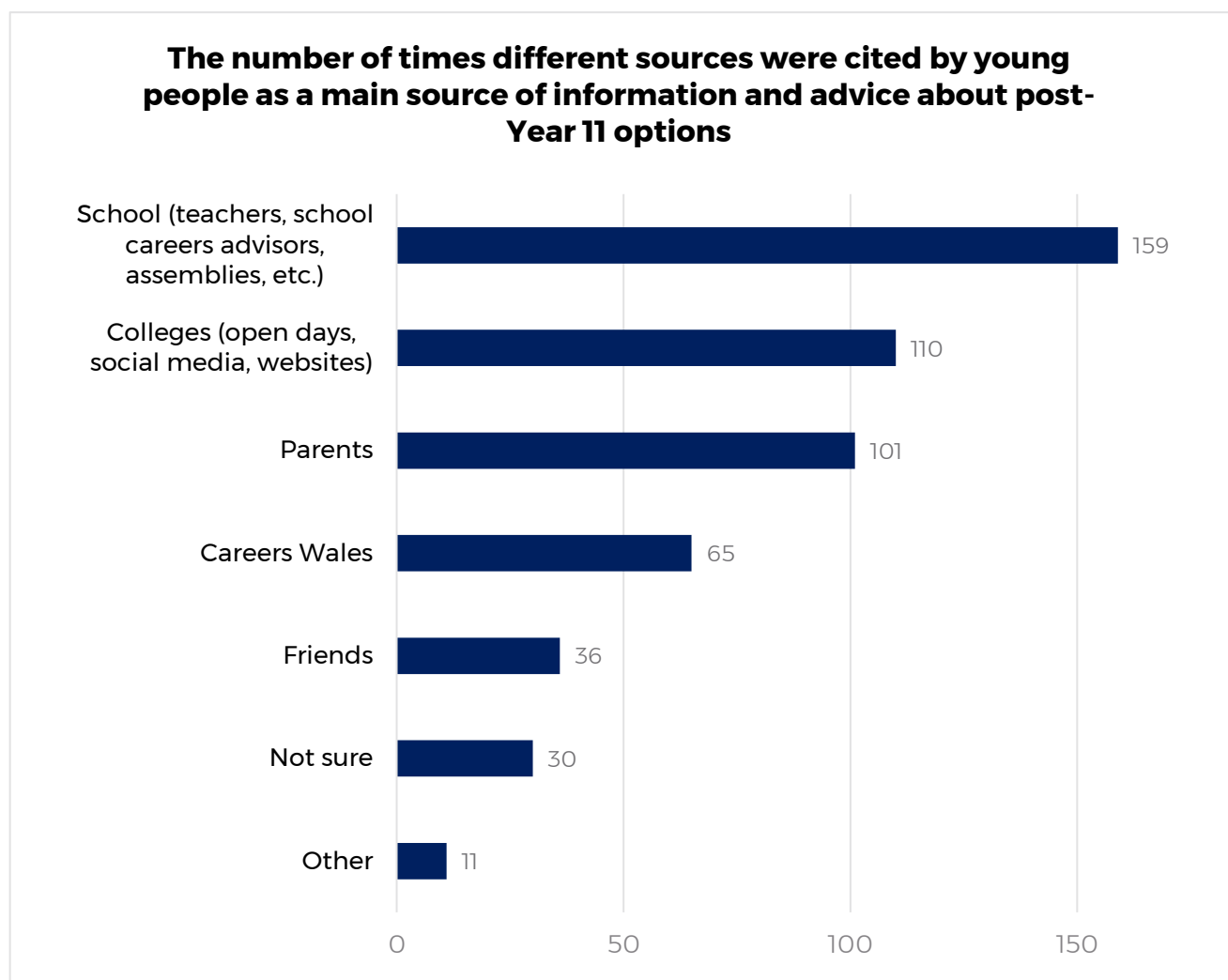


Figure 2. The number of times different sources were cited by young people as a main source of information and advice about post-Year 11 options. Respondents could select more than one source. Findings from the Senedd's Citizen Engagement Team's survey of young people. We received 311 respondents in total. Source: Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings', March 2025, paragraph 27

79. We received a significant body of evidence about the quality of the advice and guidance that young people receive directly from school staff, and how schools act as gatekeepers for advice and guidance from other sources.

80. Some, including some trade unions representing school staff and school leaders, were positive about the role that schools play in ensuring that learners receive high quality careers advice. They reported that schools work hard to provide high-quality information to learners⁹⁷ and that schools provide robust information about post-16 opportunities, particularly when schools don't have

⁹⁷ Written evidence: RET 03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC) [ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF WELSH ORIGINAL]; Written evidence: RET 38 Into Film Cymru

sixth forms⁹⁸. (See paragraph 87 onwards for detailed discussion of conflicts of interests in schools with sixth forms.) Estyn agreed that many schools provide or facilitate good quality careers advice and guidance for their pupils:

“So, there are really good examples. Lots of schools do it really well: they get a really wide range of colleges, training providers, Careers Wales, and employers involved in young people’s chances to make that decision.”⁹⁹

Estyn also told us that pupils in PRUs typically feel well-supported to think about their next steps after year 11.¹⁰⁰

81. Other stakeholders suggested that the quality of schools’ careers advice across Wales is inconsistent.¹⁰¹ The WLGA said advice was “patchy”, but that there are pockets of excellent practice.¹⁰² Careers Wales reported that some schools value careers advice and have “outstanding practice”, whereas others won’t consider careers education to be important and may not even have a careers lead.¹⁰³ The National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (“NASUWT”) suggested that inconsistencies are linked to demography and geography:

“... there’s a difference or a variance in the information provided according to the geographical location, primarily because, obviously, in the more populous areas of the country, the range of options available in terms of post-16 provision is all the more abundant than in rural areas. And so, associated with that abundance of opportunities, whether they be further education colleges, tertiary colleges or, I’ll say, traditional sixth-form provision within secondary schools, you then have more support and information provided by the various bodies who provide

⁹⁸ Written evidence: RET 12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL); Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges

⁹⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 201

¹⁰⁰ Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

¹⁰¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 119 (Cambrian Training); Written evidence: RET 26 Powys County Council; Written evidence: RET 35 Coleg Sir Câr; Written evidence: RET 46 Dr Elisa Vigna & Andrea Meek, The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University

¹⁰² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 15

¹⁰³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 205

this information, be it in-house or in-school careers advice or from outside agencies.”¹⁰⁴

82. We heard more critical views about the quality of advice that many learners receive at school about vocational education and training.¹⁰⁵ Educ8 Training told us that some schools are “fantastic”, but that “we often find that the advice given is very narrow in terms of: FE, sixth form.”¹⁰⁶ Cambrian Training told us:

“It doesn’t matter whether that individual, that pupil, is academically able or not, they have to have the same choices available, from A levels to FE to apprenticeships. But also, I think, it does need to be careers. It needs to be teachers, it needs to be everybody giving independent advice that is learner centric. Because there are a lot of influences that learner has at that age and we need to make sure we take account of all of those influences and give them fair, independent advice.”¹⁰⁷

83. Estyn’s evidence was consistent with those concerns about the advice learners receive about work based learning. They wrote that “a minority” of schools without sixth forms ensure that learners interact with providers of work-based learning provision.¹⁰⁸

84. Stakeholders reported different reasons for which schools are not consistently ensuring that learners receive high-quality careers information. Some felt that school staff may lack the knowledge and resources to provide robust, impartial advice to learners, particularly when it comes to vocational opportunities.¹⁰⁹ Others, like Educ8 Training Group and Into Film Cymru, suggested that teachers needed additional training and support.¹¹⁰ Universities Wales reported that universities struggled to get direct contact with secondary

¹⁰⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 6

¹⁰⁵ Written evidence: RET 33 Make UK; Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 22 Coleg y Cymoedd; Written evidence: RET 40 National Training Federation Wales (NTFW)

¹⁰⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 121

¹⁰⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 137

¹⁰⁸ Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

¹⁰⁹ Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Written evidence: RET 29 Social Care Wales;

¹¹⁰ Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group; Written evidence: RET 38 Into Film Cymru

pupils due to teacher workload and significant pressures on school timetables.¹¹¹ The WLGA, meanwhile, argued that financial pressures are affecting the quality of careers advice and guidance in schools.¹¹²

85. Despite those concerns about funding for schools, Medr set out that £3 million ‘Transition Funding’ was provided in 2023/24 and in 2024/25 to facilitate greater collaboration between schools, FE colleges and training providers. They reported that both schools and colleges have given positive feedback about how that funding has increased activities relating to post-16 transition, such as college taster days, masterclasses, or summer programmes.¹¹³

86. The Cabinet Secretary for Education acknowledged the need for a culture change in schools to ensure learners are exposed to the full range of post-16 options, including vocational routes.¹¹⁴ The Minister for Further and Higher Education agreed, and recognised that some schools expect that certain students with certain academic skills should remain in sixth form. She confirmed that is not the Welsh Government’s view:

“There are some really very valuable, wonderful vocational opportunities that our FE colleges offer, and we need to ensure that all staff within each section of the teaching profession really understand and value that, so that those barriers can be broken down and we can celebrate young people who say they have these predicted grades, but, actually, they’d really like to go to an FE college and do a vocational qualification or A levels that may not be offered in their school sixth form. Or, for some, there is that need to have that change, to go to an FE college to do their sixth-form studies, which could be better for them.”¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Written evidence: RET 19 Universities Wales; Written evidence: RET 29 Social Care Wales; Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges

¹¹² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 15

¹¹³ Written evidence: RET 41 Medr

¹¹⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 40-42

¹¹⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 29-33

Conflicts of interest between schools with sixth forms and other post-16 education and training providers

87. The most commonly raised concern in this inquiry has been that some schools with sixth forms promote their own sixth form courses over other post-16 options in order to retain learners and their associated funding. This view was shared (albeit to varying degrees) by vocational providers¹¹⁶, independent organisations¹¹⁷, and even trade unions representing both school staff and leaders¹¹⁸.

88. We heard that these conflicts of interest manifest themselves in a variety of ways, including:

- by schools providing biased advice about the options available to the young person, including by overly-promoting the school's own sixth form provision, not providing information about other options, or actively advising against provision by other providers;¹¹⁹
- reluctance from school staff to let FE colleges or work-based learning providers engage with learners¹²⁰, or only letting other post-16 providers engage with certain groups of children that the school believes do not want to/are unsuitable for study at the sixth form¹²¹; and

¹¹⁶ Written evidence: RET 04 Mark Jones, Chief Executive, Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group; Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru; Written evidence: RET 35 Coleg Sir Gâr; Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraphs 22-30

¹¹⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 28 (WLGA); Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales; Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn; Written evidence: RET 26 Powys County Council; Written evidence: RET 37 Individual

¹¹⁸ Additional evidence: The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 12-13; Written evidence: RET 03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC); Written evidence: RET 12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL)

¹¹⁹ Written evidence: RET 04 Mark Jones, Chief Executive, Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

¹²⁰ Written evidence: RET 35 Coleg Sir Gâr; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 126 (ColegauCymru); Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales; Written evidence: RET 05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT); Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 24

¹²¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 126 (ColegauCymru)

- school staff challenging careers advisors when they share information about other post-16 options.¹²²

89. The evidence we received from young people and parents was consistent with these views. One young person who responded to our Citizen Engagement Team's survey told us:

"In year 11 it is very much pushed upon students to continue studying by carrying out their A Levels. There was very minimal discussion and information available about the various other options available."

Another wrote:

*"In year 11 so many teachers kept trying to convince me that staying in sixth form instead of going to college would be the better option and constantly put down the idea of college e.g. saying that I'd hate it"*¹²³

90. There were some nuanced differences in the views submitted by different stakeholders about why and when the conflicts of interest occur. The most common view was that conflicts of interests are a fundamental and inevitable biproduct of a funding system that encourages competition for learners.¹²⁴ ColegauCymru wrote that:

*"Currently, funding models drive competition between different types of providers. This has created barriers to colleges being able to access learners in some schools to set out the options available to them and means there is variation across Wales, and even within local authority areas, on the quality and amount of advice given to pupils."*¹²⁵

¹²² [Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales](#)

¹²³ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings', March 2025, pages 14-15

¹²⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 28 (WLGA); [Written evidence: RET 04 Mark Jones, Chief Executive, Gower College Swansea](#); [Written evidence: RET 05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers \(NASUWT\)](#); [Written evidence: RET 12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru \(ASCL\)](#); [Written evidence: RET 26 Powys County Council](#); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 12-13 (UCAC); [Written evidence: RET 43 Coleg Cymraeg](#)

¹²⁵ [Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru](#)

91. Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (“UCAC”) explained to us how the funding system drives behaviour at a local level. They told us that some of its recent work with union members has been to support them through redundancy processes. The redundancies have been driven primarily by falling numbers of learners going to sixth forms:

“The last thing that they’re going to do is to encourage those who have a good chance to do well at A-level—they’re not going to encourage those pupils to do anything else, are they?”¹²⁶

92. Others argued that conflicts of interest tend to occur for certain groups of children or in certain specific situations. The NASUWT argued that conflicts of interest only occur when the courses offered by the school sixth form are identical to those offered by another local provider. In such cases, they report, the school will “naturally” promote its own course to the learner over the alternative.¹²⁷ UCAC, meanwhile, argued that conflicts of interest predominantly affect learners for whom it is not clear whether A levels or other qualifications are the best options. They suggested that those learners can be pursued by smaller schools with sixth forms, when they might well benefit from going to an FE institution instead.¹²⁸

93. Some stakeholders argued that it is possible for schools with sixth forms to give learners impartial advice about all their post-16 options even if the funding system encourages competition between providers.¹²⁹ Estyn reported that some schools with sixth forms do not collaborate enough with other providers,¹³⁰ but highlighted good practice nevertheless:

“In other areas, where there are schools with sixth forms, there’s really good collaboration with local colleges, and, actually, it is a shared offer that they’ve thought about together and tried to make as broad as possible, collectively. So, it’s not just those schools not with a sixth form, it is down to that wider relationship and collaboration that’s happening, and, in some areas with sixth forms, we see that happening really well and

¹²⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 12-13

¹²⁷ Additional evidence: The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT); Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group

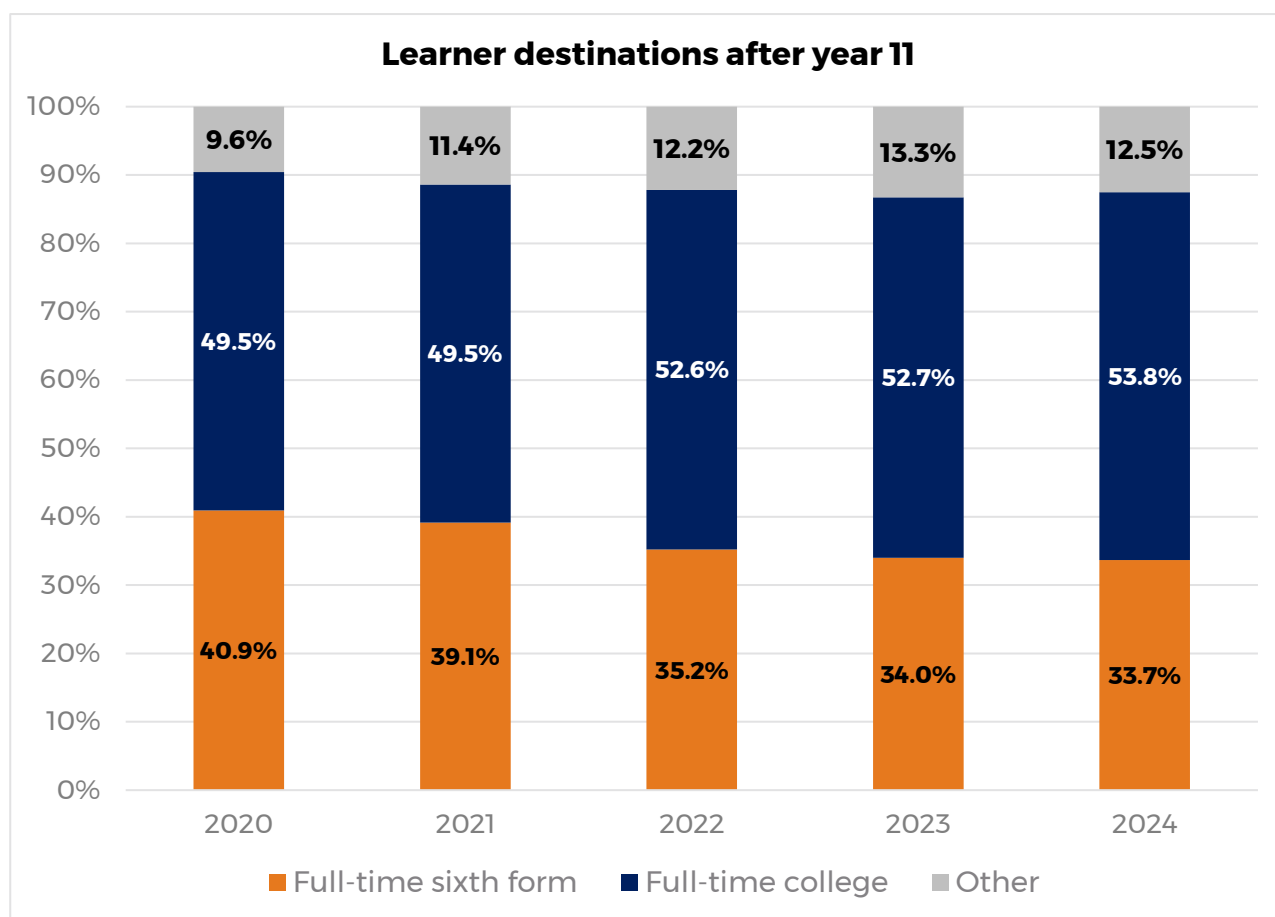
¹²⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 43

¹²⁹ Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges

¹³⁰ Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

young people getting a really good mix of options available to them.”¹³¹

94. However, despite acknowledging that conflicts of interest do occur, the NASUWT stressed that colleges’ concerns about access to learners “do not appear in the data”. They pointed out that a larger share of young people in Wales study in colleges than in any other UK nation, and that the percentage of young people studying in sixth forms in Wales is actually falling¹³² (see figure 3). Data from Medr also sets out that, in the 2024/25 academic year, 49% of learners who progressed from Year 11 studied AS levels. This is the first time that fewer than half of learners progressing to post-16 education have studied AS levels, and the lowest progression rate to AS levels in the period covered by Medr’s analysis.¹³³



¹³¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [5 March 2025 Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 208

¹³² [Additional evidence: The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers \(NASUWT\)](#)

¹³³ Medr, ‘[Progression from Year 11 to tertiary education, August 2017 to January 2025](#)’, 25 February 2025, pages 6-7

Figure 3. Proportions of learners leaving Year 11 and going into full-time education in sixth forms, full-time education in colleges, and all other destinations. Source: Careers Wales, ‘Pupil destinations’

95. There was widespread agreement that, when conflicts of interest do occur, the quality of the advice that learners receive suffers.¹³⁴ We heard repeatedly that the advice that learners receive should be driven by their needs, not by the needs of any particular institution.¹³⁵ Dr Hefin David MS came to similar conclusions in his ‘Transitions to Employment’ report, and recommended that the Welsh Government “should ensure that learners have full clarity on what options are available to them in post-compulsory education at an early stage”.¹³⁶ However, we have heard relatively few concrete proposals for how to ensure that happens in practice in schools across Wales.

96. A limited number of stakeholders, entirely representing FE or work-based learning providers, argued in favour of a fully ‘tertiary’ education system, whereby all learners progress from year 11 in schools to colleges, whether as part of a vocational/academic/mixed route. They reported that the advice and support that young people receive at school about their post-16 options is better because there is no competition between schools with sixth forms and colleges.¹³⁷

97. Medr, meanwhile, proposed incentivising collaboration within funding methodologies.¹³⁸ They set out that:

“A central tenet of Medr’s strategic plan will be creating one cohesive system that can be more easily understood and navigated by learners, providers and employers alike. One way that Medr will improve that system is by making it more collaborative, recognising the roles that both local authority-maintained school sixth forms and further education colleges

¹³⁴ Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 37 Individual; Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn; Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru

¹³⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 62 (WLGA); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 130 (Medr)

¹³⁶ Dr Hefin David MS, ‘Transitions to Employment’, June 2023, page 8

¹³⁷ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 30; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 312-313 (National Training Federation for Wales)

¹³⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 130

play in our post-16 landscape, and ensuring that learners have both choice and high-quality provision.”¹³⁹

The Chief Executive of Gower College Swansea submitted similar views.¹⁴⁰

98. Some stakeholders, including the National Training Federation for Wales (“NTfW”), suggested that a Welsh equivalent of the provider access legislation in place in England (commonly referred to as “the Baker Clause”) could improve the impartiality of information given to young people in Wales.¹⁴¹ The Baker Clause is a statutory requirement in England since 2018 for state secondary schools to provide access to information about technical education qualifications and apprenticeships to learners in years 8 to 13. However, a 2019 report for the Institute for Public Policy Research found that compliance with the Baker Clause had been “very poor”.¹⁴²

99. The UK Government has since sought to strengthen the legislation via the Skills and Post-16 Education Act.¹⁴³ However, in his report ‘Transitions to Employment’, Dr Hefin David MS concludes that “the very fact that the UK Government felt that it required additional legislation to improve the Clause’s effectiveness suggests that careful scrutiny is required.”¹⁴⁴ Some stakeholders, including the Welsh Local Government Association, also expressed doubt that a Welsh Baker Clause would work, based on what they report to be its limited effectiveness in England.¹⁴⁵

100. Some felt that there was a role for Estyn, or other inspection bodies, to hold schools to account for how well they inform learners about all post-16 options.¹⁴⁶ However, Estyn explained that although careers and advice is a focus of their

¹³⁹ Written evidence: RET 41 Medr

¹⁴⁰ Written evidence: RET 04 Mark Jones, Chief Executive, Gower College Swansea

¹⁴¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 316; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, page 10

¹⁴² IPPR, ‘The Baker Clause: One year on’, 9 January 2019; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, page 10

¹⁴³ UK Parliament, ‘Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [HL]: Progress of the Bill’, 29 April 2022

¹⁴⁴ Dr Hefin David MS, ‘Transitions to Employment’, June 2023, page 12

¹⁴⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 57; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 30

¹⁴⁶ Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 30

inspections, it can be challenging in practice to get an accurate picture of what's happening on the ground:

*"It is a focus in terms of the inspections. We triangulate information, we have questionnaires for pupils, we meet with young people, we ask their views, we look at information provided by schools—the nature of the curriculum and so on—and we receive feedback from parents. So, it is a quite a wide-ranging picture, but, of course, during an inspection, we don't have an opportunity perhaps to meet some of those children who aren't content with the guidance that they've received. They've left school perhaps, and so it's difficult for us to look retrospectively at the advice."*¹⁴⁷

101. Grŵp Llandrillo Menai advocated strengthening colleges' rights of access to 15-year-old learners and improving transition projects to ensure that learners can make informed choices about their steps post-16.¹⁴⁸ Colegau Cymru agreed, arguing that the Welsh Government has not given enough urgency to addressing the recommendations about giving colleges access to learners in Dr Hefin David MS's and the Lusher review.¹⁴⁹ Others highlighted the role that colleges themselves can play in actively engaging with schools to talk to learners, including from a young age.¹⁵⁰

102. The Cabinet Secretary for Education recognised that there were challenges arising from conflicts of interest between schools with sixth forms and other post-16 providers. She emphasised that "we want everybody to be putting the needs of learners at the heart of everything that they do", and that schools should support young people to consider the full range of options, "not just their own sixth form".

¹⁵¹

103. The Minister for Further and Higher Education stressed that the Welsh Government has made it clear to Medr that "there's no room for competition; we need to drive that out and work on collaboration." However, she dismissed an equivalent of the Baker Clause for Wales, arguing that there is existing legislation

¹⁴⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, [Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 217

¹⁴⁸ [Written evidence: RET 10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai](#)

¹⁴⁹ [Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru](#)

¹⁵⁰ [Written evidence: RET 22 Coleg y Cymoedd](#); [Written evidence: RET 35 Coleg Sir Gâr](#)

¹⁵¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, [Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 28

in Wales that requires collaboration and co-operation between post-16 institutions, which argued was a “better” approach because the legislation is broader than the Baker Clause.¹⁵²

The 14 to 16 Learner Entitlement

104. The Welsh Government issued statutory guidance on 14 to 16 year olds’ learning in September 2024. The guidance sets out that a school’s curriculum offer in Years 10 and 11 must “provide learners with a broad and balanced profile of learning and experiences” and should be designed with reference to the 14 to 16 learner entitlement. There are four components of the 14 to 16 learner entitlement:

- Reflections on learning and progress and post-16 planning;
- Qualifications in literacy and numeracy;
- Qualifications to encourage breadth; and
- Wider learning and experiences across the curriculum¹⁵³.

105. The Welsh Government is proposing to establish a 14 to 16 Learner Entitlement Indicators Framework (“LEIF”). The framework would set out what data schools should publish about transitions to post-16 education and training, replacing the Interim Key Stage 4 measures that have been in place in recent years. The consultation set out proposed ‘indicators’ for which outcomes data will be published. The indicators include information on post-16 and transition planning in a school; destinations of year 11 learners; and learners with no qualifications. The Cabinet Secretary for Education issued a written statement summarising the outcomes of that consultation in July 2025.¹⁵⁴

106. What little we heard from stakeholders about the Learner Entitlement and the proposed LEIF was positive. Careers Wales argued that getting schools to publish data on access to work experience, careers guidance, and time spent on transition planning would make the system more accountable.¹⁵⁵ Medr urged the

¹⁵² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 29-33

¹⁵³ Welsh Government, ‘14 to 16 learning guidance’

¹⁵⁴ Welsh Government, ‘Data and information to support learning and improvement for those working within the school system’, 10 January 2025; Welsh Government, ‘Written Statement: Consultation outcome - Data and information to support learning and improvement and the 14 to 16 Learner Entitlement Indicators Framework’, 16 July 2025

¹⁵⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 209

education system to embrace the 14-16 statutory guidance, arguing that “we need to be building in time to support learners with understanding what their post-16 routes are, and that’s all of their routes, not just in terms of the school route”.¹⁵⁶ Estyn reported that learners themselves would welcome more data from post-16 providers like schools and colleges. Some, they stated, feel that there is not enough information about the quality of institutions’ provision and the outcomes achieved by their learners.¹⁵⁷

107. The Cabinet Secretary for Education stated that the statutory guidance on 14-16 learning sets out “clear national expectations to help provide a consistent approach across all schools”. She also argued that the proposed published data would be “an important element of accountability”.¹⁵⁸ The Welsh Government set out separately that schools would be held to account for their delivery of the Learner Entitlement by Estyn in their inspection of secondary schools from September 2025, by Medr (in the context of their strategic duty around collaboration) and local authorities.¹⁵⁹

The role of Careers Wales

108. Careers Wales is remitted by the Welsh Government to provide careers advice to young people aged 14-19. It provides four levels of support, which are consistent for learners across Wales:

- Universal support: A ‘Career Check’ survey of year 10 pupils and the offer of a guidance interview before they leave statutory education.
- Career Check support: One to one support for young people identified as in need of guidance and coaching support.
- Targeted support: For young people at risk of becoming NEET.
- ALN support: One to one support for young people identified as having ALN.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 133

¹⁵⁷ Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

¹⁵⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 6

¹⁵⁹ ‘Letter from the Welsh Government to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee’, 19 May 2025

¹⁶⁰ Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales

109. Careers Wales also supports parents and carers via attendance at parents' events, one-to-one interactions with parents, termly newsletters, and by labour market information on its website. In the 2024-25 financial year, Careers Wales recorded 13,966 interactions with parents and guardians, and involvement in 3,021 parent activities. They also provide ongoing support to schools via a Curriculum Coordinator, who "provides bespoke consultancy and training". As part of their work with schools, they are piloting a Careers Wales Quality Award with 49 schools and settings across Wales to align with the cross-cutting theme of CWRE in the Curriculum for Wales. Careers Wales also provides targeted support in relation to work experience, which is discussed separately below.¹⁶¹

110. Careers Wales told us that it has two key performance indicators associated with careers guidance interviews:

- 95% of young people in year 11 who receive a guidance interview will "enter a positive destination". They report that they consistently exceed this target.
- 85% of young people who fall within the targeted groups for additional support (such as young people who have ALN, young carers, care experienced young people, young people entitled to free school meals, young people who are in EOTAS, and young people who are poor attenders) enter "a positive destination". They report that over 90% of this group enter a positive destination each year.¹⁶²

111. Stakeholders generally agreed that impartial and well-informed careers advice from independent careers advisors – as part of a wider network of advice-givers – is crucial to ensuring that learners make the right choices after year 11.¹⁶³

112. Some of the evidence we received praised Careers Wales' support for learners.¹⁶⁴ We heard particularly clear and consistent evidence about the targeted

¹⁶¹ Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales

¹⁶² Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales

¹⁶³ Written evidence: RET.07 Educ8 Training Group; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, *Record of Proceedings*, paragraph 133 (Colegau Crymu); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, *Record of Proceedings*, paragraph 204 (Careers Wales); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, *Record of Proceedings*, paragraph 137 (Cambrian Training); Written evidence: RET.42 Institute of Physics (IOP); Written evidence: RET.14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW); Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 14

¹⁶⁴ Written evidence: RET.05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT); Written evidence: RET.12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL);

support they provide for learners who have ALN, are eligible for free schools meals, or at risk of becoming NEET. A representative of Parents' Voices in Wales told us about her experiences of the support her children have received:

*"We have a designated Careers Wales adviser who works with kids with additional needs across the Swansea area, and she has been fantastic. So, I've seen her on several occasions and in terms of writing those plans ready to move on and that transition, and she actually met with my children yesterday. So, that element has been really, really positive for me, and I know who to go back to if I need to."*¹⁶⁵

113. We received extensive research evidence from Dr. Katy Huxley and Rhys Davies from Cardiff University, which found that careers guidance interviews from Careers Wales are highly effective for low attaining learners eligible for free school meals:

"Using statistical matching techniques we have compared the outcomes of 'similar' pupils who did or did not receive a careers guidance interview from Careers Wales. This approach provides a more accurate or nuanced assessment of the impact of careers guidance interviews for different groups of learners. Significantly, low attaining free-school meal (FSM) pupils were 42% less likely to become NEET if they received a careers guidance interview compared to an otherwise comparable group of pupils who do not have an interview."

