

Key FE and Skills Developments in Wales

General

Following the 'Transformation' agenda from 2008, a process of mergers, rationalization and regionalization has led to a Further Education sector in Wales consisting of 14 institutions (10 FE corporations including St David's Catholic College; 2 FE institutions under Adult Learning Wales; and three colleges that form part of University-linked groups (The College, Merthyr Tydfil, Coleg Sir Gar, and Coleg Ceredigion). In a recent study, most FE principals felt that whilst the reorganisations had brought benefits to most stakeholders, any further reformulation would jeopardise the capacity of colleges to serve their communities and other interests, and they had particular worries about any further travel demands on relatively disadvantaged learners (James & Unwin, 2016).

Colegau Cymru estimate that the FE sector provides around 85% of funded vocational and technical education in Wales (ColegauCymru, 2017, p. 1). It is worth noting that having reached a peak in 2005-06, overall learner numbers have continued a declining trend, though within this, there have been increases in WBL activity in recent years. Across FE, Community Learning and Work-Based Learning, there were 224,410 learners in 2015-16. Figures on learning activity show a great diversity of subject areas, with the most prevalent being: Engineering; Business, Management and Office Studies; Construction and Property (Built Env.); Care, Personal Development (including basic skills); Sales, Marketing and Retail; Catering, Leisure Services and Tourism. The same figures also suggest that under 8% of learning activity is clearly non-vocational (including A and AS level, GCSEs, Access Certificate and Diploma, HE) (James & Unwin, 2016; StatsWales 2015a, 2015b).

About a quarter of the 224,410 learners were in WBL. The year 2014-15 saw almost 20k new Apprenticeships start up, with another 48k already in train (WG 2017, p. 12). This total is divided between: Foundation Apprenticeships (Level 2) at 45%; Apprenticeships (Level 3) at 39%; Higher Apprenticeships (Level 4 +) at 16%. Apprenticeships in Wales are organized under some 120 'frameworks', some at multiple levels. Each framework contains competency and technical knowledge qualifications, and at least two Essential Skills qualifications (or equivalent). There is a commitment to maintaining qualifications as part of Apprenticeships, and to the National Occupational Standards in order to maintain parity of systems across the UK.

An important facet of context is that some 18% of 16-24 year-olds in Wales are unemployed.

What's prominent in current debate?

There have been a series of major reports since 2013 on aspects of the education landscape in Wales. These have focused on: Higher Education; teaching and learning for all those aged 3 – 19; the reform of the school curriculum; music services; teacher training; HE Governance; HE funding and student finance arrangements. A *Policy Statement on Skills* (WG, 2014a) was followed by a *Skills*

Implementation Plan (WG, 2014b). The first contained a series of proposed actions that would enhance the capacity of Wales to compete in an increasingly global race by attending to skills: for jobs and growth; for local needs as well as national ones; that employers value; and for employment. However, the document is weak on diagnosis and justification, contains much assertion (such as the claim that 'skills' are a strong lever for tackling poverty). The second document sets out a series of actions including setting up *Skills Performance Measures*, and a new *Flexible Skills Programme* in which Government would make targeted interventions to meet new needs from employers or where existing provision could not respond.

A more recent policy document on Apprenticeships is much more focused. The Welsh Government predict a doubling of the demand for level 4-6 qualified workers by 2024, and recognizing the historic emphasis on level 2, wish to initiate a step-change in the nature of provision and participation. Apprenticeships are seen as 'an essential ingredient of economic success and a vital tool in building a stronger, fairer and more equal Wales', and to this end, WG have instituted a five-year plan for phased introduction, wishing to see a minimum of 100,000 Apprenticeships by the end of the current Assembly term, which is May 2021 (though it is not clear exactly how this will be calculated). To be successful, this will require '(s)tronger cooperation between academic and vocational education, and the way in which these systems work together' (WG, 2017, p.2). To realise this step-change, WG propose to integrate Apprenticeships into the wider education system, including degree level Apprenticeships. There is a greater emphasis on partnership working, including schools, colleges, work-based learning providers and the higher education sector.

However, Colegau Cymru has made strong representations about some of the barriers they see to taking forward the Apprenticeships policy. Prominent amongst these is that advice to potential apprentices is '...still patchy with the most significant barriers being an unwillingness in the schools sector to engage with colleges and other providers to provide advice and guidance to all levels of learners' (Colegau Cymru 2017, p.2). It is argued that this also connects to the maintenance of a parity of esteem problem, in that in schools:

'Too often, apprenticeships and vocational options are still not discussed as a realistic and desirable option for more able and talented learners, yet there are apprenticeships and BTEC qualifications that lead onto higher level learning, some of which reach degree level, with the added bonus of work experience' (p. 7).

There is no doubt a link here with how schools' interests are driven by what counts as a successful outcome in their own frameworks of accountability. Indeed, this whole area of tension between FE and schools would be a crucial topic for research, given that so many long-term ambitions in Wales depend on greater partnership working. Colegau Cymru also make the point that cuts to the Careers Wales service have accelerated a general decline in the capacity of schools to engage in independent advice and guidance. One suggestion is put forward that schools could be made ('mandated') to invite colleges in to discuss the post-16 options that are available.

The Welsh government is now working out how to take forward the recommendations of the Hazelkorn report (Hazelkorn, 2016). The report's full subtitle is 'Review of the oversight of post-compulsory education in Wales, with special reference to the future role and function of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)'. It notes that currently, oversight of post-compulsory education in Wales is undertaken by a mix of Government and Government-sponsored bodies. Within the remit of the review is the WG view that we are now at '...an appropriate time to review and align the arrangements for the oversight of governance in and between institutions involved in the provision of post-compulsory education' (ibid, section 1). It is worth noting that the introduction to the document attempts to encompass a very broad range of considerations, similar to earlier sets of ambition around lifelong learning or 'the learning society':

'Because there are direct correlations between societal value systems and policy choices, how Wales balances its objectives for a skilled labour force, greater social equity, balanced regional growth, active engaged citizens, strong competitive institutions, attracting and retaining talent, and global competitiveness, matters. This means ensuring the post-compulsory system is characterized by: open and competitive education, offering the widest chance and choice to the broadest number of students; a coherent portfolio