Their research also found that learners with higher levels of attainment were more likely to enrol on higher level learning programmes if they had been in receipt of careers guidance.¹⁶⁶

114. Estyn's 2022 thematic report on Careers Wales' advice service came to similar conclusions. It stated that most young people eligible for a guidance session (which at the time was those eligible for targeted support) made "good progress

Written evidence: RET 14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)

¹⁶⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 186

¹⁶⁶ Written evidence: RET 21 Dr. Katy Huxley and Rhys Davies. Cardiff University

from their starting points”, and that “Advisers were effective and provided clear and appropriate advice”.¹⁶⁷

115. However, we also received a significant amount of negative feedback about Careers Wales’ careers guidance and advice service. Some reported that there was variation in the quality of the advice depending on individual careers advisors.¹⁶⁸ Others agreed that learners who receive targeted support are well-supported, but reported that learners in the middle – for whom it is not clear whether a vocational or academic route is the best option – are not being supported well enough.¹⁶⁹ Careers Wales themselves also acknowledged that it can be difficult to provide advice to children who are regularly not attending school.¹⁷⁰

116. A number of stakeholders raised concern about the impact of funding cuts on the quality of Careers Wales’ advice service.¹⁷¹ Cardiff Metropolitan University summarised why the cuts have impacted the quality of advice given to learners:

“The analysis of ADR Wales has been of particular interest and has emphasised the centrality of careers guidance in driving post-16 participation. Its papers suggest that interactions with Careers Wales can enable better choices for learners. ... Given the above, the University’s experience of careers guidance in recent years is a cause for concern. The cuts and restructuring at Careers Wales have led to confusion about appropriate contacts for guidance, affecting the support available to students. This has meant disparities in support across schools, resulting in reduced assistance for some learners and potentially impacting their educational outcomes.”

¹⁶⁷ Estyn, ‘Impartial careers advice and guidance to young people aged 14-16 years provided by Careers Wales advisers’, May 2022

¹⁶⁸ Written evidence: RET 12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL)

¹⁶⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 133 (ColegauCymru); Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea

¹⁷⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 202

¹⁷¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 154 (Educ8 Training); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 192 (Estyn); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 25 (ADEW); Written evidence: RET 03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC); Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 17

However, they stressed that “it is not the quality of the staff at Careers Wales but their reduction in number”.¹⁷²

117. Other concerns about Careers’ Wales’ careers advice service that appeared in our evidence included that:

- careers advisors in schools are reluctant to present apprenticeships as a viable option for all pupils, regardless of academic attainment;¹⁷³
- advisors may lack awareness of labour market information;¹⁷⁴
- high quality impartial advice and guidance is not consistently provided to all learners, such as children who do well in school (one young person reported to us that “Career advisors ignored Year 11 students after finding out that they wanted to stay on the school sixth form”¹⁷⁵) or that the advice is not given at the right time;¹⁷⁶
- there is a poor understanding of Elective Home Education within Careers Wales;¹⁷⁷ and
- certain parts of the Careers Wales website should be updated or improved.¹⁷⁸

118. We received a range of suggestions from stakeholders for how Careers Wales’ service could be improved. Some stakeholders, including Careers Wales themselves, reported that independent careers advice for all learners could start earlier – ideally by year 9.¹⁷⁹ Careers Wales estimated that this would cost £2.06

¹⁷² Written evidence: RET 30 Cardiff Metropolitan University

¹⁷³ Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea

¹⁷⁴ Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea

¹⁷⁵ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings’, March 2025, page 22

¹⁷⁶ Written evidence: RET 10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai; Written evidence: RET 26 Powys County Council; Written evidence: RET 42 Institute of Physics (IOP); Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 20

¹⁷⁷ Written evidence: RET 01 Education Otherwise

¹⁷⁸ Written evidence: RET 42 Institute of Physics (IOP); Written evidence: RET 33 Make UK

¹⁷⁹ Written evidence: RET 23 Horticultural Trades Association; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 20; RET 46 Dr Elisa Vigna & Andrea Meek, The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University; Written evidence: RET 13 Cambrian Training

million per year.¹⁸⁰ Others stressed the importance of one-on-one, personalised advice.¹⁸¹

119. Estyn, meanwhile, suggested that they carry out targeted inspectorate work of Careers Wales' careers advice service to ascertain whether some groups of young people are not receiving the independent advice that they need.¹⁸²

120. The Cabinet Secretary of Education acknowledged the importance of Careers Wales' independent careers advice, and welcomed the extension of their offer of an interview to all learners in schools, PRUs, special schools and known home educated children. She noted the work that Careers Wales is doing to support education professionals around CWRE in the Curriculum for Wales, although she later added that "there is more we can do" about "consistent implementation" in this area.¹⁸³

121. The Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership, whose portfolio includes oversight of Careers Wales, acknowledged our concerns that not all young people are getting the right information to help them make the best post-16 choices. He told us that he didn't "shy away" from looking to continuously improve Careers Wales' offer. However, he also highlighted Careers Wales' work with parents and bringing businesses and industry into schools, alongside work experience (which we discuss in detail below). He told us that Careers Wales will soon be setting out their plan for the year ahead:

*"... they're in the process now, on the back of the final budget that has been set by and agreed by the Senedd, of setting out their aspirational plan for the year ahead, and we'll be taking them to task against that and working alongside them against that to make sure that there is value for money and to try and iron out some of those particular issues that you've raised [about the quality of careers advice some young people are receiving]."*¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Letter from Careers Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 May 2025

¹⁸¹ Written evidence: RET.05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)

¹⁸² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 216

¹⁸³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 7 & 51

¹⁸⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 48, 20 & 50

Parents and carers

122. Stakeholders who raised the role of parents and carers in providing careers advice agreed that parents and carers play a key role in helping children decide on their next steps after year 11.¹⁸⁵ Careers Wales wrote that parents play “a vital role in shaping young people’s education and career decisions”.¹⁸⁶ They asserted that parents and carers are the most important sources of advice for young people after teachers.¹⁸⁷

123. However, we heard that parents and carers need more support to help their young people explore a wide range of post-16 options.¹⁸⁸ Parentkind reported findings from its National Parent Survey 2023, which found that only 39% of parents in Wales with a young person in secondary or post-16 education agree that their child’s school/college helps them to explore a broad range of career possibilities. This is significantly lower than parents in other parts of the UK (46% in England, 49% in Scotland, and 53% in Northern Ireland).¹⁸⁹ Similarly, the Senedd’s Citizen Engagement Team’s engagement work found that only 44% of the 140 parents and guardians surveyed felt very or fairly confident in their understanding of post-16 options.¹⁹⁰ Some vocational providers told us that some parents and carers are biased towards academic routes, or don’t understand the range of post-16 pathways that are available.¹⁹¹

124. Some of the parents we surveyed called for better communication between education institutions, local authorities, learners and parents/carers.¹⁹² Others

¹⁸⁵ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 31; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 142 (Medr); Written evidence: RET.03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC); Written evidence: RET.45 NPTC Group of Colleges

¹⁸⁶ ‘Letter from Careers Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee’, 16 May 2025

¹⁸⁷ Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales

¹⁸⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 142 (Medr); Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraphs 32-34

¹⁸⁹ Written evidence: RET.02 Parentkind

¹⁹⁰ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings’, March 2025, paragraph 20

¹⁹¹ Written evidence: RET.45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Written evidence: RET.07 Educ8 Training Group

¹⁹² Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings’, March 2025, paragraph 21

advocated better information for parents and carers about different kinds of courses¹⁹³ and face-to-face outreach events.¹⁹⁴

125. However, the Association of School and College Leaders (“ASCL”) told us that schools struggle to find the time to do so. They reported that schools are positive about Careers Wales advisors attending parents’ evenings.¹⁹⁵

126. Careers Wales told us that, with sufficient funding, they could do more to support parents and carers, such as:

- “Offering primary to secondary transition support through parental engagement at transition events...
- Hosting digital webinars for parents to enhance their knowledge, confidence, and understanding in supporting their children’s career decisions—covering topics such as labour market information (LMI), post-16 options, apprenticeships, and HE... [and]
- Establish[ing] regional digital parents’ evenings to allow parents to engage with their child’s careers adviser at a time convenient for them.”

They estimated that the combined cost of these interventions would be around £34,000 per year.¹⁹⁶

127. During oral scrutiny, the Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnerships told us that parents play a critical role in supporting their children. He said that “there’s very strong evidence out there that, when parents are informed, children then are also informed.”¹⁹⁷ The Cabinet Secretary for Education later told us that the 14-16 Learner Entitlement would be publicised to parents, as well as to learners themselves, which “creates an expectation from parents that kids should have that offer.”¹⁹⁸

¹⁹³ Written evidence: RET 03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC); Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group

¹⁹⁴ Written evidence: RET 38 Into Film Cymru

¹⁹⁵ Written evidence: RET 12 Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Cymru

¹⁹⁶ Letter from Careers Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 May 2025

¹⁹⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 14

¹⁹⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 55

Employers

128. As we explore in ‘Regional Skills Partnerships’ in chapter 2, employers have a key role to play in ensuring that up-to-date information about labour markets informs careers advice for young people. Coleg Sir Gâr asserted that “Employer engagement is a vital component in helping learners explore potential career pathways”.¹⁹⁹ However, most of the evidence we received suggested that employers’ engagement with schools is poor²⁰⁰ or inconsistent²⁰¹.

129. Stakeholders suggested two principle reasons why employers might struggle to engage with school-age children. First, that employers themselves struggle to find the time and money to engage with learners.²⁰² Second, that schools struggle to find the time and space in their learners’ timetables to facilitate employers.²⁰³

130. To improve employers’ engagement with learners, the NPTC Group of Colleges advocated expanding partnerships between schools and employers.²⁰⁴ Educ8 Training Group suggested that schools could benefit from certain post-16 providers, which have large databases and networks with both small and large employers.²⁰⁵ Meanwhile, Cambrian Training conceded that for smaller, independent providers of work-based training it might not be possible to go into every school. But they argued that apprenticeship providers could work together to give a consistent message to schools. They also argued for better collaboration between people giving careers advice and employers.²⁰⁶

131. The Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership agreed that employers’ engagement with learners is important, and praised models like the Cardiff Commitment (explored in chapter 2 of this report) but stressed that Careers Wales was the right body to lead on that work. He told us that “there’s more space for that [engagement with employers], particularly in the education business

¹⁹⁹ Written evidence: RET 35 Coleg Sir Gâr

²⁰⁰ Written evidence: RET 42 Institute of Physics (IOP)

²⁰¹ Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group; Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group; Written evidence: RET 05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT); Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraphs 39-40

²⁰² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 127 & 151 (Cambrian Training); Written evidence: RET 26 Powys County Council; Written evidence: RET 38 Into Film Cymru;

²⁰³ Written evidence: RET 26 Powys County Council; Written evidence: RET 35 Coleg Sir Gâr

²⁰⁴ Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges

²⁰⁵ Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group

²⁰⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 151; Written evidence: RET 13 Cambrian Training

partnership, which is run by Careers Wales”.²⁰⁷ The Welsh Government’s evidence also states that collaboration with employers is encouraged within its 14-16 learning statutory guidance.²⁰⁸

Other sources of careers advice

132. Some stakeholders told us that young people receive careers advice from other sources, alongside those explored above. The WLGA and the National Youth Advocacy Service (“NYAS”) Cymru highlighted the role of youth workers, which the former called Wales’ “secret weapon”.²⁰⁹ Other stakeholders agreed that youth workers were a key source of careers advice, but needed more training to do so effectively.²¹⁰ Some stakeholders highlighted the value learners place on peer-to-peer advice. Into Film Cymru and Gower College Swansea both called for local role models to provide careers advice, particularly in vocational routes, to help to normalise those non-traditional options.²¹¹

Case study 3: the Green Light Project

The Green Light Project is an intervention, delivered free of charge to schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf, for learners who have disengaged, or were in danger of disengaging, from school and becoming NEET post-16. The project includes:

- careers advice and guidance sessions with a designated Employment Education and Training co-ordinator;
- opportunities for work experience;
- visits to colleges and sixth form providers; and
- support and information about applying for work or an apprenticeship.²¹²

Using grant funding provided by the Welsh Government, a pilot for the Green Light Project ran in the Summer Term of the 2021/22 academic year. Evaluation

²⁰⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025 Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 14 & 20-21

²⁰⁸ [Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government](#)

²⁰⁹ [Written evidence: RET 25 The National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru \(NYAS\) Cymru](#); Children, Young People and Education Committee, [26 March 2025 Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 68 (WLGA)

²¹⁰ Welsh Parliament, [‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’](#), May 2025, paragraph 40

²¹¹ [Written evidence: RET 38 Into Film Cymru](#); [Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea](#)

²¹² Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, [‘Pathways at Post 16’](#)

data of the pilot noted success through a range of student and staff outcomes which included 79 of 82 learners having a destination for September and 90% of school staff reporting increased confidence in relation to learner destination data.

Following the success of the pilot, the Rhondda Cynon Taf Employment, Education and Training Team decided to fund the project for a further academic year. Data from February 2025 shows 180 pupils from 17 secondary schools across Rhondda Cynon Taf are currently engaged in the project (an increase from 137 pupils in 2023/24) with evaluations highlighting excellent feedback from the learners and school staff engaged with the Green Light Project.

Funding of the Green Light Project has been noted as an ongoing issue. An additional £45k of other grant funding has been contributed to allow for a 1-year additional post and to ensure continuation of the project to August 2026. The project has also utilised bids for additional funding since the 2021/22 pilot from various grant funding schemes.

Work experience

133. Prior to 2015, Careers Wales was remitted by the Welsh Government to maintain a national work experience database and undertake health and safety vetting of work experience placements. The Welsh Government removed this from Careers Wales' remit in 2015, and has since expected schools to take this on themselves (although work-related education is still part of the curriculum, as set out from paragraph 104). Careers Wales has since introduced an Education Business Partnership, as part of its overall service for employers and support for them in working with schools.

134. We consistently heard that work experience is important for young people as they get ready to leave compulsory education.²¹³ Estyn told the Senedd's Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee that "Overall, we feel that pupils benefit from meaningful work experience opportunities when they are able to access."²¹⁴ Into Film Cymru reported that meaningful work experience can deliver "meaningful and impactful opportunities to develop skills, raise aspirations, instil

²¹³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 129 (Parents' Voices in Wales); Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 346 (National Training Federation Wales); [Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea](#); Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings', March 2025, paragraphs 51-55

²¹⁴ [Letter from Estyn to the Chair of the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee](#), 14 March 2025

confidence, and play a key role in social mobility within communities across Wales.”²¹⁵ One young person wrote that their work experience was “very usefull because if i didnt have this experience i wouldnt know what to do after year 11”.²¹⁶ Another individual wrote:

“Even if young people try a work experience and they do not like it, that’s an important learning curve and can be used to recognise skills and target further opportunities.”²¹⁷

135. However, we also heard that work experience opportunities have reduced considerably since Careers Wales stopped providing a placing service on behalf of schools in 2015.²¹⁸ Of the 295 young people who responded to a question about work experience in the Senedd’s Citizen Engagement Team’s survey, only 24% said that they had received an opportunity to undertake work experience, and only 40% of the 140 parents/carers who responded said that their child had even been offered the opportunity to undertake work experience.²¹⁹ Similarly, research by Parentkind found that just 28% of parents of young people in secondary or post-16 education in Wales say that their child’s school/college provides access to useful or relevant work experience (compared to 37% in England, 40% in Scotland, and 43% in Northern Ireland).²²⁰ Estyn reported that there has been a reduction in opportunities over the last decade, although they have observed a “noticeable upwards trend” since the pandemic.²²¹

136. We also heard that many work experience placements are sourced and/or arranged by parents/carers, which places learners without access to that parental support at a disadvantage.²²² One parent wrote:

²¹⁵ Written evidence: RET 38 Into Film Cymru

²¹⁶ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings’, March 2025, paragraph 52

²¹⁷ Written evidence: RET 08 Individual

²¹⁸ Written evidence: RET 12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL); Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales; Written evidence: RET 14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)

²¹⁹ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings’, March 2025, paragraph 50

²²⁰ Written evidence: RET 02 Parentkind

²²¹ Letter from Estyn to the Chair of the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 14 March 2025

²²² Letter from Estyn to the Chair of the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 14 March 2025; Written evidence: RET 01 Education Otherwise; Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Written evidence: RET 18 Children’s Commissioner for Wales

*"Parents and pupils were expected to source opportunities without assistance and without sufficient notice. My child came to work with me for a few days, just so that he would be able to say he's done it."*²²³

Into Film Cymru agreed, reporting the findings of a YouGov poll that privately educated students are twice as likely to do multiple placements as state school students.²²⁴

137. We also heard that some learners source their own placements. Some sixth form students we spoke to told us that they had arranged work experience themselves in areas of their own interest. Others said they found alternate routes to gaining experience such as through the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme.²²⁵

138. We heard two principal reasons for the reduction in work experience opportunities. The first is that schools struggle to source and facilitate work experience placements for every learner. This mirrors the findings of Dr Hefin David MS in his report 'Transitions to Employment'. He concluded that "the resources for locating and risk assessing each employer is outside of their [schools'] capabilities", and recommended that "an offer of a meaningful work experience placement is made available to all learners aged 14-18 in Wales."²²⁶

139. The second is that there is a limited pool of host employers.²²⁷ We heard that appropriately supervising the learner, plus practical requirements like arranging appropriate insurance, can put employers off offering work experience placements.²²⁸ Others argued that opportunities are more limited in more rural areas.²²⁹ The National Training Federation Wales suggested that RSPs could help to improve work experience opportunities by drawing upon their employer

²²³ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings', March 2025, paragraph 56

²²⁴ Written evidence: RET 38 Into Film Cymru

²²⁵ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 42

²²⁶ Dr Hefin David MS, 'Transitions to Employment', June 2023, pages 3-4

²²⁷ Written evidence: RET 12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL)

²²⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 83 (UCAC); Letter from Estyn to the Chair of the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, 14 March 2025; Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 46

²²⁹ Written evidence: RET 05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)

networks.²³⁰ They, and Gower College Swansea advocated an extension of models like the Cardiff Commitment.²³¹

140. Educ8 Training, meanwhile, argued that better support should be provided to employers to enhance their capacity to offer high-quality placements.²³² Powys County Council reported fundamental problems with the links between schools and employers:

“Since Careers Wales stopped providing this service, schools are struggling with allocating the time needed to ensure meaningful and effective work experience is sourced. Instead, learners are often left to source their own work experience which relies on connections to parents/carers. Schools suggest that there is a lack of local employers to work with, however, local employers say they aren’t receiving requests, therefore there is a clear problem with the current process.”²³³

141. A number of organisations, including Estyn, called for Careers Wales to provide more support for work experience placements.²³⁴

142. We asked Careers Wales how much it would cost to offer a central work experience placing service for all schools across Wales. They told us that a model where they would aim to place 90% of all Key Stage 4 pupils would cost around £2.3 million per year. An alternative model, whereby Careers Wales creates and maintains a central database of vetted placements for schools to use, would cost around £150,000 per year. Careers Wales cautioned that work experience provision has become “quite fragmented” since 2015, and highlighted changes to working patterns (such as virtual working) that would impact any such opportunities. They advised that any central service would require a detailed feasibility study, including consultation with stakeholders, user research with schools, and a pilot to test a range of approaches. In the absence of such a study,

²³⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 349

²³¹ [Written evidence: RET 40 National Training Federation Wales \(NTFW\)](#); [Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea](#)

²³² [Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group](#)

²³³ [Written evidence: RET 26 Powys County Council](#)

²³⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 9 (NEU); [Letter from Estyn to the Chair of the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee](#), 14 March 2025; [Written evidence: RET 06 National Education Union \(NEU\) Cymru](#); [Written evidence: RET 18 Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#); Welsh Parliament, ‘[Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits](#)’, May 2025, paragraph 45

Careers Wales will be asking schools for their views about work experience during summer 2025.²³⁵

143. Careers Wales have delivered a tailored work experience (“TWE”) programme on behalf of the Welsh Government since 2022. Careers Wales explained that the programme operated in two schools in each local authority until March 2024: the school with the lowest attendance and the school with the highest levels of free school meal eligibility. In April 2024 that changed for funding reasons, at which point Careers Wales operated in 2 schools in 13 ‘clusters’ of local authorities. Eligibility criteria for the TWE is as follows:

- attendance (where learner attendance in the term preceding a referral is giving the school a cause for concern);
- behaviour (where learner behaviour is giving the school a cause for concern);
- attainment (where the learner is operating below individual targets);
- Looked after Children;
- learners who are entitled to free school meals (“FSM”);
- learners with ALN; and
- learners with English as an additional language.²³⁶

144. 910 learners have been placed as part of the TWE programme between September 2022 and March 2025. Careers Wales told us that certain learners would benefit from access to the TWE programme, including learners who were categorised as “unsuitable” for placement, learners attending PRUs, and learners in special schools. They estimated that it would cost approximately £800 per placement for these groups of learners.²³⁷

145. The Welsh Government recognised the value of work-related experience, and explained that the additional funding for Careers Wales aimed to “re-engage Key Stage 4 learners with their GCSE studies to support their future transition onto the

²³⁵ Letter from Careers Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 May 2025

²³⁶ Letter from Careers Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 May 2025

²³⁷ Letter from Careers Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 May 2025

next stage of their education or training.”²³⁸ The Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership stressed the importance of “the right type” of work experience, with the appropriate safeguards and health and safety checks. He acknowledged there was some work to do with Medr to “open the doors”. He explained that the Welsh Government has reduced the funding for Careers Wales’ TWE programme, but was keen for it to continue within Careers Wales’ existing budgets.²³⁹

146. In subsequent correspondence, the Welsh Government confirmed that 100 learners will be placed on a TWE placement this year (compared to 631 between 2022-24). This more limited TWE service will form part of Careers Wales’ core offer. They noted Careers Wales’ engagement with schools over summer 2025, which will result in “a detailed picture of what is currently on offer, what support has been identified as essential and potential options on what a Careers Wales offer could look like in the future.”²⁴⁰

Barriers to progression at 16

Provision through the medium of Welsh

147. Increasing the number of people who are able to use the Welsh language is a high-profile and long-term vision of the current and previous Welsh Governments. The Welsh Government has stated clearly that achieving the target of 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050 (known as “Cymraeg 2050”) will depend on learners being able to develop and use their Welsh language skills through every stage of compulsory and post-16 education and training.²⁴¹

148. In order to realise its Cymraeg 2050 ambitions, the Welsh Government recently introduced the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill. The Bill has subsequently received Royal Assent. The main objective of the legislation is to ensure all learners finish compulsory schooling as independent Welsh language users. We were responsible for scrutinising the Bill, and supported the general principles of the Bill, concluding that it would be an important tool to deliver the one million target.²⁴²

²³⁸ Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

²³⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 24-25

²⁴⁰ Letter from the Welsh Government to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 19 May 2025

²⁴¹ Welsh Government, ‘Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers’, December 2018, pages 17 & 32

²⁴² Welsh Parliament, ‘Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill: Stage 1 Report’, December 2024, paragraphs 33-37

149. Stakeholders generally agreed that post-16 education and training is crucial to achieving the Welsh Government’s policy ambitions in relation to the Welsh language.²⁴³ Medr has duties under the 2022 Act to encourage demand for, and participation in, tertiary education through the medium of Welsh. This is reflected in Medr’s draft strategic plan.²⁴⁴

150. However, the most commonly raised concern relating to the Welsh language throughout this inquiry has been that there is insufficient post-16 provision through the medium of Welsh. We heard numerous concerns that there are particular gaps in vocational post-16 provision, including from vocational providers themselves.²⁴⁵ The Welsh Language Commissioner reported that 15.9% of learning activities within sixth forms were undertaken entirely through the medium of Welsh, compared to just 0.2% in FE colleges and 0.5% in work-based learning.²⁴⁶ ADEW set out to us clearly the extent of their concerns:

“So, what you have is people who have invested in Welsh-medium education throughout their education career, they’ve done 16 years, or they get to 16 years of age having done 11 years of Welsh-medium education, all of a sudden going to a college that provides no Welsh-medium provision at all, to all intents and purposes. So, there’s no continuity. What we tell our learners is, ‘There is no meaningful Welsh education continuity for you in many routes.’ So, that conveys a very strong message. It is a concern.”²⁴⁷

151. We also heard that there have been some modest recent improvements in the levels of bilingual teaching in vocational courses, mainly due to the work of Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol,²⁴⁸ and increases to the number of Welsh-medium qualifications.²⁴⁹ However, the Coleg themselves acknowledged that there have

²⁴³ Written evidence: RET 41 Medr; Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner

²⁴⁴ Medr, ‘Strategic Plan 2025-30’, page 5

²⁴⁵ Written evidence: RET 41 Medr; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 375 (National Training Federation for Wales); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 38 (Cymdeithas Ysgolion Dros Addysg Gymraeg); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 46 (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol); Written evidence: RET 03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)

²⁴⁶ Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner

²⁴⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 83

²⁴⁸ Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner; Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru

²⁴⁹ Written evidence: RET 20 Qualifications Wales

not been significant increases in the number of learners who study wholly or very extensively through the medium of Welsh.²⁵⁰ Others, including Estyn, also recognised that significant gaps remain in wholly, or mainly, Welsh-language vocational post-16 provision.²⁵¹

Case study 4: Coleg Cambria's Welsh Language Provision

Coleg Cambria is attempting to improve the uptake of bilingual and Welsh-medium provision by addressing learner and staff confidence as well as the perceived relevance of the Welsh language.

On finding many Welsh-speaking apprentices were previously hesitant to undertake their assessments in Welsh or did not perceive Welsh as relevant to their career progression, the Coleg developed a mandatory Welsh language and culture course for all apprentices. This course was designed to raise awareness of Welsh as a valuable employment skill and contextualise the benefits of bilingualism as well as serving as a foundation for learners to develop their Welsh knowledge and signposts additional opportunities for learners to enhance their skills.

The Coleg also introduced a detailed tracking system for fluent Welsh-speaking learners from enrolment to ensure they are consistently encouraged and supported to continue studying in Welsh or bilingually.

There is also an “opt-out” default set for Health and Care learners where at least 50% of their assessments are now required to be in Welsh by default. The “opt-out” system shifts the expectation from Welsh-medium assessment being the exception to one of being the norm which results in increasing uptake.

According to Estyn's effective practice article, the impact of this work has included:

- that nearly all learners develop an improved understanding of the Welsh language and culture;

²⁵⁰ Written evidence: RET 43 Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol

²⁵¹ Estyn, 'Increasing the use of the Welsh language in the post-16 sectors: Evaluating the effectiveness of Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol Welsh-medium and bilingual training schemes for the Further Education and Apprenticeships sector', March 2025; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 48-50 (UCAC)

- that 95% of learners in the provider learner survey confirmed that they are given the opportunity to develop their Welsh language skills;
- increased opportunities for all learners in health and care, childcare, horticulture and agriculture to undertake assessments in Welsh or follow their programme bilingually; and
- that learners are supported to develop greater confidence in using Welsh in the workplace with 84% of employers in the employer survey agreeing the college offers Welsh language training opportunities for their apprenticeships.²⁵²

152. We heard that sixth forms in Welsh-language schools have been a strength of Welsh-language post-16 provision. Some stakeholders argued that Welsh-medium schools are the only post-16 providers who are contributing to achieving the Cymraeg 2050 targets.²⁵³

153. But despite sixth forms' contribution to Welsh-language education post-16, we also heard concerns about gaps in academic options through the medium of Welsh. Careers Wales highlighted that there may be a lack of opportunity to study science, technology, engineering and maths ("STEM") subjects in particular through the medium of Welsh.²⁵⁴ UCAC, meanwhile, suggested that funding restrictions make it difficult for some sixth forms to offer a full range of options to learners in Welsh, and that merging Welsh- and English-language learners in small dual stream schools tends to result in everyone studying through the medium of English.²⁵⁵

154. Workforce capacity was also a key theme in the evidence we received about gaps in post-16 provision delivered through the medium of Welsh. Some stakeholders stressed to us that it can be challenging, or even impossible, to recruit Welsh-language teachers and lecturers at post-16 levels.²⁵⁶ The issue of

²⁵² Estyn, 'Welsh Language and Culture within work-based learning', 28 March 2025

²⁵³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 38 (Cymdeithas Ysgolion Dros Addysg Gymraeg); Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner.

²⁵⁴ Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales.

²⁵⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 48-50; Written evidence: RET 03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC).

²⁵⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 83 (ADEW); Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges.

workforce capacity in the pre-16 education sector was also a key theme of our scrutiny of the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill.²⁵⁷

155. Educ8 Training reported that some apprenticeship providers do not have sufficient Welsh skills to deliver the technical elements of the apprenticeship in Welsh, even if they have conversational Welsh.²⁵⁸ Others said that there was a need to upskill existing staff.²⁵⁹ ColegauCymru reported that Coleg Gwent, supported by Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, has increased bilingual learners in key areas such as childcare and health care from 7% to 52% over the last five years.²⁶⁰ The National Centre for Learning Welsh, meanwhile, told us that several hundred staff are currently being upskilled. They advocated extending these kinds of schemes in future to help existing speakers become confident teaching through the medium of Welsh.²⁶¹

156. We also heard that some learners do not progress to post-16 education or training through the medium of Welsh because they actively choose not to. This can happen because the learner lacks confidence in Welsh-language skills, as the Welsh Language Commissioner²⁶² and Cambrian Training highlighted.²⁶³

157. However, we also received evidence suggesting that many Welsh-speaking learners actively choose English-language courses, whether or not Welsh-language equivalents are available and irrespective of their levels of confidence.²⁶⁴ This was a particularly strong theme across the evidence provided by vocational post-16 providers.²⁶⁵ Cambrian Training told us that many Welsh-speaking learners are keen to speak in Welsh, but prefer to do the written parts of the qualifications

²⁵⁷ Welsh Parliament, 'Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill: Stage 1 Report', December 2024, paragraph 38 onwards

²⁵⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 182

²⁵⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 67 (UCAC)

²⁶⁰ Written evidence: RET.34 Colegau Cymru

²⁶¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 2 105-106

²⁶² Welsh Language Commissioner, 'Post-compulsory education and the Welsh language: the learners' voice', 17 November 2023, page 3

²⁶³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 184

²⁶⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 55

²⁶⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 375 (National Training Federation for Wales); Written evidence: RET.24 Estyn; Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales; Written evidence: RET.07 Educ8 Training Group

in English.²⁶⁶ The Welsh Language Commissioner reported that some learners believe that studying in English is better for their future employment prospects.²⁶⁷ Similarly, Educ8 Training reported that some learners opt for English-medium post-16 education to improve their English language skills.²⁶⁸

158. We heard that improving the information given to learners and their parents/carers about the benefits of Welsh-language post-16 education and training will improve take-up of Welsh-medium provision. Careers Wales acknowledge their role in promoting the value of Welsh-language skills as part of their careers interviews.²⁶⁹

159. However, the National Centre for Learning Welsh and Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol agreed that the information given to learners about Welsh-medium post-16 options is inconsistent, and should be improved.²⁷⁰ Cymdeithas Ysgolion Dros Addysg Gymraeg (“CYDAG”), meanwhile, told us that there should be work at a national level to engage with parents about the benefits of Welsh-medium study.²⁷¹ These views were consistent with the Welsh Language Commissioner’s evidence to us:

“This [learners’ belief that studying in English post-16 would be better for them] underlines the need to raise awareness of the opportunities available to learners to use their Welsh language skills as they continue with their education and move into the world of work, including the benefits of doing so. This should be done as part of the package of information about education and training options, career support and work experience offered to young people, by schools, post-compulsory education and training providers and Careers Wales.”²⁷²

²⁶⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, **13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings**, paragraphs 180-181

²⁶⁷ Welsh Language Commissioner, ‘**Post-compulsory education and the Welsh language: the learners’ voice**’, 17 November 2023, page 3

²⁶⁸ **Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group**

²⁶⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, **6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings**, paragraph 256

²⁷⁰ **Written evidence: RET 43 Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. Written evidence: RET 39 The National Centre for Learning Welsh [Senedd translation]**

²⁷¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, **13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings**, paragraph 13

²⁷² **Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner**

160. Other, less frequently-raised barriers to post-16 Welsh-medium education and training included:

- that Welsh-medium provision is usually more sparse, which makes it less accessible, putting some learners off (see paragraph 190 under ‘Transport’ below)²⁷³;
- the funding model: Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol argued that because funding follows the learner, this penalises Welsh-medium groups where learner numbers are “necessarily” going to be lower²⁷⁴; and
- that FE colleges struggle to promote their Welsh language offers because Welsh-medium schools with sixth forms restrict their access.²⁷⁵

161. We heard that the collective impact of all these barriers is that learners either move into English-medium post-16 education and training, or that they sacrifice what they want to study in order to continue learning through the medium of Welsh.²⁷⁶

162. We received a range of suggestions from stakeholders to improve the quality and availability of Welsh-medium post-16 provision:

- One learner we spoke to who was studying at a college called for improved Welsh provision post-16, and for more support for learners who had gone to Welsh-language schools to adjust to English-speaking environments if Welsh-language provision isn’t available.²⁷⁷
- Medr and others argued for better collaboration between sixth forms and colleges.²⁷⁸ CYDAG argued that:

²⁷³ Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner; Written evidence: RET 26 Powys County Council; Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges;

²⁷⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 29 & 67

²⁷⁵ Written evidence: RET 35 Coleg Sir Gâr

²⁷⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 54-55 (UCAC); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 247 (Careers Wales); Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner

²⁷⁷ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 59

²⁷⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 189 (ColegauCymru); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 170-171 (Medr); Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner

*"It's just a matter of looking at where the provision can be best provided, and whether developing that provision in this place undermines provision that already exists, and whether there wouldn't be a better use of the time, funding, energy and enthusiasm that lies behind that."*²⁷⁹

- More qualifications in Welsh.²⁸⁰
- More funding for post-16 provision through the medium of Welsh.²⁸¹
- A workforce plan to ensure that the workforce has the required Welsh-language skills.²⁸²
- Ensuring that employers use the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages ("CEFR") to clarify the Welsh-language skills required for jobs, thereby facilitating young people's pathways to employment.²⁸³ (CEFR is a framework used in many European countries to describe language ability, and will be integral to implementation of the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025.²⁸⁴)
- Providing accredited 'learn Welsh' lessons in tertiary education courses.²⁸⁵

163. The Welsh Government set out that provision of tertiary education through the medium of Welsh is one of Medr's strategic duties. They explained that Medr will work alongside Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and other stakeholders to ensure the duties are met. The Coleg has been provided with over £10 million of funding for 2025-26 to extend Welsh-medium programme by expanding its programme of development grants for FE colleges and apprenticeship providers.²⁸⁶

164. The Minister for Further and Higher Education acknowledged our concerns about Welsh-medium provision post-16. However, she described the picture of

²⁷⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 59

²⁸⁰ Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 83 (ADEW)

²⁸¹ Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru

²⁸² Written evidence: RET 06 National Education Union (NEU) Cymru

²⁸³ Written evidence: RET 39 The National Centre for Learning Welsh [Senedd translation]

²⁸⁴ Welsh Parliament, 'Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill: Stage 1 Report', December 2024, paragraph 183 onwards

²⁸⁵ Written evidence: RET 39 The National Centre for Learning Welsh [Senedd translation]

²⁸⁶ Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

Welsh-language provision as “improving”, and praised the work of Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and post-16 providers to improve availability. She highlighted that over 20% of activities in colleges and over 40% in work-based training include some Welsh delivery. She cited new Welsh-medium provision in areas like dentistry and veterinary science, and the importance of such provision for local communities. The Minister added that the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and the National Centre for Learning Welsh have been tasked with developing an action plan to increase Welsh use in post-16 education.²⁸⁷

Disabilities and Additional Learning Needs (“ALN”)

165. The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (“the ALN Act”) replaced the old Special Education Needs (“SEN”) system. It has been introduced in phases. Learners who started studying in post-16 institutions from September 2023 were the first to be supported under the new system.

166. Since 2022, we have been undertaking a long-term inquiry scrutinising the implementation of the ALN reforms. This extensive body of work has identified a series of concerns about the implication of the ALN Act and the associated ALN Code. We set out our concerns in full in an interim report, dated July 2024.²⁸⁸

167. Although we have not yet considered the implementation of the ALN Act specifically in post-16 institutions, the themes in our evidence for this inquiry were consistent with our findings to date about provision for compulsory school-age learners. Research from the Wales Centre for Public Policy has found that pupils with disabilities are less likely to attend sixth form or FE, with almost a fifth of the most severely disabled pupils not progressing to either setting.²⁸⁹ Similarly, researchers from Cardiff University reported that learners with additional learning needs and/or disabilities have lower rates of post-16 participation.²⁹⁰ The NEU raised significant concern about post-16 participation for learners with ALN:

“The statistics are really stark, aren’t they, for young people with additional learning needs, and they coincide particularly with the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. Pushing down the

²⁸⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 150-155

²⁸⁸ Welsh Parliament, [‘Implementation of education reforms: Interim report’](#), July 2024

²⁸⁹ Wales Centre for Public Policy, [‘Understanding inequity in tertiary education: Data analysis key findings’](#), October 2024, page 9

²⁹⁰ [Written evidence: RET.21 Dr. Katy Huxley and Rhys Davies, Cardiff University](#)

responsibilities to schools and colleges to support young people without the funding and the training and the support to do that seems to definitely be correlating with those young people not being in education, employment or training. That appears to be the correlation. The statistics are horrible as a disabled person, I find it chilling.”²⁹¹

168. The availability and quality of provision for disabled learners and learners with ALN was the most common theme across the evidence we received. Different stakeholders reported that, fundamentally, expectations for learners with ALN were too low. One individual with a child who has ALN told us that their child’s school has “little aspiration or expectation” that they will go on to HE, despite the parent’s belief that she can.²⁹² One young person who responded to the Senedd’s Citizen Engagement Team’s survey felt that they had been discriminated against because of their additional needs. They wished their options could have been more inclusive. Others said that their schools hadn’t given them enough information about their post-16 options, or had refused to discuss them altogether.²⁹³

169. Many agreed that mainstream provision is not flexible enough for needs of learners with ALN. The NASUWT called it “mixed and haphazard”. Careers Wales told us that there is a lack of appropriate Level 1 provision for learners with ALN. Estyn reported that many colleges struggle to recruit staff with the necessary skills to support learners.²⁹⁴ The Children’s Commissioner, meanwhile, raised a series of concerns about provision within the FE sector, including funding, workforce capacity, and the quality of information held about learners. She did report improved expertise across Welsh colleges and better partnership working with local authorities.²⁹⁵

170. Others argued that not all learners with ALN should be encouraged to follow ‘mainstream’ pathways. Representatives of Parents’ Voices in Wales argued that

²⁹¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 74

²⁹² Children, Young People and Education Committee, [29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 143 (Parents’ Voices in Wales); [Written evidence: RET.08 Individual; Written evidence: RET.46 Dr Elisa Vigna & Andrea Meek. The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University](#)

²⁹³ Welsh Parliament, [‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings’](#), March 2025, paragraphs 38 & 67

²⁹⁴ [Written evidence: RET.05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers \(NASUWT\)](#); Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 271; [Written evidence: RET.24 Estyn](#)

²⁹⁵ [Written evidence: RET.18 Children’s Commissioner for Wales](#)

the education system should focus on a journey of building life skills, building on learners' strengths, recognising that the learner's journey may not be traditionally academic.²⁹⁶ Down's Syndrome Association, meanwhile, called for better access to inclusive college courses and a review of specialist residential provision to see how that model of support for learners could be replicated within local communities.²⁹⁷

171. Researchers from the National Centre for Mental Health at Cardiff University argued that there should be a wider range of supported internships developed with local companies, because apprenticeship entry requirements can be too high for some learners.²⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Natspec and Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance argued that some learners should be provided with specialist post-16 provision, rather than pushing them into mainstream settings that aren't right for them:

*"Different FEIs have different offers to learners with learning difficulties and disabilities and we remain concerned that a prevailing place-based assumption that inclusion means 'all learners being educated in a mainstream setting' risks denying some young people with the most complex needs the specialist further education they need ... We must not allow the principle of educating all young people in a mainstream setting to take priority over the right of learners with learning difficulties and / or disabilities to a learning experience of equally high quality to their non-disabled peers."*²⁹⁹

172. We heard a significant number of concerns about the impact of the ALN Act and Code on post-16 progression for learners with ALN. Natspec and Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance highlighted a series of implications of the ALN Act and the associated Code, including:

- Careers Wales Advisors have lost their statutory roles in facilitating routes to further education and training for learners with complex ALN. The Act

²⁹⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 210

²⁹⁷ Written evidence: RET 16 Down's Syndrome Association

²⁹⁸ Written evidence: RET 46 Dr Elisa Vigna & Andrea Meek. The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University

²⁹⁹ Written evidence: RET 27 Natspec and Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance (TSANA)

assumes that learners from special schools will progress to their local FE college's 'independent living skills' provision.

- A general two-year limit to FE learning, which is not appropriate for learners with ALN, who may take longer to learn and therefore require three years or more to complete programmes of education.
- That the ALN Code does not define what FE means for a young person with complex ALN and when it is deemed to have commenced.
- Inconsistent and inadequate Individual Development Plans ("IDPs") that lack ambition for learners, fail to formally recognise learners' therapeutic needs, and IDPs that are ended if FE education institutions state they are unable to meet the learner's needs.³⁰⁰ The WLGA and ADEW also reported that not all colleges or training providers can meet the requirements of individual learners' IDPs.³⁰¹

173. Others focused on the funding and resourcing implications of the ALN Act. The Children's Commissioner estimated that Cambrian Training reported that the cost of ALN within the further education sector is predicted to reach between £2m - £6m in 2025/26.³⁰² There is a "lack of both funding and flexibility within current programmes to deliver the necessary support" for ALN learners hoping to access apprenticeships.³⁰³ The NASUWT summed up the views of some representatives of FE institutions³⁰⁴:

"The assumption that the FE/HE institution can provide for the ALN needs of pupils transitioning there takes no account of the individual and specific needs, nor do FEIs have the funds to cover these specific personal ALN needs."

They reported that parents state they felt better supported when ALN funding was centrally managed by the Welsh Government, rather than costs being shared across local authorities, health boards and FE institutions.³⁰⁵ On the other hand,

³⁰⁰ Written evidence: RET.27 Natspec and Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance

³⁰¹ Written evidence: RET.14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)

³⁰² Written evidence: RET.18 Children's Commissioner for Wales; Written evidence: RET.32 Welsh Language Commissioner

³⁰³ Written evidence: RET.13 Cambrian Training

³⁰⁴ Written evidence: RET.31 Gower College Swansea

³⁰⁵ Written evidence: RET.05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)

Down's Syndrome Association reported that delays in Welsh Government agreeing funding have pushed some learners to becoming NEET.³⁰⁶

174. The quality of careers advice given to learners with ALN and their families was also raised by some stakeholders.³⁰⁷ We heard from parents of children with ALN, and professionals who work with them, that careers advice should be clear, explicit and start early.³⁰⁸ However, the NASUWT felt that schools may not have the capacity to do so.³⁰⁹ Natspec and Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance reported that their own research with parents/carers of learners with ALN found that two thirds of parents rated the quality of the information their young person received as "poor".³¹⁰

175. The Down's Syndrome Association stated that information for learners with Down's syndrome is "patchy at best and generally inadequate". They added that there doesn't appear to be a one-stop-shop for learners who have Down's syndrome and their families across Wales to access information about post-16 provision and training options, especially within the specialist sector".³¹¹ An individual shared similar views.³¹²

176. The NASUWT recommended that Careers Wales advisors should be supporting learners with ALN.³¹³ However, Careers Wales themselves noted that the reduction in numbers of learners identified as having ALN (which has reduced by over 50% since the introduction of the ALN Act³¹⁴) has impacted on the numbers of learners who receive their additional one-to-one ALN support.³¹⁵

³⁰⁶ Written evidence: RET 16 Down's Syndrome Association;

³⁰⁷ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 34

³⁰⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 118-120 (Parents' Voices in Wales); Written evidence: RET 46 Dr Elisa Vigna & Andrea Meek, The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University

³⁰⁹ Additional evidence: The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) – 18 February 2025

³¹⁰ Written evidence: RET 27 Natspec and Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance

³¹¹ Written evidence: RET 16 Down's Syndrome Association

³¹² Written evidence: RET 08 Individual

³¹³ Additional evidence: The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)

³¹⁴ The number of learners identified as having SEN/ALN has fallen from 93,000 in 2020/21 to 44,000 in 2024/25. See: Welsh Government, 'Schools' census results', 23 July 2025

³¹⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 193 (Parents' Voices in Wales); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 276 (Careers Wales)

177. We also heard that people with learning disabilities face significant challenges when they enter the workforce.³¹⁶ Stakeholders told us that learners with ALN have fewer opportunities for work experience, or that work experience is limited to artificial situations.³¹⁷

178. Researchers at the National Centre for Mental Health at Cardiff University argued that it is crucial to offer more post-16 training and awareness-raising activity for employers “to challenge stereotypes and educate them on the benefits of a diverse workforce”. They also called for a ‘National Job Coaching Strategy for Wales’:

“Since the Engage to Change project ended, there is no bespoke supported employment provision in many areas of Wales. People who are not suitable to start a supported apprenticeship, cannot access support and will stay economically inactive. Once again, there is a need for Welsh Government to have a National Job Coaching Strategy for Wales, where job coach support is provided to anyone who needs it, available in various stages of employment. Job coach support should be embedded in every employment programme, to ensure equity of opportunity.”³¹⁸

179. Careers Wales acknowledged that “there are opportunities to strengthen and enhance our offer for ALN learners”. They estimated that offering job coaching to 20% of the post-16 cohort in special schools (approximately 254 learners) and resource bases – which would include sourcing work experience placements, delivering small group sessions twice annually, and working with schools – would cost around £2m per year.³¹⁹

180. The Welsh Government cited figures from Medr showing that 86% of learners with SEN or ALN provision progress to tertiary education, compared to 91% of learners without SEN or ALN provision. They note the findings of a recent Estyn thematic review, which found that colleges are at “varying stages” in

³¹⁶ Written evidence: RET 46 Dr Elisa Vigna & Andrea Meek, The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University

³¹⁷ Written evidence: RET 16 Down's Syndrome Association; Written evidence: RET 08 Individual; Written evidence: RET 05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)

³¹⁸ Written evidence: RET 46 Dr Elisa Vigna & Andrea Meek, The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University

³¹⁹ Letter from Careers Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 16 May 2025

implementation of the ALN Act. They added that Medr has provided £16.9 million in the 2024-25 financial year to support FE institutions with ALN provision.³²⁰

181. The Cabinet Secretary for Education acknowledged challenges in ALN provision post-16, but added that it is “early days” under the new system for colleges. She praised the work of the new National Implementation Lead for Post-16 ALN to “prepare FEIs for implementation, to train staff, increase understanding, set up systems, and improve provision”. The Cabinet Secretary went on explain that some learners are placed in specialist provision, rather than mainstream colleges, and that Medr would be working to ensure that young people with ALN are supported to access the learning “that is right for them”. She also praised the work of the Cardiff Commitment in relation to how it can support learners with ALN.³²¹

Transport

182. The current learner travel statutory guidance was published in June 2014. Local authorities have discretion over whether they provide free home to provision transport to post-16 learners, having to ensure that any decision applies to all learners in similar circumstances living in that authority’s area. However, a local authority “must have regard in particular” to needs of “learners who are disabled or with learning difficulties.”³²²

183. The Welsh Government announced a Review of Post-16 Learner Travel in 2019.³²³ However, progress was delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the scope of the review was widened to also include 4-16 year olds. The Cabinet Secretary for Transport confirmed in a Plenary debate in March 2025 that he and the Cabinet Secretary for Education would be holding a learner travel summit on 9 May, and would be consulting on refreshed guidance after the summit.³²⁴

184. The Welsh Government’s consultation on their revised learner travel guidelines was published on 11 June 2025, after we had taken evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and her Ministers. The majority of amendments to the guidance reflect changes to legislation or policy since the guidance was originally published in 2014. However, the legislation relating to learner travel

³²⁰ Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

³²¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025: Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 22 & 145-148

³²² Welsh Government, ‘Learner Travel: Statutory Provision and Operational Guidance’, June 2014 page 17

³²³ Welsh Government, ‘Written Statement: Review of Post 16 Learner Travel’, 13 November 2019

³²⁴ Plenary, 25 March 2025: Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 227-228

entitlement has not changed since 2008. The only substantive proposed change relating to transport for post-16 learners is that the guidance explicitly notes that local authorities should publish information about learner travel provision that is “easy to find” and support available to all post-16 learners, including provision and support that are not provided by the local authority (such as FE colleges).³²⁵

185. The Welsh Government has also launched a pilot scheme capping single bus fares in Wales at £1, and whole-day tickets at £3, for young people aged 16-21 and under.³²⁶ This is being extended to 5-15 year olds from November 2025.³²⁷ In October 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales confirmed that the pilot would be “rigorously evaluated” as part of an independent evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the scheme.³²⁸

186. Throughout this Senedd, we have heard about the negative impact of learners struggling with travel on their school attendance, with disproportionate impacts on learners with ALN.³²⁹ In our 2022 report on pupil absence, we made the following recommendation, which the Welsh Government accepted in principle:

“The Welsh Government should ensure that decisions on learner travel are driven by the individual and specific needs of children and young people. To support local authorities in taking this approach, the Welsh Government should ensure that local authorities have sufficient funding to ensure all children and young people have access to appropriate transport options to get them to school safely. The current review should look to prioritising a learner first solution; and should be radical in looking for innovative solutions.”³³⁰

187. We frequently heard concerns about the impact of transport for learners on post-16 participation. Attendees of our stakeholder event told us that travel can be a reason why learners choose one post-16 option over another, or even why some

³²⁵ Welsh Government, ‘[Consultation Document: Learner travel operational guidance 2025](#)’, 11 June 2025, pages 27-28

³²⁶ Welsh Government, ‘[Budget agreement secures extra £100m for public services](#)’, February 2025

³²⁷ Welsh Government, ‘[£1 bus fares for young people from September](#)’, July 2025

³²⁸ [Plenary, 7 October 2025: Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 424

³²⁹ Welsh Parliament, ‘[Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare?](#)’, pages 138-1743 & 159

³³⁰ Welsh Parliament, ‘[Pupil absence](#)’, November 2022

learners do not engage in post-16 education and training at all.³³¹ Colegau Cymru stressed to us that transport is “probably the biggest single financial challenge and practical challenge that a lot of learners face”.³³² They drew on Welsh Government data, which has found that 41% of 16 to 24 years olds identified transport as being the number one barrier to getting a new course, training or a job.³³³ Others, including Estyn, reported that transport can drive learners’ post-16 decisions, particularly in rural areas.³³⁴ The NASUWT set out clearly the choices facing many learners:

“So, to move to an FE college or similar provision will invariably involve further distance to travel, a longer distance to travel, and a change in the dynamics of getting to that place, staying in that place and so on and so forth ... It can be a barrier to some pupils who are making a decision based on certain factors, if the decision they have is, ‘Well, I can stay in my local school 3 miles away, or I can travel every day on the 6 o’clock bus in the morning to the FE college 20 miles away; I know what choice I’m going to make.’”³³⁵

188. Concerns from stakeholders related to both the cost and availability of transport. On cost, some stakeholders noted the variation across local authorities and across colleges in the level of financial assistance they provide to learners.³³⁶ Estyn reported “heightened concern” among college leaders in relation to recent and proposed changes to learner transport arrangements within certain local

³³¹ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 50

³³² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 195

³³³ Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru

³³⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 201 (Parents’ Voice in Wales); Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 235 (Estyn); Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales; Written evidence: RET 14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW); Written evidence: RET 10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai; Written evidence: RET 05 The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)

³³⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 35

³³⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 235 (Estyn); Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru; Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner; Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges

authorities.³³⁷ Others stressed the impact of the cost of transport on learners from low-income families in particular.³³⁸

189. Some stakeholders were optimistic about the impact of the £1 bus fare cap for young people on improving the affordability of travel.³³⁹ Others, however, stressed that the availability of travel is also a major concern, particularly for apprentices who need to travel where employers are based, and learners whose vocational courses extend beyond office hours.³⁴⁰ Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol told us:

“As one who comes from a very small village in rural Carmarthenshire, Llanboidy, where a bus goes once a week to the nearest town, leaving at 10 a.m. and returning at 2 p.m., that isn’t practical in terms of enabling a pupil to access any provision. So, it impacts schools and colleges alike in some areas. So, it’s important to look at both issues.”

They, and others, pointed out that the £1 bus fares would not help learners who need to travel by train, in areas where “those bus operators just don’t exit”, or if you’re travelling on trains “that have been cancelled and have to swap three, four or five times”.³⁴¹ Some of the learners we spoke to stressed that the unreliability of public transport often means that you are late for college, even when the transport has been provided to learners by the colleges themselves.³⁴²

³³⁷ Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

³³⁸ Written evidence: RET 10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai; Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 264; Written evidence: RET 37 Individual

³³⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 95 (WLGA)

³⁴⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 194 (Cambrian Training); Written evidence: RET 23 Horticultural Trades Association; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 264; Written evidence: RET 37 Individual; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 55

³⁴¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 199 (ColegauCymru); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 90-91 (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 422 (National Training Federation for Wales); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 198 (Educ8 Training Group)

³⁴² Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 51

190. We also heard that some groups of learners are disproportionately affected by travel challenges. CYDAG explained that whereas colleges are typically located close to transport hubs, Welsh-medium sixth forms can be difficult to access. They explained this can pose practical and financial barriers for some learners wanting to continue their studies through the medium of Welsh.³⁴³ Others shared similar views.³⁴⁴ Careers Wales told us that learners with ALN sometimes can't attend their desired post-16 provision because sometimes "the availability isn't there."³⁴⁵

191. Most of the solutions to the transport challenges facing learners that we heard centred around providing free transport for learners. The Welsh Language Commissioner, the Children's Commissioner, ColegauCymru and others called for a nationally funded travel entitlement for young people aged 16-18 in education or work-based training courses.³⁴⁶ UCAC argued for free transport for learners who want to continue their post-16 education and training through the medium of Welsh.³⁴⁷ Having identified transport as a significant barrier to post-16 participation, the Welsh Government-commissioned independent review of the Education Maintenance Allowance ("EMA") recommended that Welsh Government and Medr explore how it could provide free transport to learners from low-income families to both school and college settings.³⁴⁸

Case study 5: Scotland's Young Persons' (Under 22s) Free Bus Travel Scheme

Scotland's Young Persons' Free Bus Travel Scheme ("YPTS") allows all children and young people aged 5-21 resident in Scotland to access free bus travel. The YPTS includes free travel throughout Scotland on nearly all local registered and long-distance scheduled bus services, though there are a few exceptions.³⁴⁹

Legislation initially enabled 5-18 year olds to access free bus travel, but the scheme was later amended to include all those aged 5-21 (approximately

³⁴³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 87

³⁴⁴ Written evidence: RET 18 Children's Commissioner for Wales; Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner

³⁴⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 265

³⁴⁶ Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner; Written evidence: RET 18 Children's Commissioner for Wales; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 207 (ColegauCymru); Written evidence: RET 10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai

³⁴⁷ Written evidence: RET 03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)

³⁴⁸ Nia Bryer, Heledd Bebb and Tanwen Grover, 'A review of the Education Maintenance Allowance in Wales', 17 July 2024, paragraph 13.22

³⁴⁹ Transport Scotland, 'Young Persons' (Under 22s) Free Bus Travel'

930,000 individuals).³⁵⁰ By March 2025, 200 million free bus journeys had been made since the commencement of the YPTS, as is, on 31 January 2022.³⁵¹

A Freedom of Information (FOI) release from November 2024 stated that the total reimbursement costs to bus operators were:

- 2022-23: £107.81 million
- 2023-24: £164.22 million

As of September 2024, the implementation and ongoing operational costs of the YPTS totalled £6.45 million.³⁵²

An FOI release from April 2025 indicated the total cost of the scheme for 2024-25 was £165.72 million (inclusive of implementation and operational costs). These latest figures are subject to change as operators have up to 12 months to claim for journey reimbursement.³⁵³

The evaluation of the scheme includes three stages:

- a baseline study establishing travel behaviour, attitudes and perceptions of young people towards travel prior to implementation;
- a year 1 evaluation report, published in December 2023; and
- a stage 2 evaluation, which will take place up to five years post-implementation.

The Year 1 evaluation concluded the YPTS was highly successful, identifying greater benefits and positive impacts compared to emerging negative issues, which included capacity and safety concerns, a reported increase of antisocial behaviour and practical issues such as the reliability of buses.³⁵⁴

192. The Minister for Further and Higher Education explained that many colleges use the Financial Contingency Fund (“FCF”) to help with transport, either by offering their own transport or by subsidising learners’ transport costs. However, she

³⁵⁰ Transport Scotland, ‘[Concessionary Travel Under-22s Equality Impact Assessment Results](#)’

³⁵¹ Transport Scotland, ‘[Young people in Scotland make over 200 million free bus journeys](#)’

³⁵² Scottish Government, ‘[Young Persons Free Bus Travel Scheme \(YPS\) statistics: FOI release](#)’, 25 November 2024

³⁵³ Scottish Government, ‘[Cost of Young Persons’ Free Bus Travel Scheme for financial year 2024/25: FOI release](#)’, 9 July 2025

³⁵⁴ Transport Scotland, ‘[Young Persons’ Free Bus Travel Scheme - Year 1 Evaluation](#)’, 2023

acknowledged that “there’s a lot more to do as well”. She added that she hoped that the summit would look at opportunities to improve understanding between partners, share good practice, and use innovative tools to drive improvement.³⁵⁵

193. The Minister said that the £1 bus scheme would be a “game changer and remove a barrier to participation in education and training”. But she acknowledged our concerns that the lower fares wouldn’t address all the transport challenges that exist. She told us that there are student railcards to help with train travel, and highlighted the recent £800 million investment in trains to improve the reliable, comfort and accessibility of train journeys in Wales. On bus travel, she referenced the forthcoming bus Bill (which has subsequently been introduced to the Senedd), support learners can receive in the form of railcards, and improvements to reliability across the transport network as a result of recent Welsh Government investment in public transport.³⁵⁶

194. Speaking about the Bill in an evidence session with the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee, the Head of Bus Reform at Welsh Government explained that the Bill will empower the Welsh Ministers to take learners’ needs into account when commissioning bus services:

“When we implement the contracts, we’re looking to include an ability to bring learner travel into those. So, you might find that the contracts cover things like providing school bus services between 7 o’clock and 9 o’clock in the morning, and then that same service is a local bus service for the rest of the day, until the end of the school day, when, again, they revert to school services, and then, after that, they go back to being local bus services. The flexibility, the nature of the flexibility, around the provisions in the Bill allow us to do that sort of thing to support services.”³⁵⁷

Poverty and financial barriers

195. Published research and the evidence that we have gathered suggests strongly that learners in low income families face barriers to post-16 education

³⁵⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 161-163

³⁵⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 164-169

³⁵⁷ Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee, [7 May 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 21

and training. Research by the Wales Centre for Public Policy published in October 2024 found that pupils eligible for FSM were around a third more likely to not be in post-16 education or training than their non FSM-eligible peers. The research also found that the more dimensions of deprivation that learners are subjected to (i.e. health, housing, employment), the more likely they are to not be in post-compulsory education or training.³⁵⁸ Poverty was raised as a barrier by numerous stakeholders throughout our inquiry.³⁵⁹

196. We heard a number of different explanations for why disadvantaged learners might not progress to post-16 education and training. Some stakeholders reported that poverty is a barrier because expectations for children from disadvantaged backgrounds are too low. Parents' Voices in Wales spoke about "glass ceilings" for children from poor areas, which are compounded if the child has ALN, too.³⁶⁰ Careers Wales explained that pupils who live in poverty often face practical challenges, such as a lack of access to technology.³⁶¹ Others, including the NPTC Group of Colleges, pointed out that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds might have pressure to seek full-time work, rather than continue their studies.³⁶² In response to our questions about how we can improve participation in HE, Universities Wales told us that:

*"I wish I had a magic wand, but I suspect this starts in preschool, this starts in primary school, this starts in all the work we need to do to lift people out of poverty so that they have the bandwidth to think about whether or not there are educational opportunities for them and their children and so on."*³⁶³

³⁵⁸ Wales Centre for Public Policy, 'Understanding inequity in tertiary education: Data analysis key findings', October 2024, pages 4-5

³⁵⁹ See for example: Written evidence: RET 06 National Education Union (NEU) Cymru; Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai; Written evidence: RET 41 Medr; Written evidence: RET 40 National Training Federation Wales (NTFW); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 176 (Parents' Voices in Wales); Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraphs 57-58

³⁶⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 176

³⁶¹ Letter from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 9 April 2025; Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales; Letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Swansea University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 9 April 2025

³⁶² Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 209 (Parents' Voices in Wales)

³⁶³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 401

The EMA

197. The EMA is a weekly payment to eligible 16 to 18 year olds in low-income families living in Wales who continue full-time education after year 11 in a school or college (but not in work-based learning). The EMA provides financial aid to eligible learners to help with further education costs, such as transport, course materials and meals. The EMA was worth £30 per week between 2004 and 2023 when – following calls from a range of stakeholders, including us³⁶⁴ – the Welsh Government increased the EMA payment to £40.

198. Also following one of our recommendations in our report on the Welsh Government’s Draft Budget 2023-24³⁶⁵, the Welsh Government commissioned an independent review of the EMA. This was carried out between October 2023 and May 2024. The review expressed support for the EMA, and recommended that it be continued. Its other recommendations included that:

- the household income threshold be increased;
- the value of the allowance be increased in line with inflation or HE student grant support percentage uplifts, if finances allow; and
- the language in the EMA application form be simplified to make it more accessible to young people.³⁶⁶

199. The Welsh Government subsequently raised the household income threshold. From April 2025, learners whose annual household income is no more than either £23,400 will be eligible (or £25,974 if they are not the only dependent in the household).³⁶⁷ They agreed to carry out modelling to understand the financial impact of the inflation-linked allowance and to work to “improve the application journey for all learners”.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁴ Welsh Parliament, ‘[The Welsh Government’s Draft Budget 2023-24](#)’, February 2022, paragraphs 106-111

³⁶⁵ Welsh Parliament, ‘[The Welsh Government’s Draft Budget 2023-24](#)’, February 2022, paragraphs 43-50 and 106-111

³⁶⁶ Nia Bryer, Heledd Bebb and Tanwen Grover, ‘[A review of the Education Maintenance Allowance in Wales](#)’, 17 July 2024, paragraph 13.22

³⁶⁷ Student Finance Wales, ‘[The little book of EMA: All you need to know about EMA for academic year 2025/26](#)’, pages 3-4

³⁶⁸ Welsh Government, ‘[Response to the Independent Review of the EMA Scheme in Wales \(February 2025\)](#)’, 9 April 2025

200. The EMA was generally supported across our evidence as a valuable scheme to reduce barriers to post-16 education and training by a series of stakeholders.³⁶⁹ However, we also heard some concerns about the scheme, much of which chimed with the findings of the independent review. Some argued that the threshold for eligibility has not risen with inflation and is therefore too low, despite its recent increase.³⁷⁰ Others reported that the application process is too cumbersome.³⁷¹ The Children’s Commissioner for Wales also expressed concern that absence can result in a learner losing their weekly allowance, even if their absence is outside their control (e.g. due to transport issues, or a cancellation by the school or college).³⁷²

201. The Minister for Further and Higher Education acknowledged the findings of the independent review, and welcomed the EMA as a way to encourage learners into post-16 education and alleviate financial stress and anxiety amongst existing learners. She highlighted the Welsh Government’s increase to the upper income eligibility threshold, which she expected would make the EMA eligible to around 3,500 additional learners. However, she also told us that most learners were making their decision around whether to progress to post-16 education before they knew about the EMA available to them. She concluded that this meant it was important to tell learners about EMA as early as possible. She told us that the Welsh Government would be developing a targeted campaign for year 11 learners to increase awareness-raising initiatives at peak times during the year, and particularly during GCSE results week.³⁷³

The Financial Contingency Fund (“FCF”)

202. Medr funds the FCF, which is a grant provided to colleges to help them support eligible learners who are experiencing financial hardship. The FCF is provided to colleges on a discretionary basis, and colleges are free to set their own detailed rules about how it’s spent (provided they stay within Welsh Government guidelines). The total FCF for 2023-24 was £7m. The most significant areas of FCF

³⁶⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 209 (Parents’ Voices in Wales); Written evidence: RET.06 National Education Union (NEU) Cymru; Written evidence: RET.10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai; Written evidence: RET.33 Make UK

³⁷⁰ Written evidence: RET.10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai; Written evidence: RET.18 Children’s Commissioner for Wales

³⁷¹ Written evidence: RET.12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL); Written evidence: RET.31 Gower College Swansea

³⁷² Written evidence: RET.18 Children’s Commissioner for Wales

³⁷³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 138-140

expenditure were transport (38.9% of the £7m), lunch vouchers (20.2%) and childcare (14.9%).³⁷⁴

203. The NPTC Group of Colleges reported that there are increasing demands on the FCF to provide financial support for learners.³⁷⁵ Grŵp Llandrillo Menai agreed, expressing concern about the ability of colleges to meet students' needs with current levels of funding:

*"GLLM is seeing growing demands on this fund as it provides essential financial support for transport and daily meal allowances for learners. These rising costs have a significant impact on colleges' ability to meet the needs of all students. Without additional funding from the Welsh Government, should there be an increase in demand, colleges face challenges in continuing to offer this vital support."*³⁷⁶

ColegauCymru called for the FCF to be increased, arguing that the funding removes barriers to learners and prevents young people becoming NEET.³⁷⁷

204. The Minister for Further and Higher Education spoke about "innovative" and "passionate" use of the FCF by colleges throughout Wales to help with learner travel and free provision of meals during the college day. The Minister suggested that the recent increase to the EMA income thresholds would ease the pressure on the FCF, thereby providing more flexibility to colleges in how they support learners.³⁷⁸

Care experience

205. We found during our inquiry into services for care experienced children and young people that, on average, the attainment of children in care at Key Stage 4 is significantly lower than their peers.³⁷⁹

206. We received evidence from NYAS Cymru setting out that care experience learners face a number of unique barriers to participation in education and

³⁷⁴ Written evidence: RET 41 Medr

³⁷⁵ Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges

³⁷⁶ Written evidence: RET 10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai

³⁷⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 205

³⁷⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 138-143

³⁷⁹ Welsh Government, 'If not now, then when? Radical reform for care experienced children and young people', May 2023, paragraphs 163-168

training post-16 too. Although the full impact of those barriers is difficult to ascertain due to the “very limited data” published by Welsh Government. They explained that, as they look at their post-16 options, children in care may have recently moved homes, sometimes multiple times. They may have experienced bullying or discrimination due to having experienced care, and will be in the process of navigating their transition out of the care system, which can create “profound challenges” as they begin adulthood. To illustrate the challenges care experienced young people face as they move out of compulsory education, they pointed us towards the latest published data, which suggests that over a third of care leavers were NEET on their 19th birthday as of March 2016.³⁸⁰

207. We also heard about practical challenges that care experienced young people face when they consider moving to post-compulsory education and training. Care Leaver Activities and Student Support in Wales (“CLASS Cymru”) raised concerns about the “inconsistent and patchy” information that many care experience young people receive from their social workers and local authority.³⁸¹ NYAS Cymru explained that care experienced children may not have someone to help them apply for university, may have financial concerns and/or be struggling to find accommodation, and may not have access to transport. They called for free public transport for care leavers, more paid apprenticeships targeted at care experience children, and ensuring that universities provide care experienced students with accommodation for 365 days of the year.³⁸²

Mental health

208. In 2024, the Welsh Government commissioned research to consider the impact of the pandemic on learners in post-16 education who were 19 or younger at the start of the pandemic. They found that 52.9% of the 1,821 respondents either tended to agree or strongly agreed that their learning had been disrupted in the previous twelve months due to mental ill health. This was more than any other reason. The research concluded that “Poor mental health and emotional wellbeing presents a significant challenge amongst learners in post-16 education.”³⁸³

209. Mental health was also raised by stakeholders in the evidence that we gathered as a barrier to participation in post-16 education and training. Careers

³⁸⁰ Written evidence: RET 25 The National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru (NYAS) Cymru

³⁸¹ Written evidence: RET 28 Care Leaver Activities and Student Support in Wales (CLASS Cymru)

³⁸² Written evidence: RET 25 The National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru (NYAS) Cymru

³⁸³ Eales, C., Griffiths, C., ‘Learner Experiences in Post-16 Education (2024)’, 12 December 2024, paragraphs 3.1

Wales stated that “School staff and careers advisers are finding that higher numbers of young people are experiencing anxiety and mental health issues.”³⁸⁴ Grŵp Llandrillo Menai agreed, and urged the Welsh Government to prioritise funding for pastoral and mentoring roles to support learners to develop healthy attendance patterns, address the mental health challenges they face, and build the resilience they need to “navigate challenges and become confident, ethical, and informed citizens of Wales.”³⁸⁵ Evidence from the WLGA and ADEW was particularly stark:

“Following the pandemic, anxiety in children and young people is at unprecedented levels, many not even being able to leave home and numbers of home educated children and young people are increasing at rates not previously seen.”³⁸⁶

Other barriers to progression at 16

210. Other groups who were identified as facing additional barriers included included:

- Home educated children: Education Otherwise explained that the quality of information provided to home educated young people depends on their parents, who may be less trusting of the Welsh Government and reluctant to engage with Careers Wales. They added that home educating families can also struggle to get access to discuss learners’ pathways. They also argue in favour of the EMA being extended to post 16 home educated learners from low income families.³⁸⁷ Some of the attendees at our stakeholder event reported that it can be difficult for post-16 providers and advisors to access home educated learners because there is no direct route for professionals to do so.³⁸⁸
- Adopted children: CLASS Cymru cited findings from the Wales Adoption Cohort Study to highlight that, despite 47% of children placed for adoption having experienced at least four Adverse Childhood Experiences (compared to 14% of the general population), they may not

³⁸⁴ Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales

³⁸⁵ Written evidence: RET.10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai

³⁸⁶ Written evidence: RET.14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)

³⁸⁷ Written evidence: RET.01 Education Otherwise

³⁸⁸ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 63

be eligible for support in further and HE because they are not legally considered to be ‘care leavers’.³⁸⁹

- Learners with caring responsibilities: Gower College Swansea told us that young carers require flexible learning schedules and additional pastoral support.³⁹⁰
- Learners with parents with lower educational achievement: research by the Wales Centre for Public Policy found that learners whose parents/carers do not have qualifications are significantly more likely to become NEET.³⁹¹
- Learners with English as an additional language: Careers Wales set out that there is particularly high demand for careers advice services from learners who have English as an additional language.³⁹²
- Estranged children: CLASS Cymru explained that there is very little support available for learners who have little or no contact with their parents. They used the EMA application form as an example, which they argued gives insufficient guidance to help prospective estranged applicants.³⁹³

Our view

The role of schools in providing and facilitating careers advice

211. It is unacceptable that some young people do not receive high quality, unbiased careers advice because their school wants to retain the funding that comes with them attending their sixth form. We note that there is some disagreement about the extent to which this is happening, that more learners go to FE college in Wales after year 11 than in other countries across the UK, and that the proportion of learners going to sixth forms is actually declining. Nevertheless, every single pupil should be told about all the options available to them after year 11, and every single child should be encouraged to explore all those options in detail so they can make the choice that’s right for them.

³⁸⁹ Written evidence: RET.28 Care Leaver Activities and Student Support in Wales (CLASS Cymru)

³⁹⁰ Written evidence: RET.31 Gower College Swansea

³⁹¹ Wales Centre for Public Policy, ‘Understanding inequity in tertiary education: Data analysis key findings’, October 2024, pages 6-7

³⁹² Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales

³⁹³ Written evidence: RET.28 Care Leaver Activities and Student Support in Wales (CLASS Cymru)

212. We understand, however, the reality of the financial pressures that many schools are facing. If one implication of pupils not attending sixth form is that school colleagues may lose their jobs, it's hardly surprising if school staff are reluctant to promote a local college or apprenticeship opportunity to a learner who could stay on at sixth form.

213. In some areas of Wales, individual schools with sixth forms and colleges work together effectively to provide a full range of post-16 options for learners. We heard that many schools with sixth forms actively encourage their learners to find out about local college and work-based learning offers, or even facilitate external providers coming into schools to speak to pupils. These pockets of best practice demonstrate that it is not impossible to collaborate within the existing system.

214. But despite the good practice that undoubtedly exists, we are sceptical that learners in schools with sixth forms will ever be consistently given unbiased advice from school staff under the current funding model. Competition for places is hard-wired into the post-16 funding model which, in turn, incentivises behaviour that can be disadvantageous for learners. This cannot continue.

215. We have heard repeatedly throughout this inquiry that learners' needs must be placed at the centre of the advice they are given. But we have heard much less about *how* that shift in culture will happen in practice.

216. We therefore ask the Welsh Government, or Medr on their behalf, to carry out a review of post-16 funding arrangements to ascertain how we can realign the funding system for the benefit of learners and learn from the positive relationships that have already been formed across some post-16 providers. Alternative funding arrangements have the potential to benefit the careers advice and guidance given to learners. They could have other tangible benefits, too, by improving the breadth of the post-16 offer for learners (e.g. in relation to provision through the medium of Welsh, as we discuss below) and help to ensure the viability of post-16 education institutions (as we discuss from paragraph 283 in relation to the financial challenges facing school sixth forms).

Recommendation 5. The Welsh Government, working with Medr, should carry out a review of post-16 funding and legislation to explore:

- whether, and to what extent, the current funding system incentivises competition between providers that affects the impartiality of careers advice for learners;

- how individual schools and colleges have overcome funding challenges to work together effectively;
- whether any changes should be made to the post-16 funding system and legislation to incentivise collaboration between post-16 institutions (e.g. by moving away from a funding model based on pupil numbers, by providing grant funding to reward collaboration, or otherwise).

The 14 to 16 learner entitlement

217. We welcome the steps that the Cabinet Secretary for Education has taken to standardise the minimum offer of support and guidance that pupils receive in Key Stage 4. As our evidence makes clear, that support and guidance is currently inconsistent, placing some learners at a significant disadvantage as they start thinking about their steps after year 11.

218. We also support the Welsh Government's proposals to publish certain data as part of the LEIF about how schools support their learners with post-16 planning. We believe that improving published data, and therefore transparency, about learners' destinations after year 11 and planning for post-16 transitions will make the provision across schools more consistent. We are pleased to hear that the Cabinet Secretary for Education intends to promote the learner entitlement to learners and to parents and carers themselves, and that Estyn will also be considering how schools fulfil their duties as part of their routine school inspections. These are crucial measures that must form part of the wider accountability framework for schools.

219. Our inquiry has found that learners need a significant amount of advice, guidance and opportunities to make informed decisions about their futures after year 11. We therefore see an opportunity to build on the existing 14-16 Learner Entitlement by including the wider package of support that learners should expect to receive in Key Stage 4 as part of their preparation for, and transition to, post-16 education and training.

220. Some of the key entitlements of a bolstered '14-16 Learner Entitlement' are discussed in more detail throughout this report, such as learners' rights to independent careers advice; support to attend local college open days and to speak to work-based providers and universities; and the opportunity to undertake experience. This extended package would clarify to learners and their families what they are entitled to. It would also contribute to a broader effort to ensure an

equitable and consistent offer of non-biased and robust careers advice and work-related education to support young people as they leave compulsory education.

Recommendation 6. The Welsh Government should expand the existing 14-16 Learner Entitlement to include the wider package of advice, guidance and opportunities that learners are entitled to in Key Stage 4. This extended 14-16 Learner Entitlement should include the fundamental components of a high-quality and effective transition to post-16 education, such as the right to high-quality careers advice from their schools and Careers Wales; access to representatives of colleges, work-based providers and universities; and work experience. The specific entitlements should reflect the Welsh Government's wider policy offer, be promoted to learners and their families directly, and used by Estyn and others to hold service providers to account for the support they provide to learners.

The role of Careers Wales

221. We were struck by the inconsistency of the evidence we received about Careers Wales. It is very encouraging that independent research from academics at Cardiff University found that low attaining pupils eligible for free-school meals were 42% less likely to become NEET if they received a careers guidance interview. There was positive evidence about Careers Wales' targeted support from Estyn, too, alongside positive testimonials from parents of learners with additional needs and encouraging data from Careers Wales' own self-evaluation mechanisms.

222. But we also received a significant body of evidence that was critical of the offer of support that most pupils receive during Key Stage 4. It seems clear that many young people simply do not get enough independent careers advice, and that careers advice in general does not start young enough.

223. Careers Wales are right to point out that they play a key role in providing unbiased careers advice to learners, but they are not – and cannot be expected to be – the only source of information for learners. However, they are unique in that they are independent, which is absolutely crucial, particularly in the context of concerns about conflicts of interest affecting the advice given at some schools with sixth forms. It is therefore worrying that some children and their families are not getting the support from Careers Wales that they need.

224. What is abundantly clear is that reductions to Careers Wales' funding has had a detrimental impact on the advice they provide to many learners. In that context,

Careers Wales have targeted their limited resources on the learners who they feel need the most support. That targeted support appears to be very effective. The support for other learners is less so.

225. When we consider the careers advice given to learners from the various different sources, we are most concerned about children in the middle: not those who are eligible for targeted support, and not those who have already decided what they want to do after year 11. The others – learners for whom it is unclear where they should go and what they should do. Learners who might well benefit from going to college or doing an apprenticeship, but are also considering staying on at sixth form or taking an academic route. We welcome that Careers Wales are now providing a careers guidance interview to every learner in Key Stage 4 as standard. This will help. But we fear it won't go far enough.

226. We note that Estyn have not carried out a thematic review of Careers Wales' independent careers advice service since 2021. An awful lot has changed since then. We believe that the Welsh Government should commission another such review, focusing specifically on Careers Wales' standard offer for Key Stage 4 learners, to see how Careers Wales' offer could improve to give learners and their families the support they need.

Recommendation 7. The Welsh Government should commission Estyn to carry out a thematic review of Careers Wales' careers advice service. The review should focus specifically on Careers Wales' 'standard' offer, and should consider whether it meets the needs of all learners and their families, and what changes, if any, could be made to improve the provision.

Work experience

227. Work experience is a critical element of transitioning to post-16 education or training. It is not realistic to expect that every young person will do a work experience placement at their ideal workplace. Or even that every work experience placement will be directly relevant to what the young person is thinking of doing after they leave school. But that doesn't matter – experiencing a professional environment gives you a valuable taster of the world of work. Even if the young person dislikes the experience, that, in itself, is a valuable lesson.

228. We are deeply disappointed that meaningful work experience does not seem to exist for most learners. Some school staff go above and beyond to deliver work experience placement for their pupils. And some parents and carers are able to organise work placements for their children, even if the child's school can't.

Since work experience was removed from Careers Wales' remit in 2015, other than some pockets of excellent practice across Wales, opportunities for learners have radically declined. The reduction in Wales is all the more stark when data indicates that many more children in every other country in the UK do have work experience opportunities.

229. We do not believe that the decline in work experience is a conscious choice. In fact, the Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership spoke about working with Medr to open the doors to meaningful work experience, which we welcome.

230. The causes of the decline seem to be practical. Collectively, schools do not have the time, nor the expertise in some cases, to establish a network of host employers and carry out the necessary safeguarding and health and safety checks to facilitate placements for every child.

231. We note with interest the work of Careers Wales in providing a targeted work experience placement service for learners. This service reflects the wider trend at Careers Wales of focusing their limited resources on certain groups of young people, such as those at risk of disengaging from education or who have ALN. This is clearly a beneficial programme for learners who are eligible for it.

232. For other pupils, however, the current work experience offer is evidently not good enough. It is not right that children whose parents and carers are able to organise placements get the advantages of that experience when others do not. The mechanism by which work experience placements are arranged needs review. We have considered Careers Wales' cost estimates to provide a centralised placing service for all pupils (£2.3 million per year) and potential to reduce that cost further if schools place learners using a database of employers maintained by Careers Wales. These costs do not seem prohibitive. We welcome Careers Wales' work over summer 2025 to consult with schools to find out more about what support they would want to provide meaningful work experience to more learners.

233. However, employers face challenges when considering providing work experience opportunities to young people, too. Even if schools have all the expertise and capacity to oversee their side of arrangements, there currently aren't enough host employers to provide every learner with a work experience placement. Young people need insurance, planning, and supervision. This all takes time and money. There are clearly benefits for local employers that engage with learners. But unfortunately, for many, the cost of that engagement is too high. In parallel with Careers Wales work with schools, we recommend that the Welsh

Government commissions a short, focused piece of work to explore the barriers facing potential host employers, and what measures could be taken by the Welsh Government and/or others to overcome those barriers.

Recommendation 8. The Welsh Government should commission a focused piece of research to better understand why some employers are unable or unwilling to offer work experience placements, and what steps can be taken by the Welsh Government or others to overcome those barriers.

Barriers to progression at 16

Provision through the medium of Welsh

234. The post-16 education and training sector plays a critical role in ensuring that bilingual, compulsory-school-age learners retain and enhance their confidence and ability in using the Welsh language. Despite the commendable increases in the levels of bilingual teaching across vocational courses, there is still significantly less provision through the medium of Welsh in FE colleges and work-based learning compared to sixth forms. This is particularly acute when we look at provision wholly or predominantly through the medium of Welsh.

235. Our evidence shows that the primary barriers to progression to post-16 education and training through the medium of Welsh are a lack of provision and the tendency for some bilingual learners to undertake their courses in English.

236. We believe that removing barriers to collaboration between institutions could address both of these barriers. Institutions can improve the breadth of their post-16 offer – including through the medium of Welsh – by coordinating provision across institutions. This benefits the learner by giving them a broader range of Welsh-language options. It can be hugely beneficial for institutions offering Welsh-language provision, too, some of which may otherwise struggle to attract sufficient student numbers to specific courses to remain financially viable (which we discuss from paragraph 283).

237. Improving collaboration between institutions could also encourage some learners to continue studying through the medium of Welsh. When pushed to choose between carrying out all of their education or training in English or all of it in Welsh, many bilingual learners are currently opting for English. We see no reason why collaborating institutions cannot embrace a more flexible approach to enable learners to undertake some of their post-16 studies in Welsh and some in English. From what we have heard, this could encourage bilingual learners to

continue some of their education and training in Welsh, which will help them retain their Welsh-language skills and confidence into adulthood.

238. We therefore re-iterate here our earlier recommendation, Recommendation 5, which is critical to a series of the most pressing issues highlighted in this report: the quality and impartiality of careers advice given to learners, the viability of sixth forms, and – as we explore here – improving the breadth and flexibility of Welsh-language post-16 provision.

ALN

239. We note the concerns raised by a range of stakeholders about the availability and quality of post-16 provision for disabled learners and learners with ALN. We recognise many similar themes from our extensive work focusing on the implementation of the new ALN system in pre-16 education throughout the Sixth Senedd.

240. On 14 October 2025, the Cabinet Secretary for Education published a summary of responses to its ALN legislative framework review and the findings of a survey of parents and carers about the ALN system. We scrutinised the Cabinet Secretary for Education on the findings of this review, and the Welsh Government's response to those findings, on 23 October as part of our ongoing work considering the Welsh Government's implementation of education reforms. That scrutiny was informed by the evidence we have taken in this inquiry about the challenges facing learners who have ALN as they transition to post-16 education and training. Our report on that inquiry is scheduled to be published in January 2026.

Transport

241. Transport is clearly one of, if not the, most significant barrier(s) facing learners as they look to progress to post-16 education and training. For many, the lack or cost of transport narrows down their options, pushing them to opt for one post-16 institution over another, and consequently to choose one subject or course over another. It pushes others away from post-16 education and training entirely.

242. It is important to note that the fundamental problems facing learners in relation to transport are twofold.

243. The first is cost. Many local authorities do not provide financial assistance for travel to learners after they leave year 11. The financial burden of daily travel to and from post-16 education providers throughout term-time is therefore significant,

particularly in the context of the ongoing financial challenges that many families face.

244. The Welsh Government is taking action in this area, by piloting a cap of £1 single bus fares for young people. Of course, £1 bus fares won't help learners who have to take the train. Or learners who live or study in areas with limited bus access. But we welcome the pilot as a way to reduce the financial burden of transport for many young people. As a relatively high-cost policy, it will be important for the next Welsh Government to consider the impact of the pilot and to ascertain whether it has made a tangible difference to young people, including in relation to the accessibility of education and training institutions. We therefore welcome the Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales' commitment to commissioning an independent evaluation of the pilot, which we believe must consider explicitly the impact of the scheme on access to post-16 education and training.

Recommendation 9. The Welsh Government should explicitly include the impact on young people's access to post-16 education and training amongst its terms of reference in the forthcoming independent evaluation of its pilot of £1 maximum single fare/£3 maximum daily fare bus travel for young people.

245. The second significant transport barrier is the availability of transport. We recognise the significant body of evidence that points out very clearly that, irrespective of cost, travel is impossible if buses and trains don't run at appropriate times, or don't run at all. Unsurprisingly, this is a particular issue for learners in rural areas. But it is also a significant barrier for learners in work-based education and training who work unsociable hours, or who are based with employers that are not close to transport hubs.

246. The Welsh Government is taking action here, too, via the Bus Services (Wales) Bill. We note the comments of Welsh Government officials about the potential for Welsh Ministers to create a bus network that takes into account the travel needs of learners in post-16 institutions.

5. Provision for 16-18 year olds

Wales has a higher proportion of learners aged 16-18 who study in FE colleges than other UK countries. In 2024/25, for the first time since 2017/18, less than half of learners who progressed to post-16 education and training studied AS levels. But a significant number of learners do not progress to post-16 education or training: despite improvements in recent years. Over 10% of learners aged 16-18 are NEET as of March 2023.

16-18 destinations data

248. Key sources of data about post-16 participation include:

- Careers Wales data on pupil destinations following year 11, 12 and 13. This is published by academic year, and is ratified by the Welsh Government before being published.³⁹⁴
- The Welsh Government's Lifelong Learning Wales Record ("LLWR") provides data on learners in post-16 education and training, excluding those at schools but including those at FE institutions, other work-based Learning providers and Community Learning provision.³⁹⁵
- The Statistical First Release ("SFR") is published annually by the Welsh Government and is the definitive source for estimates of the proportion on young people in Wales who are NEET.³⁹⁶
- A second statistical bulletin, 'Young people not in education, employment or training', is published by the Welsh Government each quarter and provides more timely, though less statistically robust, data. This release summarises the Annual Population Survey statistics, and

³⁹⁴ Careers Wales, 'Pupil destinations'; Written evidence: RET.17.Careers Wales

³⁹⁵ StatsWales, 'Lifelong Learning Wales Record'

³⁹⁶ Welsh Government, 'Participation of young people in education and the labour market', last updated 13 March 2025

can be used to compare rates of young people who are NEET between UK nations. The data is broken down by region, as well as by disability and ethnicity, which is not possible with the annual SFR data.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁷ Welsh Government, '[Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\)](#)', last updated 26 June 2025

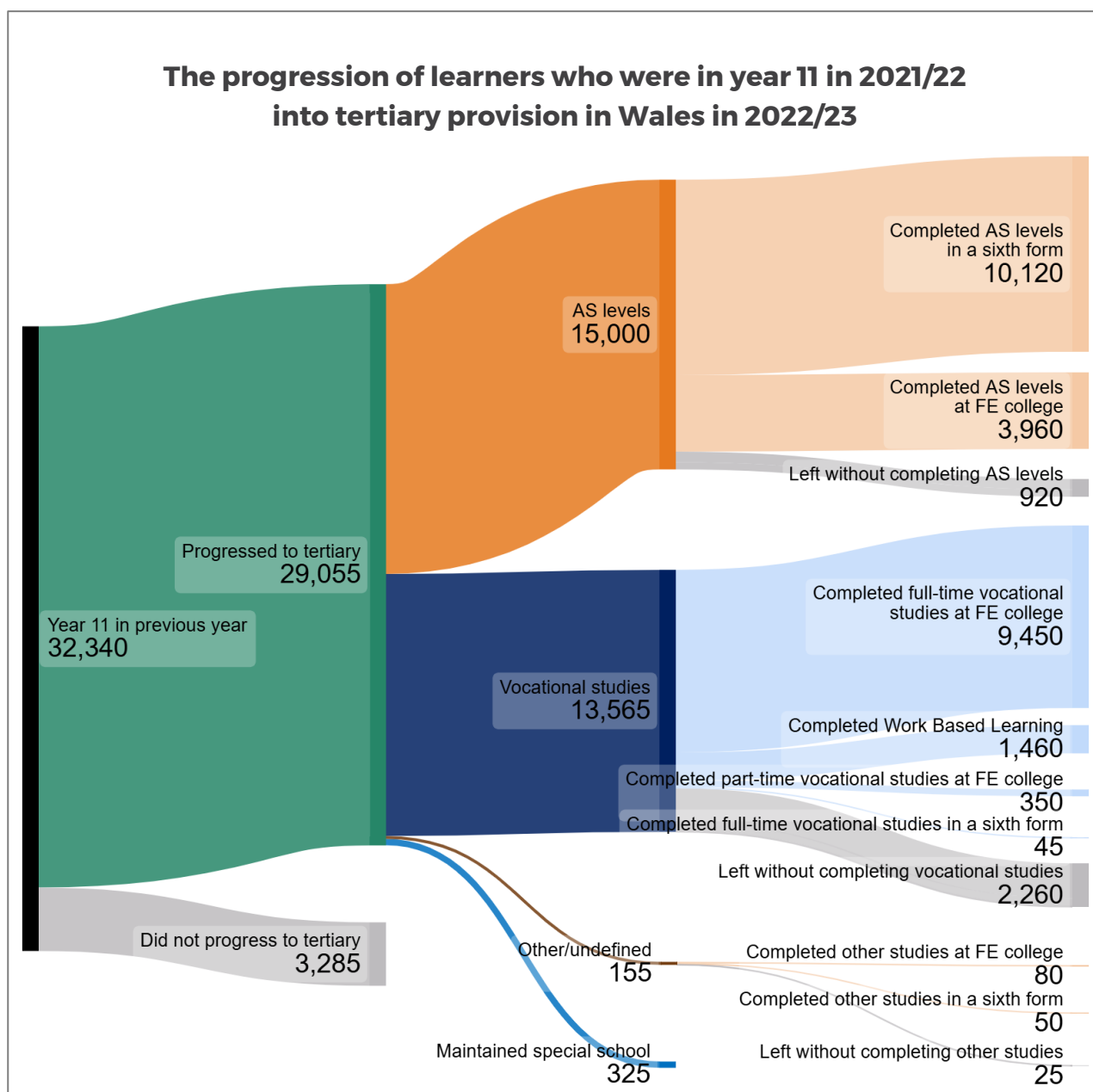


Figure 4. The progression of learners from Year 11 in 2021/22 into tertiary provision in Wales in 2022/23: FE colleges, sixth forms, Work Based Learning (including apprenticeships, traineeships and Jobs Growth Wales+) and maintained special schools (for which completion data was not available). Progression breakdown does not equal 29,055 due to rounding. Source: Medr, 'Sta/Medr/04/2025: Progression from Year 11 to tertiary education. August 2017 to January 2025', 25 February 2025

249. The evidence we received was almost universally critical of the usefulness of the data that is published in Wales about post-16 education and training.

250. The most commonly raised concern was that, at the moment, published data does not follow learners' pathways. We heard from various organisations – including Careers Wales and Estyn – that the lack of data tracking learners'

pathways means that it is not possible to understand how learners progress through and between post-16 education and training options and where, why and when learners are dropping out.³⁹⁸

251. Others raised concerns about the timeliness of the data.³⁹⁹ Estyn explained :

*"... the speed at which data is made available to people is problematic as well. We've been carrying out inspections this term in FE colleges, and we have no data from last year yet that we can formally refer to or look at comparatively across Wales. You'd have thought, by now, we should be in a position where we can report on last year's data and use that data officially. So, there are issues around all aspects of that."*⁴⁰⁰

252. We heard from a few key stakeholders that there are too many 'unknowns' in the data, that make it challenging to draw conclusions about the levels of young people who are NEET in particular.⁴⁰¹ Others highlighted gaps in the data, such as information about:

- learners who are not in sixth forms, because Careers Wales' destinations data only relates to learners who are in a school sixth form.⁴⁰² Estyn argued this is of limited use at a local authority level, because "the proportion of schools with a sixth form in each local authority ranges from 0%-100%";⁴⁰³
- progression by subject choice or course;⁴⁰⁴

³⁹⁸ Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 10 Grŵp Llandrillo Menai; Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 281 (Careers Wales); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 247 (Estyn); Written evidence: RET 33 Make UK; Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Written evidence: RET 21 Dr. Katy Huxley and Rhys Davies, Cardiff University; Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraphs 64-65; Written evidence: RET 30 Cardiff Metropolitan University

³⁹⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 210 (Colegau Cymru); Written evidence: RET 14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)

⁴⁰⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 245

⁴⁰¹ Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

⁴⁰² Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales

⁴⁰³ Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

⁴⁰⁴ Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 19 Universities Wales

- specific groups of learners (learners with ALN⁴⁰⁵, learners from low income families or learners who were eligible for FSM⁴⁰⁶, learners of different ethnicities⁴⁰⁷; learners with English as an additional language⁴⁰⁸; learners who have experienced care or are estranged⁴⁰⁹);
- learners who no longer engage with the education system;⁴¹⁰
- Welsh-language speaking learners;⁴¹¹
- efficacy of the advice and guidance about post-16 options provided to young people;⁴¹²
- privately educated learners;⁴¹³ and
- learners who are home-educated.⁴¹⁴

253. Medr told us that there is actually a significant amount of data held across the post-16 sector as a whole, and that the challenge is how to interrogate that data.⁴¹⁵ However, we heard calls for better collaboration between organisations.⁴¹⁶ Researchers at Cardiff University explained the impact of disparate data collections on the conclusions that can be drawn from the collective data:

“... current data collections that enable analysis of the post-16 education sector are disparate data collections, often with long-lead times for publication and data access. The nature of the data collected, whilst aligned across some items are not aligned for other items. This makes it difficult to compare like with like, for example, in terms of disability. ... These data issues limit the ability of analysts to create a complete and detailed understanding determinants of participation and pathways

⁴⁰⁵ Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea; Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

⁴⁰⁶ Written evidence: RET 42 Institute of Physics (IOP); Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn

⁴⁰⁷ Written evidence: RET 42 Institute of Physics (IOP)

⁴⁰⁸ Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea

⁴⁰⁹ Written evidence: RET 28 Care Leaver Activities and Student Support in Wales (CLASS Cymru); Written evidence: RET 25 The National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru (NYAS) Cymru

⁴¹⁰ Written evidence: RET 41 Medr

⁴¹¹ Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea

⁴¹² Written evidence: RET 19 Universities Wales

⁴¹³ Written evidence: RET 21 Dr. Katy Huxley and Rhys Davies, Cardiff University

⁴¹⁴ Written evidence: RET 21 Dr. Katy Huxley and Rhys Davies, Cardiff University

⁴¹⁵ Written evidence: RET 41 Medr;

⁴¹⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 111 (WLGA); Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru

through tertiary education. It is currently not possible to take into account achievement or experiences in pre-16 education, a key determinant in progression, without utilising examinations data.”⁴¹⁷

254. Careers Wales told us that they have presented the Welsh Government with a prototype of an ‘all-Wales data intelligence hub’, which would draw on data from Careers Wales, schools, colleges, local authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions. They urged the Welsh Government to consider developing that data hub further to help inform careers guidance, help local authority service provision, support individual education and training providers to develop their learning offers and inform analysis of the current and future labour market needs.⁴¹⁸

255. Medr, meanwhile, have also highlighted their role in improving the quality of post-16 data. They told us that they are committed to making data-informed decisions, and will review and improve how they collect data from providers so they can better interrogate available data.⁴¹⁹

256. The Welsh Government stated that “High quality, reliable data is key to understanding participation trends and then tackling the challenges and opportunities, as well as the impact of interventions.” However, it acknowledged that there is “limited robust evidence on the effectiveness of policy initiatives to increase participation”. The Welsh Government has developed a ‘Participation in Tertiary Education Evidence Plan’ to improve data quality to increase understanding of learners’ pathways through the education system.⁴²⁰

257. The Cabinet Secretary for Education stressed to us that she was “very passionate about data... but data is only as good as what you do with that data”. She mentioned the data that schools will be required to publish as part of the learner entitlement indicators framework (see paragraph 105), and opportunities the Welsh Government has to work with organisations such as the OECD.⁴²¹

⁴¹⁷ Written evidence: RET 21 Dr. Katy Huxley and Rhys Davies, Cardiff University

⁴¹⁸ Written evidence: RET 17 Careers Wales

⁴¹⁹ Written evidence: RET 41 Medr

⁴²⁰ Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

⁴²¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 186-188

258. The Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership expressed confidence in the quality of the pupil destinations data provided by Careers Wales.⁴²² The Minister for Further and Higher Education added that she felt that more could be done with existing data, particularly data from different sources that does not currently link together. She told us that the Welsh Government has developed an “evidence plan”, which would combine different education data sets to help identify trends and patterns to provide “a more comprehensive and holistic view of participation”⁴²³

The mix of provision for 16-18 year olds

Academic routes

259. AS levels are the most common tertiary education choice for learners after Year 11. According to provisional data released by Medr, 49% of learners who progressed to tertiary education in 2024/25 undertook an AS level programme. However, the number of learners opting for AS levels had fallen in recent years, from a recent peak of 55% in 2021/22. GCSEs were awarded differently during the pandemic because there were no exams, one consequence of which was higher results in 2020 and 2021. After exams returned in 2022, GCSEs were graded more generously to achieve a gradual transition back to pre-pandemic outcomes by 2024, at which point arrangements were back in line with 2019. This may account for the higher number of AS level entrants during the pandemic period. Nevertheless, the proportion of learners progressing to AS levels in 2024/25 remains lower than the pre-pandemic period (52% of pupils progressed to AS levels in 2017/18 compared to 49% in 2024/25).⁴²⁴ Data from Qualifications Wales sets out that A level entries in Wales decreased by 16.1% between 2009 and 2024.⁴²⁵

260. For some stakeholders, the falling proportion of learners taking A levels is a cause for concern. Universities Wales argue that “Fewer 16-year-olds undertaking A Levels means fewer students moving into higher education and higher skilled jobs.” Their evidence highlights the following points in particular:

⁴²² Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025 Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 183

⁴²³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025 Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 190-193

⁴²⁴ Medr, ‘[Progression from Year 11 to tertiary education, August 2017 to January 2025](#)’, 25 February 2025, page 6

⁴²⁵ Qualifications Wales, ‘[Current A level Cymraeg qualifications in context](#)’

- 33% of school leavers go on to study A levels in Wales, compared to 47% in England.
- Inequality “is being baked in” to post-16 destinations. They point to census data indicating that 41% of learners who experience no deprivation do A levels, compared to 8% of learners who exhibit deprivation in 4 dimensions. Similarly, 34% of learners who are not eligible for free school meals do A levels, compared to 11% of learners who are eligible.
- Welsh medium sixth form provision is critical for the Welsh medium HE sector, due to the high proportion of learners who progress from Welsh medium sixth forms to Welsh universities.⁴²⁶

261. Universities Wales argued that the decline in the proportion of learners studying A levels appears to be unintentional rather than a conscious policy decision:

“I’m not sure there would have been a deliberate thing in the system, for example, that would have meant that we were pushing for an A level participation rate in Wales that is 33 per cent, whereas in England it’s 47 per cent; I don’t think that’s happened deliberately. So, I think we maybe need to sit back and ask: what is it we’re trying to build here and why? What are the qualifications that fit with that? And how do we build good advice and guidance to make sure that we get that high-value economy rolling?”⁴²⁷

262. They propose targets for A level entries in Wales.⁴²⁸ However others, particularly those representing vocational post-16 education providers, argued that a target for A level entries might inappropriately push some children into academic education.⁴²⁹

263. Not everyone shared Universities Wales’ concerns about falling AS and A level participation rates. We explore earlier in this report the views that there are deep-

⁴²⁶ Written evidence: RET 19 Universities Wales; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraphs 66-68

⁴²⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 303

⁴²⁸ Written evidence: RET 19 Universities Wales

⁴²⁹ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 69

seated, cultural biases towards academic routes at the expense of vocational routes (see paragraph 34 onwards). UCU argued more explicitly that “greater learner participation means ending the partial monopoly of A levels as the principal currency for entering higher education”. They go on:

“After all, and in common with past gold-standards, their [A levels’] value is somewhat over inflated and stifles development and innovation. Lecturers frequently complain that the first year of an undergraduate course is spent inculcating the habits of critical thought and independent research which Welsh learners’ European comparators picked up in the school system.”⁴³⁰

264. The Welsh Government told us that it has worked with the OECD to produce the report ‘What Shapes Pathways and Transitions? A Comparative Perspective on Learners’ Trajectories through Upper Secondary Education in Wales’. The Welsh Government explained that the “overarching aspiration” in the report is for learners to complete “upper secondary education”, which it defines as 14-19 learning. They go on to mention the reformed, made-for-Wales GCSEs, which have been designed to support progression to post-16 study, including A levels. The Welsh Government also linked its work on school attendance and attainment to A level participation, which it reports is “vital to maintain the pipeline from secondary school, through GCSE’s and on to A levels or other level 3 qualifications.”⁴³¹

Vocational routes

Trends in vocational uptake

265. AS and A levels may still be the most common choice for learners engaging in post-16 education and training, but a growing proportion are opting for vocational qualifications instead. Data published by Medr sets out that in 2024/25, for the first time since 2017/18, more learners progressed to non-AS level study (51%) than enrolled on AS levels (49%). Of those who did not enrol on AS levels, 13% undertook Level 3 study, 17% Level 2, 12% Level 1, and 9% enrolled on other types of education or training. This trend away from AS and A levels is mirrored in

⁴³⁰ Written evidence: RET.36 University and College Union in Wales

⁴³¹ Written evidence: RET.47 Welsh Government

the increasing proportion of learners who study in FE colleges rather than sixth forms (see figure 3 in chapter 4).⁴³²

266. ColegauCymru told us that demand for vocational provision is rising. They argued that vocational qualifications can support progression through to HE, and that the key difference between vocational and academic qualifications is the mode of study, not the value of the qualification.⁴³³ Nevertheless, some stakeholders working in vocational post-16 education told us that many pupils arrive at college feeling like failures because they have struggled with academic education. Some of the young people we spoke to agreed. They told us that they struggled with the school environment, and were keen to go to college to start a new chapter of their lives.⁴³⁴

267. We received evidence suggesting that the increase in learners enrolling on vocational courses is due to an increase in uptake of lower-level qualifications (Level 1 and Level 2 qualifications), rather than Level 3 qualifications, which have an equivalent value to A levels. Medr's data sets out that in 2024/25, 29% of learners in post-16 education and training were enrolled on Level 1 or 2 courses, compared to 25% of learners in 2017/18.⁴³⁵ Medr told us they needed to understand why more learners are coming into post-16 institutions at levels 1 and 2 so that they can "ensure that the appropriate pathways then for those individuals are there."⁴³⁶ A Universities Wales representative from the University of South Wales reflected that this trend showed that providers were duplicating the level of education offered during compulsory schooling:

*"We have an FE college in our structure at the University of South Wales, so we've got a circumstance where they've got growth in their learner numbers, but it's largely in lower level qualifications where, actually, people are catching back up. So, we're paying for education twice through that system."*⁴³⁷

⁴³² Medr, 'Progression from Year 11 to tertiary education. August 2017 to January 2025', 25 February 2025, pages 6-7

⁴³³ Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 141

⁴³⁴ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 73-75

⁴³⁵ Medr, 'Progression from Year 11 to tertiary education. August 2017 to January 2025', 25 February 2025, pages 6-7

⁴³⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 145

⁴³⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 307

268. Other concerns about vocational provision raised include:

- the disparity in the vocational offers for learners, arguing that there are fewer vocational options available to learners in rural Wales compared to their counterparts in urban areas;⁴³⁸
- shortages of Welsh-medium vocational provision (as discussed from paragraph 147), and the barriers preventing colleges and schools from collaborating to bolster that provision;⁴³⁹ and
- gender imbalances in certain vocational areas.⁴⁴⁰

269. The Minister for Further and Higher Education stressed to us that there are some “valuable, wonderful vocational opportunities that our FE colleges offer”, that should be open to all children, irrespective of their predicted grades at GCSE. She told us that the Welsh Government was already implementing some of the recommendations from the Lusher review and Dr Hefin David MS’s report ‘Transitions into Employment’, such as the development of VCSEs and increasing the number of Welsh-medium qualifications. However, she acknowledged that delivering the other recommendations is “a really complex piece of work, because it cuts across a range of portfolios”.⁴⁴¹ The Welsh Government stated in its written evidence that it is engaging with key stakeholders first, followed by wider stakeholder engagement, to move forward with that body of work.⁴⁴²

Apprenticeships

270. There are four apprenticeship levels in Wales:

- foundation apprenticeships (Level 2);
- apprenticeships (Level 3);
- higher apprenticeships (Level 4 and 5); and

⁴³⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 7 (NASUWT); Written evidence: RET.03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)

⁴³⁹ Written evidence: RET.03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC); Written evidence: RET.24 Estyn;

⁴⁴⁰ Written evidence: RET.31 Gower College Swansea

⁴⁴¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 200-204

⁴⁴² Written evidence: RET.47 Welsh Government

- degree apprenticeships (Level 6), which we cover in more detail from paragraph 363.

271. The Welsh Government committed to creating 125,000 all-age apprenticeships in its updated Programme for Government.⁴⁴³ As recently as February 2024, the Welsh Government stressed that apprenticeships are a “cornerstone” of their skills policy, and have a “a central role in driving growth and supporting recovery, whether that is in digital innovation or the foundational economy, in areas such as health and social care, childcare and housing.”⁴⁴⁴ However, in evidence to the Senedd’s Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee (ETRA) in June 2024, the then Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and Welsh Language confirmed that the Welsh Government had revised down its target to 100,000 all-age apprenticeship starts.⁴⁴⁵

272. Data from StatsWales presented via a Medr interactive online tool sets out that, by April 2025, there were 77,385 apprenticeship starts (see figure 5). The numbers of apprentice starts across all levels (Level 2, Level 3 and Level 4 or higher) were lower in the third quarter of 2024/25 (3,895) compared to the third quarter of 2023/24 (4,570), with a particularly high reduction in the number of Level 2 apprenticeship starts (19%).⁴⁴⁶ Medr reported that the fall in apprenticeship starts coincidences with a reduction in apprenticeship funding in the 2024-25 budget, following the loss of European Social Fund contributions.⁴⁴⁷

⁴⁴³ Welsh Government, ‘[Programme for Government – Update](#)’, December 2021, page 4

⁴⁴⁴ Welsh Government, ‘[Apprenticeships: policy statement](#)’, February 2024

⁴⁴⁵ Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee, [26 June 2024, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 120

⁴⁴⁶ Medr, ‘[Apprenticeship learning programmes started: Interactive dashboard](#)’, 4 June 2025

⁴⁴⁷ Medr, ‘[Official statistics: Apprenticeships learning programmes started: August to October 2024](#)’, 7 May 2025, page 2

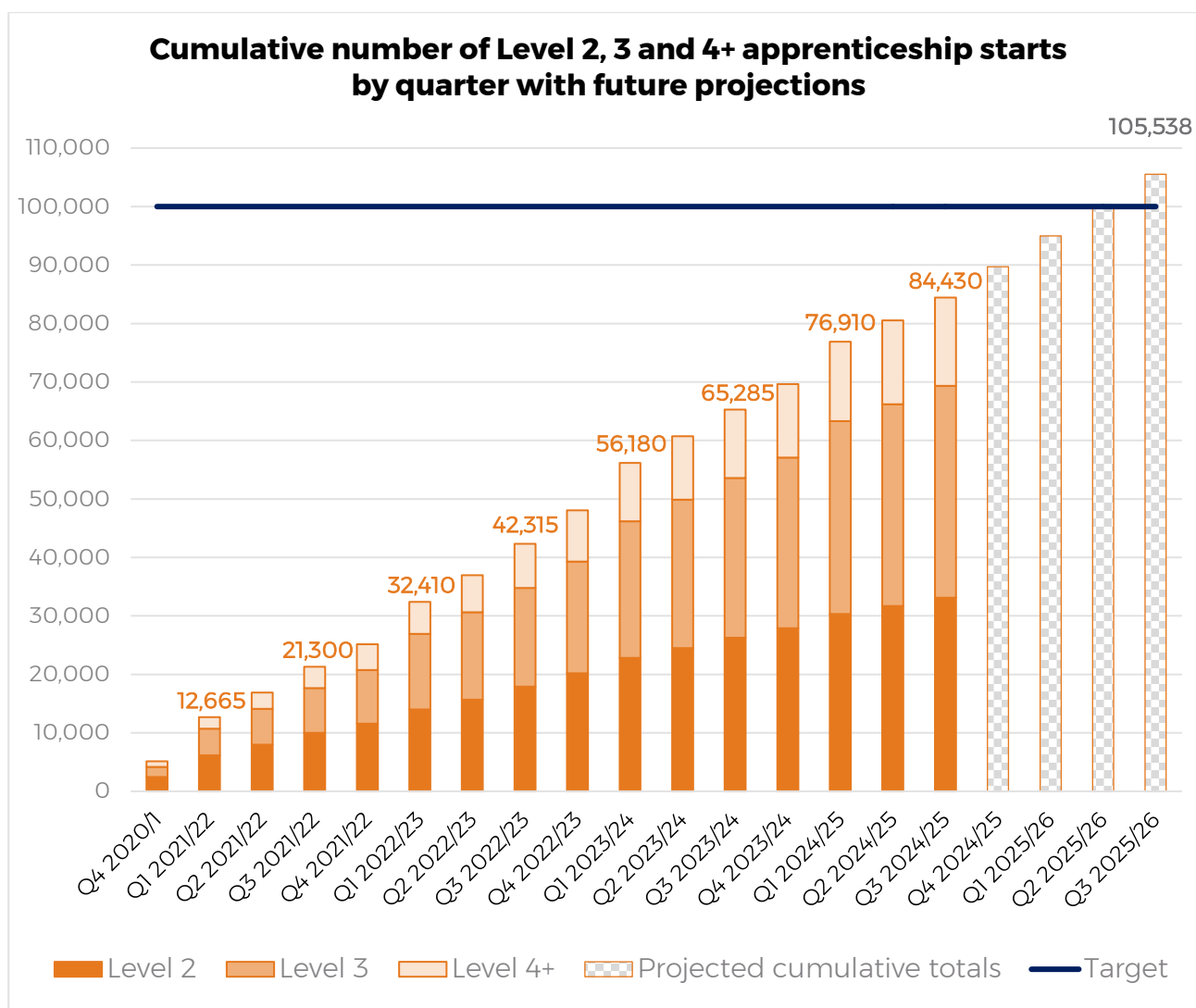


Figure 5. The cumulative number of Level 2, 3 and 4+ apprenticeship starts by quarter, with projections of future quarters based on the average quarterly increase between Q4 2020/21 and Q3 2024/25. Source: StatsWales, 'Apprenticeship learning programmes started by quarter and year'.⁴⁴⁸

273. Careers Wales told us that despite being a first choice for 13.5% of learners in year 11, and a second choice for 21% of learners, only 1.6% of learners actually end up entering work-based learning.⁴⁴⁹ The findings of our survey with young people and parents/carers were consistent with Careers Wales' data. One respondent told us:

⁴⁴⁸ Medr produces a more robust measure of apprenticeship starts, which take into account early dropouts (within 8 weeks) and transfers between apprenticeships. Using this measure, the running total of apprenticeship starts as of Q3 2024/25 is 77,385 (rather than 84,430, as noted in figure 5). See: Medr, 'Apprenticeship learning programmes started: Interactive dashboard', 4 June 2025

⁴⁴⁹ Written evidence: RET.17. Careers Wales

“... more needs to be done to be able to help find apprenticeships for trades such as plumbing. This is not a college problem, it's a problem that needs to be looked at, at a higher level. Currently, apprenticeships are scarce and students are potentially wasting years at college with no route way into their preferred trade. If apprenticeships are not available there should be some other means of getting into the trades that are easily accessible for students.”

Another wrote:

“[We need] More help in gaining an apprenticeship, my son is in his third year of college studying electrical and can't get an apprenticeship, it feels like it's a waste of time, we have contacted so many firms but no one will take him in or give him a chance.”⁴⁵⁰

274. We heard from college professionals there are lots of high paid, quality roles at the end of apprenticeship pathways.⁴⁵¹ But we also heard about numerous barriers to apprenticeship uptake. Educ8 Training Group and Cambrian Training agreed that employers are broadly supportive of apprenticeships, but are cutting recruitment in general at the moment, which is leading to fewer apprenticeship placements. Make UK told us that some manufacturing businesses are cautious about investing in apprentices, who may leave once they've completed their training.⁴⁵²

275. Other barriers to apprenticeship uptake raised by our stakeholders included:

- a lack of capacity within schools to collaborate with employers,⁴⁵³
- limited opportunities to do work-based learning in Welsh;⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵⁰ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings', March 2025, paragraph 63

⁴⁵¹ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 77

⁴⁵² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 218, 230-231; Written evidence: RET.33 Make UK

⁴⁵³ Written evidence: RET.26 Powys County Council

⁴⁵⁴ Written evidence: RET.24 Estyn

- the lack of a reliable digital connection across some parts of Wales, which can limit hybrid or homeworking apprenticeship options;⁴⁵⁵
- the negative impact of a young person earning money as an apprenticeship on family benefits⁴⁵⁶; and
- transport, particularly for learners in rural areas.⁴⁵⁷

276. Some stakeholders argued that more could be done to support employers. Educ8 Training Group, NTfW and Make UK all urged the Welsh Government to provide more funding for apprenticeship programmes, with the latter stressing that the cost of manufacturing and engineering apprentices have grown without equivalent support from the Welsh Government.⁴⁵⁸ Some urged the Welsh Government to do more to raise awareness amongst employers. Make UK argued in favour of simplified, tailored guidance for small to medium businesses in particular, whereas the Horticultural Traders Association called for more exploration of how apprenticeships could be developed in specific areas, such as urban horticulture.⁴⁵⁹

277. Meanwhile, the UK Government has removed the requirement for apprentices aged 19+ to complete a Level 2 qualification in English and/or maths as part of their training. (The requirement is still in place for apprenticeships aged 16-18.)⁴⁶⁰ They argue this will reduce “red tape” to help employers employ apprentices more easily.⁴⁶¹ This was supported by some of the stakeholders we spoke to. They told us that the minimum requirements for maths and English for some apprenticeships can put learners off. They explained that this can be frustrating because some employers report that they do not even need the minimum requirements, especially for maths.⁴⁶²

⁴⁵⁵ Written evidence: RET 13 Cambrian Training

⁴⁵⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 807 (Educ8 Training Group)

⁴⁵⁷ Written evidence: RET 42 Institute of Physics (IOP); Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 78

⁴⁵⁸ Written evidence: RET 33 Make UK; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 424 (National Training Federation for Wales)

⁴⁵⁹ Written evidence: RET 23 Horticultural Trades Association; Written evidence: RET 33 Make UK

⁴⁶⁰ UK Government, ‘Apprenticeship funding rules: August 2025 to July 2026’, July 2025, paragraph 41

⁴⁶¹ UK Government, ‘10,000 more apprentices as government slashes red tape to boost growth’, 18 February 2025

⁴⁶² Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 79

278. Other suggestions for improving apprenticeship uptake included proposals from Educ8 Training Group, which suggested integrated work-based options alongside traditional academic pathways.⁴⁶³

279. While we were collecting evidence for this inquiry, the Senedd's Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee was scrutinising apprenticeship pathways. Their report was published in July 2025. They concluded that:

- the reduction in the number of apprenticeship starts is a concern which needs further explanation;⁴⁶⁴
- learners face challenges when mapping careers progression through the apprenticeship levels, especially when compared to academic qualifications;⁴⁶⁵
- employers face a range of barriers to engaging with the apprenticeships system and taking on an apprentice.⁴⁶⁶

Their recommendations included that the Welsh Government set out a detailed explanation for the reduction in the number of apprenticeship starts, and explore barriers facing apprenticeship providers, and work with colleges to address those barriers.⁴⁶⁷ The Welsh Government accepted most of the Committees' recommendations. However, it argued that responsibility for exploring and addressing the barriers to provision faced by apprenticeship providers falls within Medr's remit, and that Medr would respond to the Committee separately.⁴⁶⁸

280. The Welsh Government stated that "in 2025-26 we are investing £144m in apprenticeships to ensure delivery of our 100,000 new apprenticeships target", to create a more joined-up and inclusive sector, with clearer and more flexible pathways for learners to learn at the level and in the place that is best for them.⁴⁶⁹

281. We asked the Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership whether he was concerned about recent drops in the number of apprenticeship starts. The Minister reassured us that he was "very clear and confident" that the revised target of 100,000 apprenticeship starts this Senedd term would be met. The Welsh

⁴⁶³ Written evidence: RET 07 Educ8 Training Group

⁴⁶⁴ Welsh Parliament, 'Apprenticeship pathways', July 2025, pages 21 & 52

⁴⁶⁵ Welsh Parliament, 'Apprenticeship pathways', July 2025, page 38

⁴⁶⁶ Welsh Parliament, 'Apprenticeship pathways', July 2025, page 43

⁴⁶⁷ Welsh Parliament, 'Apprenticeship pathways', July 2025, page 29

⁴⁶⁸ Welsh Government, 'Apprenticeship pathways: Response to ETRA Committee report', 3 September 2025

⁴⁶⁹ Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

Government's Director of Social Partnership, Employability and Fair Work told us that an injection of funding for one year can mean that starts in future years fall, because most apprenticeships last for more than one year. She added that:

*"... if we can't provide long-term certainty of funding, then the apprentice providers will slow down and accelerate and we see that, and it's a really, really big challenge to try and smooth over some of the variations that we see."*⁴⁷⁰

282. The Minister concluded by pointing to work being undertaken by Medr to consider the apprenticeship framework review to make sure that the frameworks are right for learners and for the economy.⁴⁷¹

Challenges facing 16-18 education institutions

School sixth forms

283. From paragraph 87 of this report, we consider evidence we received about perceived conflicts of interest when schools with sixth forms give careers advice to pupils. The causes of those conflicts of interest are that sixth forms are facing significant financial challenges in the context of budget pressures on schools generally. These financial pressures are making it difficult for some school sixth forms to remain viable.⁴⁷²

284. Stakeholders – predominantly those representing the FE sector - raised concerns about the impact of these financial pressures on learners. Gower College Swansea argued that some sixth forms are unable to offer the breadth of academic and vocational pathways, which they reported leads to inequitable access for learners.⁴⁷³ The college's Chief Executive suggested that some schools are using funding for pre-16 provision to subsidise sixth forms, which he reported is having a negative impact on pre-16 provision.⁴⁷⁴ ColegauCymru urged Medr to consider the viability of small sixth forms, which they assert "has been left in the

⁴⁷⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 58-62

⁴⁷¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 64-65

⁴⁷² Welsh Parliament, ['Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits'](#), May 2025, paragraph 82

⁴⁷³ [Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea](#)

⁴⁷⁴ [Written evidence: RET 04 Mark Jones, Chief Executive, Gower College Swansea](#)

‘too difficult’ box”. They claim that 42% of sixth form classes had 5 learners or fewer, which is “to the detriment of learners”.⁴⁷⁵

285. Others - predominantly those representing schools or school staff - took a different view. Some argued that schools lack investment compared to colleges.⁴⁷⁶ ADEW reported that “It’s not competition [with colleges] that we want, but in calling it a competition, it’s not really a fair competition, in the opinion of the schools.”⁴⁷⁷

286. Some stakeholders stressed that it is important for sixth forms to remain viable:

- The NEU argued that sixth form provision is intrinsically linked to secondary education, which is helpful in various ways, such as transition from Key Stage 4.⁴⁷⁸ Some of the learners we spoke to agreed that transition to post-16 education is easier with sixth forms, and added they wanted to stay at the school sixth form because they felt comfortable in the school, knew the teachers and liked the smaller classes.⁴⁷⁹
- UCAC reported that sometimes sixth forms are the only practical option for learners, particularly in rural areas.⁴⁸⁰
- The Children’s Commissioner reported that, in many parts of Wales, the strongest Welsh-medium provision is in schools.⁴⁸¹ CYDAG and Coleg Cenedlaethol Cymraeg agreed, adding that schools are the main feeder for HE through the medium of Welsh.⁴⁸²
- Universities Wales stressed that sixth forms have provided “a steady stream of university applicants” and that closure of sixth forms could lead to further HE participation challenges.⁴⁸³

⁴⁷⁵ Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru

⁴⁷⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 51 & 112 (Cymdeithas Ysgolion Dros Addysg Gymraeg (CYDAG))

⁴⁷⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 37

⁴⁷⁸ Written evidence: RET 06 National Education Union (NEU) Cymru

⁴⁷⁹ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraphs 82-84

⁴⁸⁰ Written evidence: RET 03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC) [Senedd translation]

⁴⁸¹ Written evidence: RET 18 Children’s Commissioner for Wales

⁴⁸² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 71; Written evidence: RET 43 Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol

⁴⁸³ Written evidence: RET 19 Universities Wales

287. The NASUWT felt that the financial challenges facing school sixth forms would lead to better collaboration between tertiary education institutions for the benefit of both schools and learners.⁴⁸⁴ The WLGA agreed, telling us:

“I think more and more will be forced to collaborate ... working together to give a fuller offer to the learner is definitely the way forward. We’re already seeing school sixth forms collaborating more due to issues around retention of staff and expertise. Especially if you’re looking at the sciences, the maths, the expertise isn’t there anymore, especially when you’re thinking of A level, beyond GCSE. And if you put the Welsh medium into that, we’re already into dire straits in getting the expertise and the good quality teaching there. So, I think it has to be a collaboration.”⁴⁸⁵

Colleges

288. ColegauCymru stressed to us the value of FE colleges and work based learning providers as contributors to a fairer, greener economy in Wales. They highlighted the role that the FE sector plays in supporting learners from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to school sixth forms. They also acknowledged the “long-standing support that the Welsh Government has given to the FE sector”, which they state makes the sector well placed to respond to the changing skills landscape in Wales.⁴⁸⁶

289. However, ColegauCymru also set out that the FE sector is not immune from challenges. They argued that the level of funding provided via the FCF to support learners from “deprived areas” is not sufficient to meet learners’ needs, and that some colleges are facing “acute pressure” on their budgets. Similarly, they argue that implementing the ALN reforms will require “enhanced funding, and long-term financial commitment” to meet the needs of learners with ALN.⁴⁸⁷ Others submitted similar evidence.⁴⁸⁸

⁴⁸⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [29 January 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 16 (NASUWT)

⁴⁸⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [26 March 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 55-56

⁴⁸⁶ [Written evidence: RET.34 Colegau Cymru](#)

⁴⁸⁷ [Written evidence: RET.34 Colegau Cymru](#)

⁴⁸⁸ [Written evidence: RET.31 Gower College Swansea](#)

290. Other college-specific challenges raised by stakeholders included:

- The funding formulae for colleges do not recognise the higher costs of teaching vocational courses through the medium of Welsh.⁴⁸⁹
- Staff salaries in colleges can be lower than working in industry, which makes recruitment and retention of college lecturers challenging.⁴⁹⁰
- FE institutions could improve how they provide local communities with access to HE, either directly or via degree apprenticeships.⁴⁹¹

291. ColegauCymru argued strongly for better collaboration between colleges and sixth forms, supported by local authorities, Medr and the Welsh Government, to ensure that the learners in their local areas have access to a broad curriculum offer.⁴⁹²

Young people aged 16-18 not in employment, education or training

292. Some stakeholders raised concerns about the proportion of 16-18 year-olds who are NEET. Medr described figures of young people who are NEET as “persistent” and “unacceptable”.⁴⁹³ Universities Wales agreed:

“Wales is experiencing some of the most alarming post-16 participation challenges we’ve seen in many years. There is clear, consistent and real evidence that fewer people in Wales are engaging with education or training beyond compulsory education. There is a participation problem across the nation – we have increasing numbers of those not in any form of education or training. Careers Wales data demonstrates that the proportion of school-leavers not pursuing fulltime education post-16 (either at college or sixth form) is at its highest since 2013.”⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁸⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 108 (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol)

⁴⁹⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 98 (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol)

⁴⁹¹ Written evidence: RET 22 Coleg y Cymoedd

⁴⁹² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 143-152

⁴⁹³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 145

⁴⁹⁴ Written evidence: RET 19 Universities Wales;

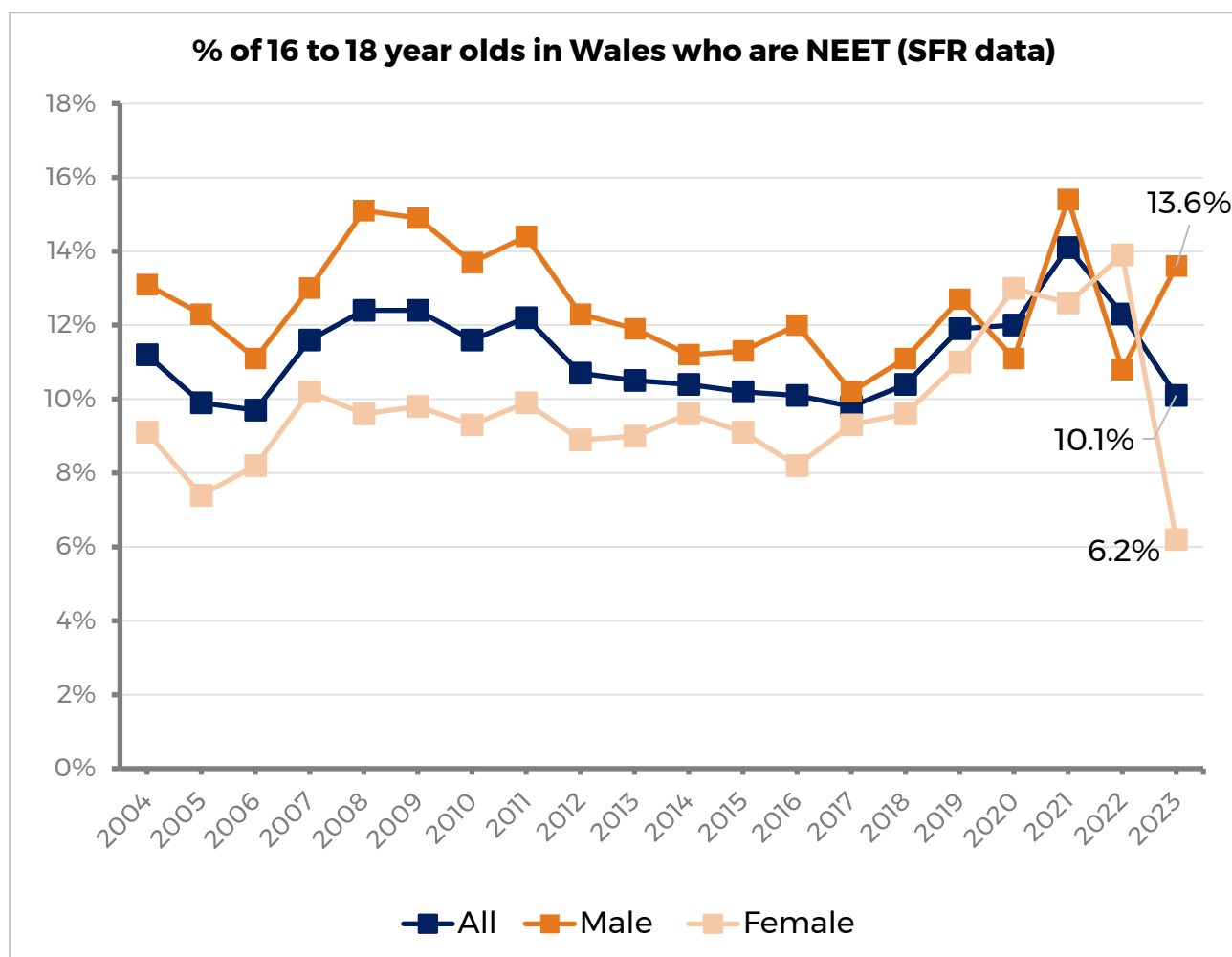


Figure 6. Percentage of 16 to 18 year olds in Wales who are NEET. Source: StatsWales, 'Estimated 16-24 year olds not in education, training or employment by economic activity and age groups'

293. Stakeholders also raised concerns about the quality of the data about young people who are NEET. Estyn told us that the data is “problematic”, and may give Members of the Senedd “a false sense of success”. They argued that not all young people sustain their post-16 destination, which is not captured in the figures.⁴⁹⁵ They concluded that an increasing number of children become NEET during the year after they finish compulsory education progresses.⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, **5 March 2025. Record of Proceedings**, paragraph 249

⁴⁹⁶ **Written evidence: RET.24 Estyn**

294. Others identified concerns with the data, such as:

- The data does not capture why young people are becoming NEET.⁴⁹⁷
- The data sample size means that short-term conclusions should not be drawn from the data.⁴⁹⁸
- Retention data from specialist colleges does not capture learners with ALN who become NEET within the first 8 weeks of college.⁴⁹⁹
- Education Otherwise argued that home educated learners are less likely to become NEET⁵⁰⁰, suggesting that the data may mask trends among specific groups of learners.

295. We heard various reasons for why young people might become NEET between the ages of 16 and 18. The Welsh Local Government Association explained that some learners find the transition to post-16 education daunting, and that some struggle to leave their homes.⁵⁰¹ Others, meanwhile, argued that disengagement starts earlier, from Years 9 and 10. We heard from stakeholders about various push factors that lead to young people disengaging after age 16, including: long-term consequences of COVID, a lack of resilience, travel challenges, difficult timetables, poor mental health, and a desire to be working and earning money. We heard that it is a big jump from GCSE to A level, and many young people have external pressures like caring responsibilities.⁵⁰²

296. NEU, meanwhile, raised a concern that some young people may not technically be NEET, but are in insecure and low-paid work. They suggested that those young people may subsequently find it challenging to re-enter the education system at a later date.⁵⁰³

297. Medr and WLGA/ADEW argued that tackling disengagement with education and training is a societal responsibility, and requires a range of interventions from

⁴⁹⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 327 (National Training Federation for Wales)

⁴⁹⁸ Written evidence: RET 06 National Education Union (NEU) Cymru

⁴⁹⁹ Written evidence: RET 28 Care Leaver Activities and Student Support in Wales (CLASS Cymru)

⁵⁰⁰ Written evidence: RET 01 Education Otherwise

⁵⁰¹ Written evidence: RET 14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)

⁵⁰² Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraphs 86-88

⁵⁰³ Written evidence: RET 06 National Education Union (NEU) Cymru

different organisations.⁵⁰⁴ However, we also heard about specific interventions that could support young people. Estyn reported that schools and local authorities are identifying young people at risk of becoming NEET and putting in place interventions “pretty well”.⁵⁰⁵ They, the WLGA and the Children’s Commissioner, highlighted the positive role of youth work in particular in building young people’s confidence and helping them to stay engaged with education and training. A WLGA representative even called youth work “our secret weapon with supporting young people who are NEET.” However, they also cautioned that the level of youth work undertaken across local authorities varies significantly, depending on the availability of funding.⁵⁰⁶

298. The Welsh Government stated that their:

“... approach to increasing participation in post-16 education specifically focuses efforts on increasing participation in education and training, as opposed to a broader objective of reducing NEETs.”

They argued that increasing school attendance and attainment are key to driving increased participation, noting an additional £8.8 million across 2024-25 and 2025-26 to support attendance, and £10 million to support learning and attainment in literacy and numeracy. The Welsh Government pointed to an additional investment of £6.5 million to increase the number of family engagement officers in schools, with a further £9.5 million announced for 2025/26. The Cabinet Secretary for Education stressed that the officers would be:

“... tackling those complex barriers that prevent children and young people coming to school, but also looking at all sorts of enrichment activities as well to try and make sure that kids do really want to come to school. The youth service is also part of that solution.”⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁴ Written evidence: RET.14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW); Written evidence: RET.41 Medr

⁵⁰⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 197

⁵⁰⁶ Written evidence: RET.14 Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 26 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 68-70; Written evidence: RET.18 Children’s Commissioner for Wales

⁵⁰⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 176

299. The Welsh Government also referenced a series of interventions that aim to reduce the number of young people aged 16-18 who are NEET, and which are considered in more detail elsewhere in this report:

- the Curriculum for Wales, including the Careers and Work-Related Experiences cross-cutting theme and the 14 to 16 Learner Entitlement;
- Careers' Wales work experience and careers advice services;
- the Junior Apprenticeship programme; and
- the Young Person's Guarantee.⁵⁰⁸

Compulsory education to 18

300. In Wales, education is compulsory until the end of year 11, which is the academic year during which a child turns 16. However, the upper compulsory school age varies significantly across countries. Compulsory school ages even differ within the UK. In England, young people must continue in full-time education, start an apprenticeship, or carry out work alongside part-time work or volunteering until they are 18 years of age.⁵⁰⁹

301. We heard calls to increase the compulsory education age to 18, predominantly from representatives of the HE sector and from the National Education Union, which argued that increasing the compulsory age would help to ensure that fewer young people in the 16-18 age bracket become NEET.⁵¹⁰ Universities Wales' evidence summarised the views we heard in support of raising the compulsory education leaving age:

"I think it's partly the piece that I mentioned earlier on about what signals are we sending about the economy and society that we want because, given the outcomes that we seem to have, they're not necessarily ones that you would say would be compatible with that high-skill, high-value economy. So, I would place compulsory education to 18 in that context, because actually it sends a signal of aspiration around education. It sends a signal about the importance of education through one's life, actually. And to cut that off at 16 when we seem to be

⁵⁰⁸ Written evidence: RET_47 Welsh Government

⁵⁰⁹ Gov.uk, 'School leaving age'

⁵¹⁰ Written evidence: RET_06 National Education Union (NEU) Cymru

unusual in that seems to be sending a strange message. We talk about lifelong learning, we talk about people having access throughout their lives, and yet we have a lower compulsory education age.”⁵¹¹

302. However, not everyone agreed that challenges in Wales relating to educational outcomes, participation and educational inequalities would be addressed by raising the school leaving age. In their February 2024 report for the Education Policy Institute, James Robson, Luke Sibieta et al say that educational outcomes are a “source of major concern in Wales”. However, they argue that:

“It is not possible to isolate exactly which policies or institutions are driving this concerning picture in outcomes. However, it is worth saying that it is unlikely to be having a school leaving age of 16, compared with an education leaving age of 18 in England. The poor set of outcomes in Wales appear to be longstanding, the education leaving age was only recently raised to 18 in England, and the school leaving age remains 16 in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where outcomes look better.”⁵¹²

In a separate 2025 report for the Education Policy Institute, Shruti Khandekar and Luke Sibieta conclude that:

“... the higher school leaving ages seem to have most effect when they oblige young people to stay on to a point when they can complete educational qualifications. They have less economic benefit if young people aren’t completing qualifications.”⁵¹³

Our view

16-18 destinations data

303. The evidence we have received indicates that there are clear gaps in data that make it challenging to understand learners’ pathways and choices after they

⁵¹¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, **6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings**, paragraph 331

⁵¹² James Robson, Luke Sibieta et al, ‘**Comparing policies, participation and inequalities across UK post-16 Education and Training landscapes**’, February 2024, page 92

⁵¹³ Shruti Khandekar and Luke Sibieta, ‘**Long-run changes in school leaving rules and outcomes across the UK**’, March 2025, page 30

leave year 11. We appreciate the challenges facing the Welsh Government and others as they look to collate and quality-assure data drawn from multiple education institutions. However, as we say time and time again, in almost every report we have produced during this Senedd term, high quality and timely data is absolutely critical to effective policy evaluation and development.

304. We are therefore pleased that the Cabinet Secretary for Education, the Ministers for Further and Higher Education and the for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership all acknowledged the importance of data about post-16 education and training. We hope that they will support us as we look to Medr, as the responsible body for post-16 data, to make tangible improvements to the dataset available about 16-18 education and training (we consider data about learners ages 18+ in chapter 7).

305. Paragraphs 248 - 255 above set out specific concerns for Medr to consider as it looks to improve the publicly available dataset for learners aged 16-18 (we consider data about learners aged 18+ in chapter 7). Of those concerns, we believe that developing a better understanding of learner pathways, and improved data about learners who are not attending a sixth form are particularly pressing issues.

Recommendation 10. Medr should improve the quality and timeliness of published data about learners' education and training between the ages of 16 and 18, in response to the concerns set out in this report. In doing so, Medr should pay particular attention to:

- data that follows learners' pathways at each stage after they leave year 11, to help understand learners' choices and where, why and when learners may be leaving or dropping out of education and training; and
- data about learners in FE colleges and work-based learning, particularly learners who are undertaking level 1 and 2 courses, including destinations for those on one-year courses.

The mix of provision for 16-18 year olds

306. As we conclude in chapter 2, there is still more to be done in the pursuit of parity of esteem between academic and vocational pathways. Post-16 education and training must be designed to meet the needs of the learner. Institutions should act collaboratively and flexibly to meet those needs, not the other way round. We therefore have no specific view about the value of one type of qualification over another. If a learner wishes to study A levels at a sixth form, they should be able to do so. If they wish to engage on a vocational course in a FE

college, they should be able to do that too. And when they consider what they want to do after completing those courses, they should be supported to take whatever steps are right for them, based on informed choices. They must not be barred from progression to education and training at higher levels due to deep-seated cultural or institutional bias over the value of one route over another.

307. We were therefore struck by the remarkable discrepancy between the proportion of young people who want to do an apprenticeship compared to the proportion who actually end up doing one. According to Careers Wales, despite being a first choice for 13.5% of year 11 learners and a second choice for 21%, only 1.6% actually end up undertaking work-based learning. This is despite assurances from the Welsh Government that they will meet the target of 100,000 apprenticeship (revised down from their initial target of 125,000) starts over the course of the Senedd.

308. Some of the barriers to apprenticeships appear elsewhere in this report in relation to barriers to post-16 education and training more generally, such as poor careers advice, transport and a lack of Welsh-language provision. We also note the work the Senedd's Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee has undertaken on apprenticeships, including their recommendation that the Welsh Government address challenges facing apprenticeship providers to improve the availability of apprenticeships. We look forward to Medr's detailed response to the Committee about those challenges and how they can be overcome.

309. However, the most commonly cited barriers to a lack of apprenticeship provision in Wales in the evidence we have gathered centre around employers: insufficient funding, a general slow-down of recruitment into new roles, and a lack of awareness amongst employers.

310. Apprenticeships are direct pathways to jobs. Therefore, for apprenticeship provision to meet learner demand, apprenticeships must be seen by employers as an effective and affordable way to provide young people with the skills and experience they need to carry out the job successfully. The evidence we have gathered does not clearly indicate whether this is the case. We therefore ask the Welsh Government to set out why it believes there is such a discrepancy between demand for apprenticeships amongst learners and the actual availability of apprenticeships in Wales, with a specific emphasis on the barriers facing employers.

Recommendation 11. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should set out an analysis of:

- why it believes that there is such a discrepancy between the proportion of learners who want to undertake an apprenticeship and the proportion of learners who end up doing one; and
- the extent to which barriers facing employers (such as the funding for apprenticeship programmes, and a lack of awareness amongst small to medium businesses) have contributed to the significant discrepancy between the demand for apprenticeship amongst young people and the actual number of apprenticeships available.

Young people aged 16-18 not in employment, education or training

311. Driving down the proportion of young people who are NEET requires a multi-faceted approach that incorporates high quality careers advice, a broad range of post-16 options, and engagement in pre-16 education. It must also confront systemic and structural challenges such as poverty. We recognise the complexity of the task.

312. Much of this report touches on policy initiatives that directly or indirectly aim to increase participation in post-16 education and training. Some of these, such as the Junior Apprenticeships programme, show real promise. We hope that our recommendations in those areas contribute to helping young people avoid becoming NEET.

313. When considering the specific evidence and data about young people who are NEET, we noticed that young men appear to be consistently more likely to be NEET than young women. This pattern is not fixed; there are years where the trend is reversed. There are also different sources of data, and the 2023 SFR figures are provisional and are liable to change following future updates. But even if we set aside the quite dramatic reduction in young women who were NEET in 2023 as set out in figure 6, we can safely conclude that, in the long-term, young men in Wales are more likely to become NEET than young women.

314. We have not received any evidence to explain why this might be the case. However, what evidence we did receive indicates that the rate of young people who are NEETs is stubbornly and unacceptably high. Helping to understand whether, and why, young men appear more likely to fall out of education, training or employment could offer valuable insights into the participation challenges faced by 16-18 year olds in Wales.

Recommendation 12. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should set out:

- why it believes that young men appear to be consistently more likely to become NEET than young women;
- how its work to improve the rates of participation in post-16 education and training has taken into account the different challenges facing young women and men; and
- whether it believes that any further work needs to be undertaken to better understand why some young become NEET , particularly in relation to variations in rates between young women and men in Wales.

6. Transitions to post-18 education and training

Many young people will start thinking about their post-18 options during Key Stage 4. But learners' circumstances can change significantly between 16 and 18, and many will need guidance *after* they leave compulsory education. This chapter considers the support that learners receive, and the barriers some learners face, as they consider their education and training options post-18.

Careers advice and guidance post-16

315. Most of the evidence we received about careers advice and guidance focused on learners in Key Stage 4 or earlier. However, some stakeholders stressed that there is an increasing need for tailored careers advice for young people in sixth form or college, whether they are going onto university or are considering other options.⁵¹⁴ Educ8 Training Group and Universities Wales argued in favour of better advice and guidance for learners throughout education to support their post-18 decisions.⁵¹⁵ The Open University urged the Welsh Government and Medr, in particular, to recognise the value of post-16 careers advice and guidance:

"We would also argue that IAG [Information, Advice and Guidance] cannot and should not be limited to pre-16 learners. In a Wales of second changes [sic], more and more adults are going to need and want to return to learning several times throughout life. We would argue that this is positive and is characteristic of a nation where lifelong learning is valued. ... We would welcome recognition of this by the Welsh Government, in

⁵¹⁴ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraphs 92-95

⁵¹⁵ Written evidence: RET.07.Educ8 Training Group; Written evidence: RET.19.Universities Wales

terms of funding, and further believe that Medr has an important role to play in coordinating IAG across Wales.”⁵¹⁶

316. Some sixth form students told us that certain universities proactively engaged with them to talk about their post-18 futures while they were in sixth form. Others told us that they had gone to a UCAS fair to help them make decisions about post-18 education and training, which they felt was very helpful.⁵¹⁷ However, some of the respondents to our online survey were less positive about the information they received about universities. Several young people expressed a lack of clarity around universities, wishing they had received more detailed guidance on courses and entry requirements. Others expressed regret about their A level choices due their implications for their chances of doing the course they wanted to do at university.⁵¹⁸

317. However, some stakeholders representing the HE sector told us that the sector’s access to students in schools and colleges has worsened in recent years. They reported that the curriculum is overburdened, and consequently teachers and lecturers don’t feel they can create spaces in timetables for universities to engage with prospective students.⁵¹⁹ Both Careers Wales and the University and College Union suggested that learners who do not have a university in their local area may be less likely to consider HE.⁵²⁰ Universities Wales shared similar views, stressing the importance of making young people aware of the opportunities presented by HE.⁵²¹ The University and College Union argued strongly that much more should be done to help put university on learners’ radars:

“... why have we not got free transport on open days to all Welsh universities? Why, when you turn up, are there always nice cars in universities on open days? Why aren’t there buses taking whole student groups? Why aren’t there university lectures put on for primary and secondary pupils? ... We have this ridiculous scenario where people don’t know what they want to do

⁵¹⁶ Written evidence: RET.15 The Open University in Wales

⁵¹⁷ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 91

⁵¹⁸ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Engagement Findings’, March 2025, paragraphs 42-44

⁵¹⁹ Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 92

⁵²⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 232; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 25 June 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 71-78

⁵²¹ Written evidence: RET.19 Universities Wales

because there's no pathways booklet. There's no glossy document. There are cuts to career services and so on. No-one's putting this information together. There's no HE in schools where there should be."⁵²²

Barriers to progression at 18

Poverty and financial barriers

The cost of HE and support for students

318. Wales' package of support for university students is widely regarded as the most generous in the UK.⁵²³ Tuition fees are capped at £9,535 a year for the 2025/26 academic year, the cost of which can be covered up front by a loan, to be repaid (plus interest, which currently ranges from 3.2% to 6.2% for undergraduates) once the student has completed their course. To help with living costs, Welsh students get a grant of between £1,000 and up to £8,100 (£10,124 for learners studying in London), depending on family income and whether they will be living with their parents. Students can also top up their living costs grant with a loan, up to a maximum of £12,345 (£15,415 for learners studying in London), again depending on family income and whether they'll be living with their parents. Students with disabilities and childcare responsibilities are able to apply for additional support. Students studying certain subjects (like healthcare, medicine and social work) may also be entitled to bursaries.⁵²⁴

319. Of the year 11 and sixth form students who spoke to us who were considering university, none were deterred by the associated costs.⁵²⁵ Research by the Higher Education Policy Institute has also found that the general public significantly overestimates the negative impact of university debt on graduates' lives. While the public guessed that 49% of graduates would say that university debt has negatively impacted their lives, 22% of graduates themselves (who have gone to university under the current fee system) stated that university debt negatively impacted their lives.⁵²⁶

⁵²² Children, Young People and Education Committee, [25 June 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 73

⁵²³ The British Academy, ['Student Funding Across the United Kingdom'](#), July 2023, page 5

⁵²⁴ Student Finance Wales, ['What's available'](#)

⁵²⁵ Welsh Parliament, ['Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits'](#), May 2025, paragraphs 98-100

⁵²⁶ Duffy, B. & Hillman, N., ['UK higher education: Public perceptions vs reality'](#), August 2025

320. Nevertheless, the cost of university was the most commonly raised barrier to HE amongst stakeholders. In general, stakeholders agreed that the fee system was putting students off going to university, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds. Some placed those concerns about value for money within the context of widespread cost of living challenges.⁵²⁷

321. Numerous stakeholders reported that there is lack of awareness of the student loans system among learners. Some added that this was a reflection of poor awareness raising activities by the Welsh Government and its partners.⁵²⁸ UCU described the marketing in Wales as “appalling”.⁵²⁹ Universities Wales expressed concern that “The opportunities of a university education to boost life chances are not being grasped, with considerable ramifications for social mobility and social justice in Wales”. They expressed support for an improved awareness raising campaign to improve understanding of the university offer in Wales. Careers Wales agreed:

“I would definitely say there is an issue around awareness of that system. I think there’s a fear of debt. There’s a perception of young people coming through university and being £50,000 plus in debt, and not enough recognition of the way that student finance system works and how it’s paid back, I guess, as a kind of tax, once they’re earning a certain salary, and only paying a small percentage of it back. So, I think there’s a lot more work to be done around working particularly with parents about understanding that, because parental influence, as we know—all the research tells us that parents have the major decision-making power, if you like, or the major influence over young people, and that awareness around student funding really is an issue.”⁵³⁰

⁵²⁷ Written evidence: RET 20 Qualifications Wales; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 237 (Careers Wales); Written evidence: RET 03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 25 June 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 189 (National Union of Students); Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru; Written evidence: RET 24 Estyn; Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea

⁵²⁸ Written evidence: RET 19 Universities Wales; Written evidence: RET 45 NPTC Group of Colleges; Welsh Parliament, ‘Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits’, May 2025, paragraph 102

⁵²⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 25 June 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 110

⁵³⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 245

322. There were mixed views on the sufficiency of Wales’ fees system and the student support offer. The National Union of Students (“NUS”) Cymru questioned the policy rationale of charging for higher education, and asked us why it was possible for other nations to provide it for free, or for much less=. They argued for more financial support for students, arguing that despite being the most generous in the UK, “financial support [in Wales] isn’t going far enough”.⁵³¹

323. However, Cardiff Metropolitan University urged us to be cautious when making associations between the funding and maintenance support models in Wales – which they considered to be “the most progressive in the UK” – and falling HE participation (which we explore in detail from paragraph 353). They argue that participation challenges pre-date the fees system, and we should avoid “drawing causation from correlation”.⁵³²

The impact of disadvantage

324. Research by the Wales Centre for Public Policy published in October 2024 found that learners eligible for FSM are less than half as likely to enter HE (19%) than learners who are not eligible (43%). Data from UCAS supports the researchers’ findings.⁵³³ In the most deprived areas (quintile 1), 20.5% of 18-year-old learners applied to go to university, compared to 50.2% in the least deprived areas (quintile 5). As figure 7 sets out, Wales’ 2025 overall participation rate and its 1st, 4th and 5th quintile participation rates are the lowest across UK jurisdictions.

Jurisdiction	Overall	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
Wales	32.5%	20.5%	26.4%	31.4%	35.7%	50.2%
England	42.0%	31.8%	37.7%	41.4%	46.6%	54.7%
Scotland	34.5%	21.5%	25.4%	30.9%	39.8%	52.2%
Northern Ireland	48.9%	32.0%	42.2%	51.7%	56.7%	64.5%

Figure 7. Application rates to university by the June 2025 UCAS deadline among 18-year-olds by jurisdiction and by quintile in the Index of Multiple Deprivation.⁵³⁴ **Source: UCAS, ‘2025**

⁵³¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 25 June 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 179 & 189

⁵³² Written evidence: RET 30 Cardiff Metropolitan University

⁵³³ Wales Centre for Public Policy, ‘Understanding inequity in tertiary education: Data analysis key findings’, October 2024, pages 4-5

⁵³⁴ These comparisons should be treated with caution, because different parts of the UK use different methodologies to establish their respective index of multiple deprivation.

cycle applicant figures – 30 June deadline'. Cells highlighted pink are the lowest across jurisdictions. Cells highlighted green are the highest.

325. Universities Wales have raised concern throughout this inquiry about the gap between the HE participation rate of the most disadvantaged learners in Wales. However, they also argue that socio-economic factors alone cannot explain Wales' lower rate of HE participation. They point to the north-west of England, which they argue has higher participation rates than Wales despite having comparable demographics.⁵³⁵ They argue:

"The social mobility and life-changing opportunities offered by tertiary education are not being grasped by those with the most to gain – and this must be addressed for Wales to be a progressive and prosperous nation where all can reach their potential and thrive."⁵³⁶

326. NUS Cymru urged us to "look at our economic position, child poverty, for example. How do we support people from different backgrounds to come into the HE sector"⁵³⁷ Others suggested that apprenticeships are more appealing now because some learners see them as a more direct route out of poverty.⁵³⁸

Other financial barriers

327. Less frequently-raised points about financial barriers to post-18 education and training included:

- Learners should be made aware of post-18 opportunities that combine studying with earning a salary to address concerns about cost.⁵³⁹
- More funding should be provided to young people to study part-time, which is currently limited to students studying at 25% intensity or above.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁵ Written evidence: RET.19 Universities Wales

⁵³⁶ Additional evidence: Universities Wales – 6 March 2025

⁵³⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 25 June 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 173

⁵³⁸ Welsh Parliament, 'Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits', May 2025, paragraph 100

⁵³⁹ Written evidence: RET.03 Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)

⁵⁴⁰ Letter from the University of South Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 9 April 2025

- The Welsh Government's learning grant (a grant for students aged 19 or over who are studying a course of Further Education at college.) should be increased.⁵⁴¹

Challenges progressing from vocational studies into HE

328. Qualifications Wales, Careers Wales and Universities Wales all suggested that the trend in falling A level entries and the increase in vocational courses at age 16-18 could be associated with HE participation challenges. We heard that learners engaged in vocational education and training are less likely to go on to university than their peers who are undertaking A levels.⁵⁴² In particular, University Wales, the UCU and Cardiff Metropolitan University all lamented that not enough learners taking vocational qualifications – BTECs, for example – are moving through to university.⁵⁴³

329. Careers Wales suggested that while vocational qualifications can lead to HE, the pathway is less linear and less well understood than academic routes.⁵⁴⁴ The University of South Wales reported a decline in learners moving through its “HE in FE partnerships”, and argued that “there is not a substitution effect of HE to FE, but an overall decline in participation [sic] in institutions that traditionally serve underrepresented students.”⁵⁴⁵ Cardiff Metropolitan University and Colegau Cymru both asserted that increasing university participation will mean encouraging learners from vocational routes to go to university too, not just by increasing A level uptake.⁵⁴⁶ The UCU went further, and argued in favour of targets for university entrants from vocational backgrounds.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [25 June 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 200 (NUS)

⁵⁴² [Written evidence: RET 30 Cardiff Metropolitan University](#)

⁵⁴³ [Written evidence: RET 19 Universities Wales](#); [Written evidence: RET 20 Qualifications Wales](#); Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 239 (Careers Wales); [Written evidence: RET 36 University and College Union in Wales](#); [Written evidence: RET 30 Cardiff Metropolitan University](#)

⁵⁴⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 239

⁵⁴⁵ [Letter from the University of South Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 9 April 2025

⁵⁴⁶ [Written evidence: RET 30 Cardiff Metropolitan University](#); [Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru](#)

⁵⁴⁷ [Written evidence: RET 36 University and College Union in Wales](#)

Retaining learners in Wales and learners studying through the medium of Welsh

330. According to Higher Education Statistics Agency data about the 2023/24 UK student cohort, 71% of students with a permanent address in Wales attend a Welsh HE institution, with 28% attending an institution in England. This is a lower proportion than the rest of the UK: 96% of students domiciled in England attend an HE institution in England, 94% of students domiciled in Scotland attend an HE institution in Scotland, and 78% of students domiciled in Northern Ireland attend an HE institution in Northern Ireland.⁵⁴⁸

331. We heard significant concerns about the proportion of Welsh students choosing to study outside Wales, particularly from representatives of the Welsh HE sector. Universities Wales and Cardiff Metropolitan University urged the Welsh Government to build on its “Study in Wales” brand, which they report has been successful in attracting international students, to encourage Welsh young people to study in Wales.⁵⁴⁹ Swansea University argued that increasing the numbers of Welsh-domiciled students studying at Welsh universities could improve participation, and would also support the financial sustainability of the sector (which we discuss in the following chapter). The UCU made similar arguments.⁵⁵⁰

332. We also heard concern that Welsh-speaking learners do not always consider studying through the medium of Welsh at university. Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol stated that only 32% of learners studying through the medium of Welsh at sixth form were considering continuing their studies in Welsh, despite 90% recognising the value of Welsh language skills for the workplace, and despite scholarships for students who carry out at least 40 credits of their course through the medium of Welsh. They told us that the numbers of learners studying at university in Welsh has plateaued in recent years, and expressed concern that the increasing numbers of learners studying outside Wales was having a detrimental effect on the numbers of learners studying through the medium of Welsh.⁵⁵¹ The

⁵⁴⁸ HESA, ‘Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2023/24’, 20 March 2025

⁵⁴⁹ Written evidence: RET.19 Universities Wales; Written evidence: RET.30 Cardiff Metropolitan University

⁵⁵⁰ Letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Swansea University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 9 April 2025; Children, Young People and Education Committee, 25 June 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 53

⁵⁵¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 8

Welsh Language Commissioner agreed, adding that this also has detrimental impacts on the numbers of people working in Welsh, too.⁵⁵²

333. Some of the views focused on the funding made available for universities to teach through the medium of Welsh. Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, Universities Wales and Cardiff Metropolitan University all reported Higher Education Funding Council for Wales research, which found that there are higher costs and smaller class sizes associated with teaching in Welsh, for which – they argued – there is no longer sufficient funding.⁵⁵³

334. When we raised concerns about the proportion of Welsh-domiciled learners choosing to go to university in Wales, and living in Wales after graduating, the Minister for Further and Higher Education told us that she “would disagree with you saying that Welsh students don’t want to stay in Wales and have higher education here.” She stressed that 68% of Welsh-domiciled students study in universities in Wales⁵⁵⁴, and that there has not been a meaningful decrease in the number of Welsh-domiciled students applying to providers in Wales. She told us that in 2025, there were only 60 fewer than in 2024 (14,690 compared to 14,750), and added that those figures are an increase on 2019.⁵⁵⁵

Other barriers to progression at 18

335. The NUS Cymru told us that there are numerous barriers to progression to HE, and that participation should be viewed within a wider context:

“Because it’s often not just the education that’s the impactful piece of their lives, there are so many other things around the individual. It’s not just the lectures and the contact hours with the lecturers, it’s the whole piece around housing, transport, mental health support, sexual health support—every other part

⁵⁵² Written evidence: RET 32 Welsh Language Commissioner

⁵⁵³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 13 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 109 (Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol); Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 378 (Universities Wales); Written evidence: RET 30 Cardiff Metropolitan University

⁵⁵⁴ This differs to the statistics in paragraph 330. The 71% quoted in paragraph 314 relate to *entrants* (new starters) only for 2023/24, and include postgraduates. The 68% quoted by the Minister in paragraph 334 relates to *all undergraduates* (i.e. not just entrants, but excluding postgraduates).

⁵⁵⁵ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 103-106

of society students touch on. It's difficult to create a fair education system in an isolated sphere."⁵⁵⁶

336. Other barriers to post-18 education and training raised in the evidence we received include:

- mental health concerns amongst learners: Careers Wales told us that some learners are struggling with anxiety and decision making, which means they are putting off decisions such as going to university.⁵⁵⁷ Some professionals working with young people told us that, because of the pandemic, sixth formers are 'younger' and are less independent, and therefore do not feel ready for university.⁵⁵⁸ We looked at the issues around mental health support in higher education earlier in this Senedd term, making 30 recommendations for change which we believed would improve the support provided to students.⁵⁵⁹
- having disabilities and/or ALN: the Wales Centre for Public Policy has advised that work should be carried out to establish why fewer disabled learners progress to HE than their non-disabled peers, and whether and how those barriers can be overcome⁵⁶⁰;
- transport: Cardiff Metropolitan University set out that navigating public transport can be challenging for learners in Wales, and that studying in England can be more attractive where travel times are better.⁵⁶¹
- affordable housing options: Wrexham University reported that a shortage of affordable rental housing for students is putting off learners from within Wales and across the UK.⁵⁶²
- having experience of care: NYAS Cymru explained that care experienced learners face a series of additional barriers when they are considering HE, including a lack of someone to support them with their UCAS

⁵⁵⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [25 June 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 181

⁵⁵⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 239

⁵⁵⁸ Welsh Parliament, ['Routes into post-16 education and training: Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits'](#), May 2025, paragraph 103

⁵⁵⁹ CYPE Committee, [Mental Health support in Higher Education, 29 March 2024](#)

⁵⁶⁰ Wales Centre for Public Policy, ['Understanding inequity in tertiary education: Data analysis key findings'](#), October 2024, page 9

⁵⁶¹ [Written evidence: RET 30 Cardiff Metropolitan University](#)

⁵⁶² [Letter from the Vice-Chancellor and CEO of Wrexham University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 15 May 2025

application, financial concerns relating to renting accommodation, accommodation not being available for them outside term-time, and variations in universities' care leaver offer⁵⁶³; and

- leaving education, even if temporarily: the NASUWT and the UCU suggested that some learners leave education with the intention of returning - to take a gap year, for example, or to take a break to find employment - then they can be reluctant to return.⁵⁶⁴

Our view

Careers advice and guidance post-16

337. As we conclude in chapter 3, careers and guidance should start early. By the time learners reach 16, they are likely to have already decided what they want to do after they finish the next phase of their education or training. Sadly, some young people's post-18 options will already have been constrained by their pre-16 experiences, choices and the support and advice they received.

338. Nevertheless, there remains a significant cohort of learners who would benefit from further careers advice and guidance between the ages of 16 and 18. This may be because they have changed their mind about what they want to do after sixth form or college. It may be that their basic pathway hasn't changed, but they need help understanding what options are open to them to help them make more nuanced decisions about what they want to do next or where they want to go. Some will need extra support and reassurance to help them to navigate their post-16 studies and take their next steps into adulthood.

339. It is not clear where the responsibility lies for careers advice and guidance between the ages of 16 and 18. Careers Wales have not been mandated to do so, and they evidently do not have spare resources to provide a national support offer for learners after they leave year 11. That means that the responsibility falls to education and training providers. We know that some provide good support to their learners. But our evidence suggests that's not always the case. We therefore ask the Welsh Government to set out clearly their expectations about the careers advice and guidance that learners receive post-16, including where that responsibility lies and the role that Estyn plays in holding post-16 institutions to

⁵⁶³ Written evidence: RET 25 The National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru (NYAS) Cymru

⁵⁶⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 29 January 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 99 (NASUWT); Written evidence: RET 36 University and College Union in Wales

account for the support they provide their learners to make the decisions that are right for them when they reach 18.

Recommendation 13. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should set out its expectations of how post-16 education and training providers should provide careers advice and guidance to young people to help them make informed decisions about their steps post-18. In doing so, the Welsh Government should outline clearly where responsibility lies for that advice and the role of Estyn in holding institutions to account for the support they provide.

The cost of HE and support for students

340. We note the remarkably consistent evidence we have gathered that has highlighted certain paradoxes about the cost of university for learners in Wales:

- Wales has a generous financial support offer for university students compared to other UK nations. Yet, the cost of university is putting off many learners from going.
- The general public perceives that the cost of university has more of a negative impact on students than is reported by students who have actually been to university (and, consequently, have experienced the impact of the costs first-hand).

341. However, we are not persuaded that awareness raising campaigns, which some have called for, would be the right solution. Campaigns such as these have significant costs and require long-term political buy-in to stand any chance of being successful. Even with all that, we are not convinced about how successful they would be at driving up participation rates, nor how they would contribute to building true parity of esteem across academic and vocational routes. There are deep-seated cultural issues at play here, as the second point above suggests, which we consider in relation to university participation rates.

342. Instead, we believe that the focus should be on improving the quality, accessibility and consistency of careers advice and guidance, particularly careers advice and guidance given to learners pre-16. That advice must make clear to learners what the costs of university are and how those costs are repaid as part of a broad and holistic package of careers advice and guidance about the whole range of options open to them – academic or vocational, traditional or otherwise. As we cover in chapter 4 of this report, careers advice is not just about supporting the young person. It is about supporting families and even education professionals to ensure that they understand the options open to learners after they leave

compulsory education. This is the critical time for careers advisors to challenge misconceptions about the costs of university, and to ensure that learners and their families have the information they need to make the decisions that are right for them.

343. We therefore reiterate Recommendation 6 and Recommendation 7 in this context. They focus on clarifying and publicising to Key Stage 4 learners and their families the package of advice, guidance and opportunities to which they are entitled, and ensuring that Careers Wales' careers advice service meets the needs of learners.

344. We acknowledge the concerns of NUS Cymru and others that many students are struggling to meet their living costs, particularly in recent years as the cost of living has increased so sharply. Clearly, these cost pressures affect any young people going to university, particularly young people whose family is not in a position to support them financially. However, we have not gathered sufficient evidence to make any recommendations about the package of financial support provided to learners, which would be both beyond the scope of this inquiry and would have very significant cost implications for the Welsh Government. We note the Minister for Further and Higher Education's comments about ongoing discussion with the UK Government for funding for universities; we cover this in more detail from paragraph 401.

7. Provision for 18+ year olds

Data from UCAS suggests that 18-year-olds in Wales are less likely to go to university than their peers across the UK, and that learners from the poorest families are significantly less likely than their peers from the wealthiest families to access higher education. Despite support from stakeholders and demand from learners and employers, degree apprenticeships are not halting the fall in university participation.

18+ destinations data

346. The primary sources of data to understand the choices of learners in Wales post-18 are:

- UCAS: data about applications to university. This data is broken down by UK jurisdiction, gender, deprivation rate and local area participation rates.⁵⁶⁵
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (“HESA”): data about student numbers. The data can be broken down by permanent address jurisdiction.⁵⁶⁶
- Careers Wales: destinations of pupils in Year 13 of maintained and special needs schools, as at 31 October the following year.⁵⁶⁷ See figure 8 for the destinations of learners who were in Year 13 in the 2023/24 academic year.
- Medr collects data on degree apprenticeships from providers as part of its Higher Education Students Early Statistics (HESES) data collection in November of each year. This detailed data is not currently published.

⁵⁶⁵ UCAS, ‘[2025 cycle applicant figures – 30 June deadline](#)’

⁵⁶⁶ HESA, ‘[Higher Education Student Data](#)’

⁵⁶⁷ Careers Wales, ‘[Pupil destinations](#)’

However, Medr's interactive apprenticeship tool sets out the total number of degree apprenticeship starts per academic year.⁵⁶⁸

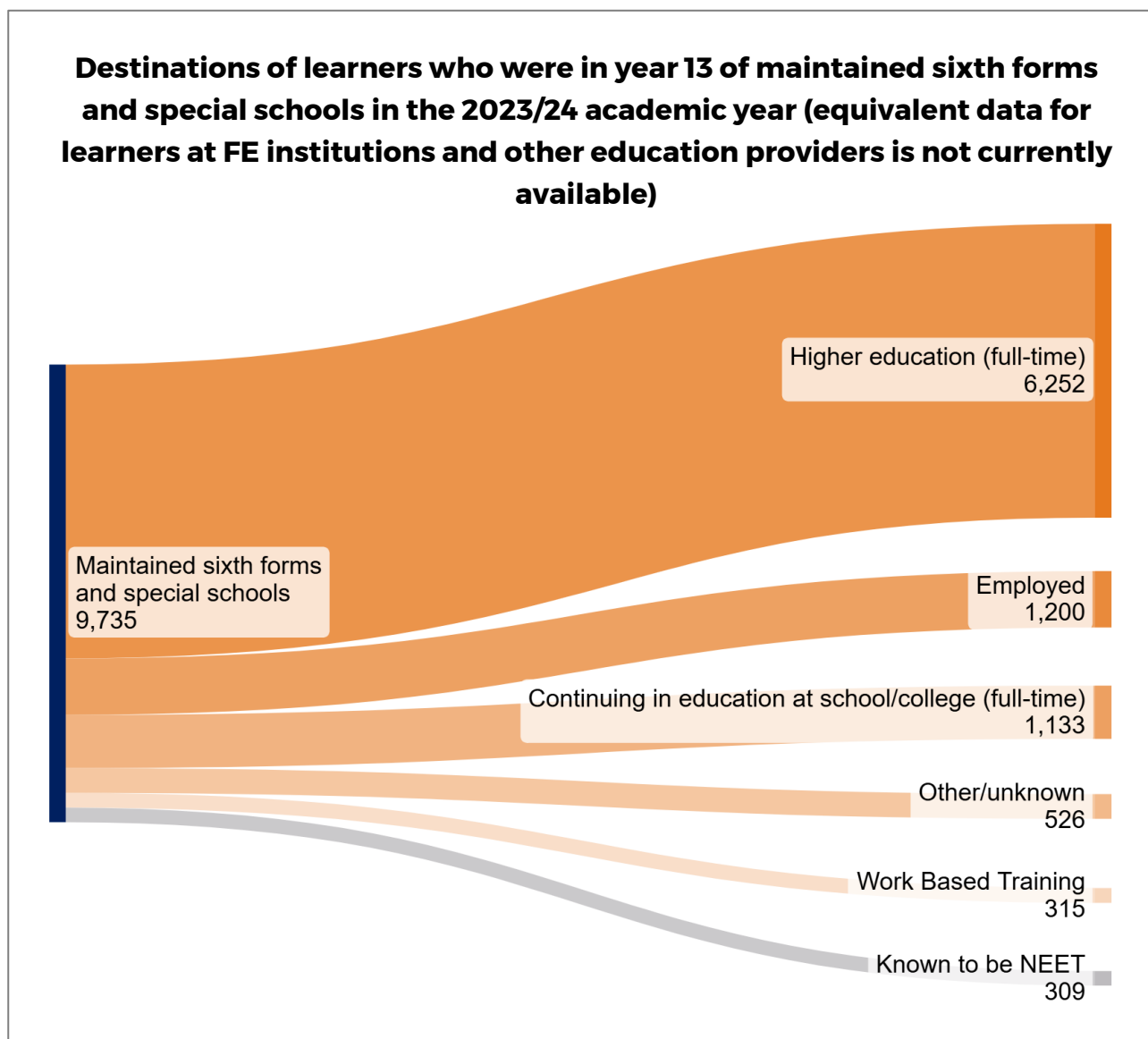


Figure 8. Destinations of learners who were in Year 13 at a maintained sixth form or post-16 special school provision in the 2023/24 academic year, as of 31 October 2024. Sources: Careers Wales, 'Pupil destinations'.

347. UCAS data published in June 2025 about university applicants suggests that significantly fewer 18-year-olds from Wales (32.5%) apply to university than 18-year-olds in England (42%), Scotland (34.5%) and Northern Ireland (48.9%). UCAS' data also suggests that learners from the least well-off families are significantly less

⁵⁶⁸ Medr, 'Apprenticeship learning programmes started in Wales: Current Target Measure'

likely to apply to go to university than their peers from the most well-off families. (See figure 7.)

348. Universities Wales argued that the data conclusively shows falling participation in HE across Welsh young people. Nevertheless, they also added that there is not one set of data that presents a complete picture of participation, and that “caution must be exercised in drawing conclusions” from the current data. They welcomed Medr’s commitments to improving the dataset about post-16 education and training.⁵⁶⁹

349. Others were less willing to draw concrete conclusions from post-18 data. Qualifications Wales suggested that there may be “alternative possible explanations” for the apparent reduction in learner participation.⁵⁷⁰ While Colegau Cymru called for “further data and more detailed analysis” before making definitive statements about learner choice post-18.⁵⁷¹ They reported that, during the pandemic, the Welsh Government produced a detailed analysis of Year 11 tertiary education progression. They argued there would be value in refreshing that analysis, making it more detailed and making it a regular statistical output to better understand trends in the data.⁵⁷²

350. Medr agreed. They suggested that available data does not conclusively suggest that there are “demonstrable” shifts from one part of the tertiary sector to another. They claimed that:

“... we are not lacking rich data. What we need is a more intelligent understanding of that data, and that is something that we are committing to do really quickly, because we need that baseline to, then, obviously, build the work patterns that we’re taking forward.”⁵⁷³

Similarly, Gower College Swansea also recognised that there are data gaps, particularly when learners leave post-16 education without progressing into HE. They advocated joining up existing data systems, such as those held by UCAS and HMRC, to comprehensively track progression of post-16 and post-18 learners.⁵⁷⁴

⁵⁶⁹ [Additional evidence: Universities Wales – 6 March 2025](#)

⁵⁷⁰ [Written evidence: RET 20 Qualifications Wales](#)

⁵⁷¹ [Written evidence: RET 34 Colegau Cymru](#)

⁵⁷² [Written evidence: RET 20 Qualifications Wales](#)

⁵⁷³ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 151 & 167

⁵⁷⁴ [Written evidence: RET 31 Gower College Swansea](#)

351. The Welsh Government acknowledged that UCAS data for the January deadline for 2025 entry shows an overall decrease in the number of 18-year-olds applying, and a “slight decrease” in the number applying from the most deprived areas. They argued that UCAS data is “only part of the picture”. It stated that in 2022/23 Wales had a higher proportion of mature (aged 21+) and part-time students than England: 66% in Wales compared to 59% in England were mature, and 36% in Wales compared to 23% in England were studying part-time. It cited data developed by Medr, known as the ‘Welsh Higher Education Initial Participation’, which suggests that in 2022/23, 54.6% of Welsh domiciled people will participate in HE by the age of 30.⁵⁷⁵

352. During oral scrutiny, the Minister for Further and Higher Education argued that:

- all-England data is giving “a deep distortion from the London figures, because London is such an outlier.” Wales’ January deadline participation rate (32%) is comparable with the south-west of England (34.1%) and the north-east (also 32%).
- in the most recent year when there was comparable data, the Welsh Higher Education Initial Participation rate was higher than England’s.
- according to 2021 census data, there is a very small difference between the proportion of people aged 16 or above with a qualification at Level 4 or above in Wales (31.5%) compared to England (33.9%).⁵⁷⁶

The mix of provision for 18+ year olds

Academic provision

Higher Education

353. The most common education and training post-18 pathway is to obtain a bachelor’s degree at university. However, as we set out in relation to the barriers to HE (paragraph 324) and in relation to data above, the evidence seems to suggest downward trends in university participation amongst learners domiciled in Wales, particularly the most disadvantaged.

⁵⁷⁵ Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

⁵⁷⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 97-101

354. Universities Wales concluded that fewer people from Wales went to university in the 2024/25 academic year than at any time in the past decade, and that the participation gap between Wales and the UK as a whole is at its widest in recent history.⁵⁷⁷ They argued that the participation by Index of Multiple Deprivation set out in figure 7 is evidence of the “widening gap” between the least and most advantaged students, and that “generational inequality is being baked-in”.⁵⁷⁸ They said that HE is beneficial both to individuals (they reported that by the age of 31, graduates are earning 37% more than non-graduates with at least two A levels) and society in general, and questioned what the falling participation rate means for Wales’ ambition for its learners:

“What I worry about is that we’re having almost terminal conversations about people’s ceiling that seals them off. The issue is how do we get them further from these things. If you’re doing an apprenticeship, where else can you go? If you’re doing a GCSE, where else can you go? It’s about having that sense of stretch and aspiration through that system, I think, because, clearly, there seems to be a ceiling we’re placing, when we have got a participation gap of six to seven percentage points from England in higher education. Again, I suspect nobody planned it.”⁵⁷⁹

355. University Wales’ concerns were shared by some individual Welsh universities.⁵⁸⁰ But it wasn’t only representatives of the HE sector who were concerned about falling HE participation. Coleg Sir Gâr stated that there is “clear evidence of shifts in learners’ post-18 choices, including a decline in Higher Education (HE) enrolments.”⁵⁸¹ The NTFW agreed, stressing that it is important to address any underlying barriers to HE.⁵⁸² Careers Wales told us that there is no evidence from the statistics that learners are choosing other education and

⁵⁷⁷ Written evidence: RET.19 Universities Wales

⁵⁷⁸ Additional evidence: Universities Wales – 6 March 2025

⁵⁷⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 364

⁵⁸⁰ Letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Bangor University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 11 April 2025; Letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Swansea University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 9 April 2025; Written evidence: RET.30 Cardiff Metropolitan University; Written evidence: RET.15 The Open University in Wales

⁵⁸¹ Written evidence: RET.35 Coleg Sir Gâr

⁵⁸² Written evidence: RET.40 National Training Federation Wales (NTFW)

training opportunities instead of university. They added that Wales also has the highest level of drop out from Foundation Degree courses across UK nations.⁵⁸³

356. We heard some suggestions about how Welsh universities should change to encourage participation. Universities Wales acknowledged that there was more to be done to create flexible, accessible HE to encourage a broader range of people to go to university.⁵⁸⁴ The Open University submitted similar views, and reported a 113% growth in undergraduate and postgraduate students since 2018, and a 160% growth in widening access students. They urged Medr to review its funding mechanisms to better support part-time and flexible learning pathways.⁵⁸⁵

357. Universities Wales also called for universities to do more to recruit students from FE colleges.⁵⁸⁶ Similarly, Cardiff Metropolitan University reported that the loss of some sixth forms has reduced some learners' exposure to university.⁵⁸⁷

358. The Welsh Government accepted that that there is a downward trend in the number of 18-year-olds who are choosing to study at university. They explained that more learners are studying at below Level 3 aged 16-18, and concluded that "increasing numbers of young people qualified to level 3 as an essential pre-requisite of increasing HE participation. This is a longer-term challenge". They state that:

*"... it is vital we do not waver from our prioritisation of improving attendance and attainment in schools and colleges, both pre- and post-16, to ensure that the next generation of learners see higher education as part of their aspirations."*⁵⁸⁸

359. The Minister for Further and Higher Education acknowledged that the Welsh Government wants HE participation rates to be higher. However, she challenged the conclusions about participation in HE that have been drawn by some when looking at UCAS data alone (outlined in paragraph 352). She suggested that, rather than not studying in HE at all, young people in Wales are taking more time to make a decision on what and where to study. She stressed that it is important

⁵⁸³ [Written evidence: RET.17 Careers Wales](#)

⁵⁸⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 342

⁵⁸⁵ [Written evidence: RET.15 The Open University in Wales](#)

⁵⁸⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 368

⁵⁸⁷ [Written evidence: RET.30 Cardiff Metropolitan University](#)

⁵⁸⁸ [Written evidence: RET.47 Welsh Government](#)

to look at the “wider evidence as well, which shows that overall participation in HE by Welsh people is much healthier than that single UCAS figure suggests.”⁵⁸⁹

The Access to HE Diploma

360. Access to HE diplomas are aimed at adults who wish to study at university but do not have the qualifications they need to do so. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) explained that the diplomas are typically delivered by colleges in Wales, and are an equivalent qualification to A levels and the Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced. They are primarily targeted at learners who are aged 19 or over (colleges do not receive funding for learners younger than 19), although the QAA notes that the proportion of under 19s is increasing each year. They explained that, in 2023/24, 50% of learners studying Access to HE Diploma are registered from an area of disadvantage, with 90.4% of graduates employed or in further study 6 months after graduation. However, they note that funding is only provided for full-time learners. They argued that funding part-time options would enhance the flexibility of the qualification.⁵⁹⁰

361. A researcher from the University of South Wales shared research findings about the Access to HE Diploma. Like QAA, they highlighted the role of the diplomas in addressing systemic inequalities in post-16 learning. They also noted the increasing enrolment of younger learners on access courses. The researcher concludes that:

“Access to HE courses fosters inclusivity and social mobility within Wales’ education system. By addressing regulatory disparities, supporting diverse learner demographics, and embracing the Welsh cultural context, these courses can continue to serve as a beacon of opportunity for non-traditional learners.”⁵⁹¹

362. However, their evidence also raises some concerns about the diplomas, including about the regulation of the courses (whether they should be regulated in Wales specifically), funding for students under the age of 19 (as raised by QAA), and inconsistent recognition among HE institutions.

⁵⁸⁹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 101

⁵⁹⁰ Written evidence: RET 11 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)

⁵⁹¹ Written evidence: RET 44 Mr J Whitcher PhD researcher, University of South Wales

Vocational provision: degree apprenticeships

363. University is not the only post-18 education or training destination. The main higher level vocational alternative to a bachelor's or master's degree is a degree apprenticeship, classified as either GNVQ Level 6 or 7. Degree apprenticeships combine work-based learning with an HE qualification. They are offered in a limited number of sectors: digital, engineering, advanced manufacturing, and construction.

364. Data from Medr states that there were 295 degree apprenticeship starts in 2021/22, 305 in 2022/23 and 385 in 2023/24.⁵⁹² There are eight universities in Wales (including the Open University) that offer degree apprenticeships; i.e., all Welsh HE institutions except for Aberystwyth University. Medr fully funds the cost of the course with the university and the employer covers the cost of the apprentice's wages.

365. One of the key concerns in recent years has been that progression through apprenticeship qualifications to degree level apprenticeships is not clear enough. In his 2023 report, Dr Hefin David MS concluded that degree apprenticeships "remain limited in scope and there is some uncertainty about provision". He also raised concern about promising degree apprenticeship programmes that sit outside the Welsh Government's degree apprenticeship pilot framework. He recommended that the Welsh Government should work with other stakeholders to enhance choice, variety and consistency in higher and degree level apprenticeships, and that vertical integration with lower levels needs to be improved.⁵⁹³

366. Similarly, the Lusher review recommended that the Welsh Government and Medr works with stakeholders to explore progression through vocational provision onto level 6 to ensure that the progression model has vertical integration between levels.⁵⁹⁴

367. In its July 2025 report into apprenticeship pathways, the Senedd's Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee expressed similar views. It concluded that:

"A clear pathway for people starting or wishing to progress through qualification levels is important to both make

⁵⁹² Medr, 'Apprenticeship learning programmes started in Wales: Current Target Measure'

⁵⁹³ Dr Hefin David MS, 'Transitions to Employment', June 2023, pages 17-21

⁵⁹⁴ Steering Group for the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales, 'A Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales', July 2023, pages 92-93

apprenticeships attractive but also to encourage further study. This is an area that must be worked on by Medr and Welsh Government. Ideally we would like to see a clear route that learners can easily follow and understand... It is clear that degree apprenticeships are popular with learners, providers and business. However, as they are oversubscribed we are questioning if the current funding quantum or model are fit for purpose. As such, Welsh Government should consider how they can expand provision of degree apprenticeships to meet demand but also ensure best value for money invested."

They recommended that the Welsh Government should explore funding solutions to expand the degree apprenticeship offer, but must also ensure value for money as part of this work.⁵⁹⁵ The Welsh Government accepted this recommendation. However, their response set out that operational responsibility for the development of degree apprenticeships lies with Medr, and that Medr is currently developing the next apprenticeships programme for implementation from August 2027.⁵⁹⁶

368. We heard consistent support for degree apprenticeships during our inquiry. The NPTC Group of Colleges reported that degree apprenticeships are an effective way to meet skills demands in certain industries.⁵⁹⁷ Make UK reported that degree apprenticeships offer a "reliable method" to develop learners' technical skills to suit a job role.⁵⁹⁸

369. ASCL⁵⁹⁹ and Cardiff Metropolitan University agreed that there was a high demand for degree apprenticeships from learners, too. The latter called for more funding for degree apprenticeships to ensure that supply meets demand, arguing that the funding model is currently undermining the viability of degree apprenticeships.⁶⁰⁰ Make UK focused its calls on better support from the Welsh Government for higher level apprenticeships in general, reporting that significantly more learners in English start advanced apprenticeships than in Wales.⁶⁰¹

⁵⁹⁵ Welsh Parliament, 'Apprenticeship pathways', July 2025, paragraph 81 onwards

⁵⁹⁶ Welsh Government, 'Apprenticeship pathways: Response to ETRA Committee report', 3 September 2025

⁵⁹⁷ Written evidence: RET.45 NPTC Group of Colleges

⁵⁹⁸ Written evidence: RET.33 Make UK

⁵⁹⁹ Written evidence: RET.12 Association of School and College Leaders Cymru (ASCL)

⁶⁰⁰ Written evidence: RET.30 Cardiff Metropolitan University

⁶⁰¹ Written evidence: RET.33 Make UK

370. Universities Wales, echoing concerns raised by Dr Hefin David MS, argued that HE institutions should have the autonomy to develop degree apprenticeship frameworks independently to respond to labour market needs, without having to wait for the Welsh Government to do so on their behalf.⁶⁰²

Challenges facing HE institutions

Universities' responses to the financial pressures facing the sector

371. At the time of writing, many universities across the UK are experiencing financial challenges. These challenges were not explicitly included in the terms of reference for this inquiry. However, it became clear as we began exploring the challenges facing the Welsh HE sector in more detail that the financial pressures facing universities have implications for - and are in part a response to changes in - learners post-18 choices.⁶⁰³

372. The Office for Students reported that 43% of institutions included in their analysis from England are forecasting a deficit for 2024/25.⁶⁰⁴ Data compiled by UCU indicated that universities UK wide have announced intentions to “cut over 5,000 jobs”, with the General Secretary, fearing around an additional 5,000 jobs could be lost if universities prioritise “axing staff”.⁶⁰⁵

373. On 28 January 2025, Cardiff University announced that it would be launching a formal consultation on proposed changes designed “to realise its ambitions and secure the University’s long-term future.”⁶⁰⁶ The proposed changes included a reduction of academic headcount by around 400 full-time equivalent staff and ceasing the teaching of certain subjects. On 18 June, the University announced its final plans, scaled back from the initial proposals, but still involving a reduction of around 219 posts and an end to teaching and research in certain subjects.⁶⁰⁷ Cost-

⁶⁰² Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 414

⁶⁰³ Welsh Parliament, ‘Issues facing the Higher Education Sector’, 11 March 2025

⁶⁰⁴ Office for Students, ‘OfS analysis finds continued pressure on university finances’, 8 May 2025

⁶⁰⁵ University and College Union, ‘University crisis will see over 10,000 staff lose their jobs, fears UCU’

⁶⁰⁶ Cardiff University, ‘Securing our Academic Future’, 28 January 2025

⁶⁰⁷ Wales Online, ‘Cardiff University formally agrees sweeping cuts that will see departments shut’, 18 June 2025

cutting measures have also been proposed at other Welsh HE institutions, including the University of South Wales⁶⁰⁸ and Bangor University⁶⁰⁹.

374. In spring 2025, we wrote to the Welsh universities to ask for more information about any financial challenges they were facing, the reasons for those challenges, and what policies at a UK- or Wales-level had significantly impacted on their ability to operate sustainably. The universities' responses set out that:

- tuition fees are insufficient: despite recent increases to £9,535 per year for 2025/26, universities state that UK student tuition fees are insufficient to cover costs, particularly in light of inflationary pressures and increases in National Insurance employer contributions;
- falling international student numbers have affected income: some universities have relied on international student recruitment to subsidise their overall costs. However, changes by the UK Government to migration policy and improvements in the provision of HE in countries that have typically sent students to the UK have reduced demand for UK HE institutions; and
- falling participation rates within Wales (as explored above) have reduced fee income.⁶¹⁰

375. The Vice Chancellor of Cardiff University set out clearly her concerns about the financial pressures facing universities across the UK. She highlighted increasing costs, such as pay increases, utility bills, national insurance rises, alongside a “steep decline” in the number of international students.⁶¹¹ The Chair of the Cardiff University Council was blunt in his assessment. He told us that there is

⁶⁰⁸ University of South Wales, ‘[Consultation on the workforce implications of a review of our academic provision](#)’, 19 February 2025

⁶⁰⁹ BBC, ‘[Bangor University to cut 78 jobs in savings cost bid](#)’, 14 May 2025; [Letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Bangor University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 11 April 2025

⁶¹⁰ [Letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Aberystwyth University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 9 April 2025; [Letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Bangor University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 11 April 2025; [Letter from the President and Vice-Chancellor of Cardiff Metropolitan University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 9 April 2025; [Letter from the Vice-Chancellor and CEO of Wrexham University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 15 May 2025; [Letter from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 12 March 2025

⁶¹¹ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [12 June 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 9

a “deep structural problem” with funding for HE, and that universities “don’t have a God-given right to exist; we do have to live within our means.”⁶¹²

376. Not all Welsh HE institutions are proposing to cut costs as extensively as Cardiff University, however. Wrexham University and University of Wales Trinity Saint David are the only two universities in Wales not to end the last academic year with a deficit. They also offer more vocational courses than other institutions in Wales. The Vice Chancellor of Wrexham University has called on Welsh universities to do more to attract local teenagers to apply to HE. Similarly, Cardiff Metropolitan University argued that HE participation problems won’t be solved by increasing A level uptake alone.⁶¹³

377. The Cardiff University Vice Chancellor agreed that universities need to improve participation by changing their delivery model:

“Universities have traditionally not been very good at responding to the environment around them. We know we need to be more agile, better at responding to the needs of society, ensuring our students have the life skills they need to adapt and flex, delivering education to a wider range of people, particularly those who’ve been excluded from education before.”

However, she later set out that efforts by Cardiff University and others to take in more domestic students by accepting learners with lower grades had not been successful. She argued that doing so was “compromising both our staff experience and our student experience” because staff were not able to provide the support they wished to a more “diverse student body”. She added that there was no real financial value in that approach, either, due to the “real value of the home fees”.⁶¹⁴

378. Some stakeholders argued that the response by certain Welsh HE institutions to the financial challenges they face could have further negative implications for young people in Wales and the Welsh economy more widely. Cardiff Metropolitan

⁶¹² Children, Young People and Education Committee, [12 June 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraph 22

⁶¹³ [Letter from the Vice Chancellor and CEO of Wrexham University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 15 May 2025; [Written evidence: RET.30 Cardiff Metropolitan University](#)

⁶¹⁴ Children, Young People and Education Committee, [12 June 2025, Record of Proceedings](#), paragraphs 10 & 200

University suggested that, if certain subjects “were to ‘disappear’ from Welsh providers”, more Welsh learners could choose to study in England.⁶¹⁵

379. Unison told us that universities are “private sector when they want to be and they think they sit in the middle when they want, depending on what’s on offer from Welsh Government.” They argued for them to be more transparent due to their role in training key public sector workers, such as social workers, teachers, the police and medical staff.⁶¹⁶ NUS Cymru argued that the Welsh Government should intervene:

“Education doesn’t stop after you leave school. You don’t finish at 16 and then you’re someone else’s problem. The Welsh Government needs to recognise, I think, that you can’t ignore the challenges faced, but also the uncertainty. These young people will be the future taxpayers, the future workforce, and to have a sustainable higher education sector is key to have that prosperous economy, to have that equitable society. We’re talking about pressures on the NHS, pressures on public services, but also, within the business sector, we need qualified people who are competent and have those skills, which you do gain through either universities, degree apprenticeships or apprenticeships.”⁶¹⁷

380. We raised our concerns about the sustainability of the HE sector in Wales with the Minister for Further and Higher Education. She acknowledged “challenges facing the HE sector”, both across and beyond the UK. She reported that up to 90 universities across the UK have cut, or are planning to cut, costs in the current year. She told us that she would be continuing to work with the UK Government “to find UK-wide solutions to the problems.”⁶¹⁸

⁶¹⁵ Written evidence: RET 30 Cardiff Metropolitan University

⁶¹⁶ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 25 June 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 86

⁶¹⁷ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 25 June 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 203

⁶¹⁸ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 2 April 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 105

Seren

381. Wales' Seren programme, which aims to “support the aspirations and ambitions of the most able learners”, drew criticism from a number of stakeholders.

382. Some argued that Welsh institutions were being negatively impacted by the programme, in an unintended consequence of encouraging some learners to attend Oxford, Cambridge and other top universities across the UK and abroad. The University of Trinity Saint David, Swansea University, Aberystwyth University and the University and College Union all argued that the scheme disadvantages the Welsh HE sector by encouraging Welsh learners to leave Wales.⁶¹⁹

383. Universities Wales also argued that Seren could be having an impact on the perceived accessibility of university education. They told us that Seren:

“... is arguably perpetuating a message to a majority of able learners that university is ‘not for them’ – the selective nature of the scheme rules out plenty of school pupils that have the potential to gain a university education, while providing opportunities aimed at those already most likely to go to university”

They called it “a study-in-England campaign”, suggested that “it needs a rethink”,⁶²⁰ and called for data looking at the impact of Seren on HE applications as a whole, rather than just the cohort engaged on the programme.⁶²¹

384. The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol argued that Seren disincentivised Welsh-speaking learners from staying in Wales and studying in Welsh. They reported that learners from Welsh-medium and bilingual schools who receive grades (ABB or higher) are actually more likely to be admitted to a university outside Wales than

⁶¹⁹ Letter from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 9 April 2025; Letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Swansea University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 9 April 2025; Written evidence: RET.36 University and College Union in Wales; Letter from the Vice-Chancellor of Aberystwyth University to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee, 9 April 2025

⁶²⁰ Children, Young People and Education Committee, 6 February 2025. Record of Proceedings, paragraph 390

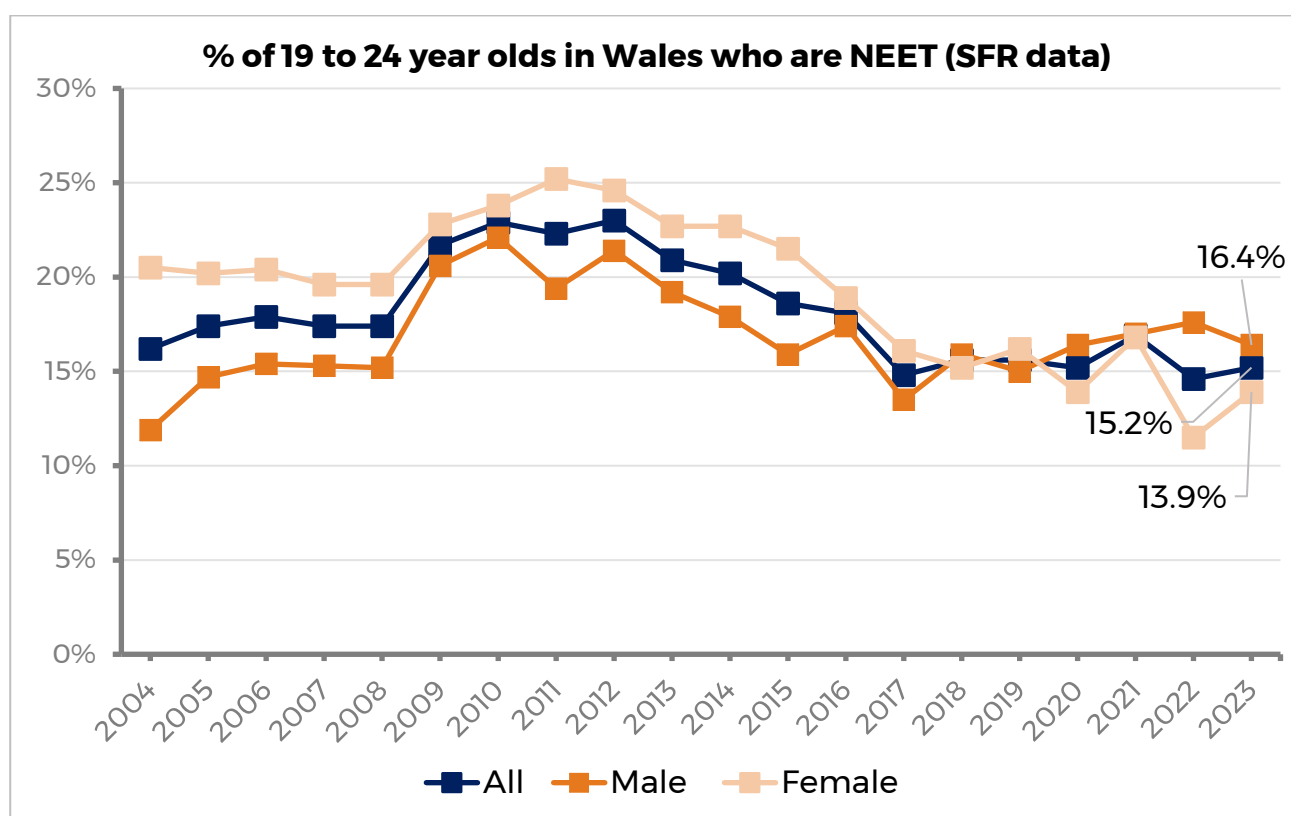
⁶²¹ Written evidence: RET.19 Universities Wales

their peers. They called for Seren's outcomes to be reviewed, with more emphasis placed on promoting top-quality Welsh-medium and bilingual provision.⁶²²

385. The Welsh Government stated that the Seren Academy's mission is to support "our brightest learners into the best provision available". However, they also stated that they are exploring ways to increase opportunities to participate in Seren for the most able learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Welsh Government added that, over the next year, they will conduct research to "enhance equity of opportunity, ensure fair access, and improve provision within Seren, prioritising the needs of learners at its core."⁶²³

Young people aged 18+ not in employment, education or training

386. Published data suggests that the proportion of young people aged 19-24 who are NEET is significantly higher than young people aged 16-18. According to the definitive source for estimates of the proportion on young people in Wales who are NEET, the SFR, 15.2% of young people aged 19-24 were NEET in 2023 (see figure 9).



⁶²² Written evidence: RET 43 Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol

⁶²³ Written evidence: RET 47 Welsh Government

Figure 9. Percentage of 19 to 24 year olds in Wales who are NEET. Source: StatsWales, 'Estimated 16-24 year olds not in education, training or employment by economic activity and age groups'

387. In June 2025, the Welsh Government published an ad-hoc statistical release that broke down data about young people aged 16-24 who were NEET by level of qualifications. When averaged over a three year period (2022 - 2024), a higher percentage of young people who were NEET had a Level 3 qualification or above (36.3%) than a Level 2 qualification or below (35.5%). 22.6% of individuals who were NEET did not have any qualifications at all, while 5.6% didn't know. The data was drawn from the more timely, but less accurate, Annual Population Survey data.⁶²⁴

388. NEU raised concerns about the number of young people aged 19-24 who are NEET, suggesting that “we cannot know the specific cause” of the NEET figures. They also pointed to statistics suggesting that nearly 40% of disabled young people aged 19-24 are NEET, which they argue represents a “failure to support disabled young people as they leave compulsory school age”.⁶²⁵

389. The Open University, meanwhile, suggested that falling participation in HE is leading to young people becoming NEET. They argued that there is no evidence that young people who are not going to university are turning to other kinds of education instead.⁶²⁶

Our view

18+ destinations data

390. The absence of destination data about learners in colleges is a clear and obvious gap in the publicly available data about post-16 participation. This is all the more significant given that more Welsh-domiciled learners now attend colleges than sixth forms, as figure 3 sets out (paragraph 94). We stress the importance of data that follows learners' pathways in relation to Recommendation 10. This is another clear example of the limitations of the currently available data. Although Careers Wales routinely provides information about progression from sixth form, effectively we have no idea about the post-18 pathways of over half of the young people in Wales.

⁶²⁴ Welsh Government, 'Ad-hoc statistical requests: 2 to 13 June 2025', 23 June 2025

⁶²⁵ Written evidence: RET.06 National Education Union (NEU) Cymru

⁶²⁶ Written evidence: RET.15 The Open University in Wales

391. We have heard frequently over the course of this inquiry that Wales faces a number of post-16 education and training participation challenges. But what is still unclear is why some young people are not continuing their education or training after 16. We still don't fully know the answer to that question, and the Welsh Government will continue to struggle to put in place interventions that stand any chance of improving participation as long as we lack basic information about when and why learners are dropping out of education and training. We acknowledge that this may have resourcing implications, as it does for Careers Wales as they gather data about sixth form students. But the relatively small resource investment is clearly worthwhile to give us a better understanding of young people's pathways post-18.

392. We imagine that many colleges will have their own destination data for their own internal or advertising purposes. The challenge at a national level, therefore, may be ensuring that the data provided by the colleges across Wales is consistent, comparable, accurate and reliable. Addressing these challenges should be a priority for Medr, alongside FE colleges, as they look to develop their understanding of learners' interactions with education and training after they leave school.

Recommendation 14. Medr should work with ColegauCymru to evaluate where there are gaps in data about learners in FE colleges (such as their destinations post-18), and take steps to address those gaps by developing an accurate, timely and reliable dataset with a view to making that an annual release by the end of the 2025/26 academic year.

Academic post-18 provision: higher education

393. We do not think that going to university is the right decision for every young person. Neither do we think that learners should be told that university is something that every young person should aspire to do. University is a wonderful choice for many young people, and there are clear and tangible lifelong benefits of a university education. But it is plainly not right for everyone. Young people for whom university is not the right choice should never be made to believe that they have failed in some way.

394. However, we *do* believe in being ambitious for every single learner. We must challenge assumptions that are made about young people, often at a cruelly early age, that limit their growth and potential. We want every learner to have the opportunity - and be encouraged - to study or train to obtain a high-quality, high-level education that gives them every chance to succeed when they enter the job

market. This must involve a society-wide focus on improving post-18 participation in education and training, whatever the form that education and training takes. University may not be the right choice for every young person. But no young person should be written off from having that choice in the first place.

395. We therefore note with concern that young people in Wales, particularly those from the lowest income brackets, are significantly less likely than their peers in England and Northern Ireland to go to university (see figure 7). These participation challenges are linked to many of the barriers to post-16 participation that we have identified in this report. We hope that the recommendations that we have made go some way towards addressing those challenges.

396. However, fundamentally, the root causes of poor participation in HE in Wales stretch beyond the scope of this inquiry. They are symptoms of wider cultural trends, where many young people and their families do not think that university is right for them, that they are not good or clever enough, irrespective of their potential to succeed in HE with the right encouragement and support. These negative assumptions must be robustly challenged at every opportunity by all of us: educators, careers advisors, parents, and by post-16 institutions. Universities themselves must not shy away from these challenges. If HE participation is to improve, universities must build on their efforts to date to widen participation and move outside their comfort zone to better meet the needs of potential students. They have a critical role in bringing about that wider cultural shift.

Vocational post-18 provision: degree apprenticeships

397. Degree apprenticeships are a powerful and flexible post-18 offer that demonstrates how vocational and academic qualifications can be bridged to open up higher-level qualifications to a broader range of learners. We fully support and endorse the degree apprenticeship programme. Our only concern is that so few degree apprenticeships are actually available, with the level of demand from both learners and employers vastly exceeding the number of opportunities to undertake one.

398. There were clear calls to improve and extend degree apprenticeship provision in the evidence we received. Many have called for more funding. Others have argued in favour of giving universities more autonomy to design their own degree apprenticeship frameworks to enable them to respond better to labour market needs.

399. We note the Welsh Government’s response to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee report ‘Apprenticeship Pathways’, which notes that Medr will be designing their degree apprenticeship framework with implementation from August 2027 onwards. We are aware that calls for more funding will be impossible for Medr to accommodate without funding cuts in other areas, and we are not in a position to be able to make recommendations to that effect. But we do believe that more degree apprenticeships could be created by exploring models whereby the Welsh Government and employers share the cost of tuition fees. This, alongside a more flexible framework development model, could create a more dynamic and flexible offer that drives increased provision.

Recommendation 15. As part of its approach to developing a degree apprenticeship framework for August 2027 onwards, Medr should carry out an assessment of the benefits or otherwise of the following in relation to increasing the number of degree apprenticeships available:

- employers contributing to the cost of degree apprenticeship tuition fees, alongside the salary they pay the apprentice; and
- giving HE institutions the autonomy to develop degree apprenticeships independently of the Welsh Government.

Universities’ responses to the financial pressures facing the sector

400. We note the clear consensus across the evidence we received that the mechanism by which universities are funded is not sustainable. What is much less clear, however, is how the sector can be put on a healthy and stable financial footing for the longer-term. These are deeply complex and technical issues that are not within the scope of this inquiry, and about which we have not gathered enough evidence to come to a view.

401. However, the challenges that universities are facing, and the decisions that some universities are taking in response to those challenges, inevitably have an impact on young people’s impressions of going to university. They also have an impact on young people in Wales’ perception of the benefits (or otherwise) of a university education *in Wales*. As such, they are directly relevant to the issues discussed in this report in relation to post-18 participation in education and training. The Minister for Further and Higher Education told us that she was working with the UK Government to consider UK-wide solutions to the problems. We ask the Welsh Government for an update on those discussions.

Recommendation 16. In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should provide an update on its ongoing discussions with the UK Government about how the financial pressures facing Higher Education institutions can be addressed at a UK-wide level.

Young people aged 18+ not in employment, education or training

402. The proportion of young people aged 19-24 who are NEET is significantly higher than the proportion of young people aged 16-18. Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising: the education and training pathways for people aged 16 are better understood, with a wider range of vocational and academic options, and come at a much lower cost to the individual learner. At 18, young people either move onto higher education (with the various barriers to higher education that we have discussed above), onto one of the few degree apprenticeships available, or they move into a potentially challenging jobs market.

403. But what *is* surprising is what we have learnt about the demographics of young people who become NEET between 19 and 24. At 16-18, the established medium-term trend in Wales is for young men to be more likely to be NEET than young women. Not so at this later age: apart from in recent years, the opposite has been true. Equally surprisingly: a higher proportion of young people who are NEET between the ages of 19-24 have a level 3 qualification or above than have a level 3 qualification or below. This challenges many stereotypes about the groups of young adults who are likely to be out of employment, education and training at this age. This also aligns with the views of some stakeholders, who believe that overall participation in education and training is declining, rather than learners simply choosing alternatives to university.

404. We do not know what causes these trends. Clearly, work needs to be undertaken to understand the challenges young people face as they navigate between education, training or work after year 11. Unfortunately, without accurate, reliable and timely pathways and destination data, it is hard to see how this work can be undertaken. We therefore reiterate Recommendation 10 in relation to data about young people who are NEET aged 18+, which is a critical step to understanding where interventions by the Welsh Government and others are required to boost participation in education and training post 18.

Annex 1: Engagement activities

Date	Host organisation/event	Summary of engagement activity
22 March 2025	Cardiff and Vale College	Members visited a Junior Apprentice class and chatted with leaders of the programme. They walked around the campus and has a round table chat group of learners, including -19 year old FE learners, apprentices, adult learners.
22 March 2025	St Martins School	Members met with Year 11 students to discuss choices post 16 and meet with Year 12/13 students to discuss the value of sixth form.
January - March 2025	Surveys	Two surveys were conducted, one aimed at parents and guardians of 16-20-year-olds and the other aimed at young people.
February - March 2025	Interviews	Face-to-face interviews were conducted with facilitators and young people of an alternative education setting to complement the surveys.

Annex 2: List of attendees at stakeholder event

22 January 2025

Organisation	Name(s)
Colegau Cymru	David Hagendyk
Adult Learning Wales	Kathryn Robson
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai	Aled Jones-Griffith
Coleg Cambria	Yana Williams
Cardiff and Vale College	Sharon James-Evans
Coleg Sir Gâr and Coleg	Andrew Cornish
Parents voices in Wales	Ceri Reed Karen Berel Deb Austin
Careers Wales	Joanne Page Toni-Jo Stables Bobbie Doward Sioned Balbini Linda J Thomas
Universities Wales	Prof Elwen Evans Prof Jon Timmis Gwen Williams Marian Wyn Jones
Local Authorities	Chris Millis Elfed Morris Gareth Jones Sharon Davies

Annex 3: List of oral evidence sessions.

The following witnesses provided oral evidence to the committee on the dates noted below. Transcripts of all oral evidence sessions can be viewed on [the Committee's website](#).

Date	Name and Organisation
29 January 2025	Sion Amlyn, Policy and Casework Official, The NASUWT (NASUWT) Ioan Rhys, Jones General Secretary, Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC) Mary van den Heuvel, Senior Wales Policy Officer, National Education Union Cymru (NEU) Deb Austin, Parent, Parents voices in Wales Karen Berrell, Parent, Parents voices in Wales
6 February 2025	Simon Pirotte, Chief Executive Officer, Medr Rhian Edwards, Executive Director for Policy, Medr Nerys Bourne, Director of Customer Strategy and Service Development, Careers Wales Mark Owen, Head of Services to Stakeholders, Careers Wales Lisa Mytton, Strategic Director, National Training Federation for Wales (NTFW) Dr Ben Calvert, Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Wales and Vice-Chair, Universities Wales Amanda Wilkinson, Director, Universities Wales
5 March 2025	Jessa Scott, Strategic Director, Estyn

Date	Name and Organisation
	Catherine Evans, Assistant Director, Estyn Mark Campion, Assistant Director, Estyn
13 March 2025	Dona Lewis, Chief Executive, National Centre for Learning Welsh Dr Ioan Matthews, Chief Executive, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol Gwenllian Owen, Senior Manager for Higher Education, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol Dr Gwennan Schiavone, Chief Executive officer, Cymdeithas Ysgolion Dros Addysg Gymraeg CYDAG Matthew McAvoy, Secondary Leader, Cymdeithas Ysgolion Dros Addysg Gymraeg CYDAG Faith O'Brian, Managing Director, Cambrian Training Jude Holloway, Managing Director, Educ8 Training Group
26 March 2025	Cllr Lis Burnett, Spokesperson, Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) Sharon Davies, Head of Education, Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) Gwyn Tudur, Assistant Head of Education at Gwynedd County Council, Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW) David Hagendyk, Chief Executive, Colegau Cymru Lisa Michelle Thomas, Principal of Merthyr College and Chair Colegau Cymru, Colegau Cymru

This inquiry also drew on the evidence we received for the inquiry into the issues facing the higher education sector. The following provided briefing and oral evidence to the Committee:

Date	Name and Organisation
21 May 2025	Simon Pirotte, Chief Executive Officer, Medr James Owen, Chief Operating Officer, Medr
12 June 2025	Professor Wendy Larnar, President and Vice-Chancellor, Cardiff University Patrick Younge, Chair of Council, Cardiff University
25 June 2025	Lynne Hackett, Lead Officer for Higher Education, UNISON Cymru Dan Beard, Lay Chair, Higher Education Forum, UNISON Cymru Gareth Lloyd, Wales Official, University and College Union (UCU) Jamie Insole, Policy Officer, University and College Union (UCU)
25 June 2025	Deio Owen, President, National Union of Students (NUS) Cymru

Annex 4: List of written evidence

The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee. All Consultation responses and additional written information can be viewed on [the Committee's website](#).

Reference	Organisation
RET 01	Education Otherwise
RET 02	Parentkind
RET 03	Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (UCAC)
RET 04	Mark Jones, Chief Executive, Gower College Swansea
RET 05	The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)
RET 06	National Education Union (NEU) Cymru
RET 07	Educ8 Training Group
RET 08	Individual
RET 09	Individual
RET 10	Grŵp Llandrillo Menai (GLLM)
RET 11	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)
RET 12	Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) Cymru
RET 13	Cambrian Training
RET 14	Welsh Government Association (WLGA) and Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW)
RET 15	The Open University in Wales
RET 16	Down's Syndrome Association
RET 17	Careers Wales
RET 18	Children's Commissioner for Wales
RET 19	Universities Wales
RET 20	Qualifications Wales

Reference	Organisation
RET 21	Dr. Katy Huxley and Rhys Davies, Cardiff University
RET 22	Coleg y Cymoedd
RET 23	Horticultural Trades Association (HTA)
RET 24	Estyn
RET 25	The National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru (NYAS) Cymru
RET 26	Powys County Council
RET 27	Natspec and Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance
RET 28	Care Leaver Activities and Student Support in Wales (CLASS Cymru)
RET 29	Social Care Wales
RET 30	Cardiff Metropolitan University
RET 31	Gower College Swansea
RET 32	Welsh Language Commissioner
RET 33	Make UK
RET 34	Colegau Cymru
RET 35	Coleg Sir Gâr
RET 36	University and College Union in Wales (UCU)
RET 37	Individual
RET 38	Into Film Cymru
RET 39	The National Centre for Learning Welsh
RET 40	National Training Federation Wales (NTFW)
RET 41	Medr
RET 42	Institute of Physics (IOP)
RET 43	Coleg Cymraeg
RET 44	Mr J Whitcher PhD researcher, University of South Wales
RET 45	NPTC Group of Colleges
RET 46	Dr Elisa Vigna & Andrea Meek, The National Centre for Mental Health, Cardiff University
RET 47	Welsh Government

Additional information

Title	Date
The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)	18 February 2025
Universities Wales	6 March 2025
National Centre for Learning Welsh	18 March 2025

This inquiry also drew on the evidence we received for the inquiry into the issues facing the higher education sector. The following people and organisations provided written evidence to the Committee:

Title	Date
Cardiff University	18 February 2025
Campaign for Mathematical Sciences	6 March 2025
Individual	February 2025
Cardiff University	21 March 2025
Cytûn: Churches Together in Wales	25 March 2025
The Open University	2 April 2025
Aberystwyth University	9 April 2025
Cardiff Metropolitan University	9 April 2025
Swansea University	9 April 2025
University of South Wales)	9 April 2025
University of Wales Trinity St David	9 April 2025
Bangor University	11 April 2025
Royal College of Nursing	25 April 2025
Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol	12 May 2025
Wrexham University	15 May 2025
UNISON	June 2025

Additional Information

Title	Date
Cardiff University (additional Information)	23 May 2025

Title	Date
Cardiff University (additional Information)	20 June 2025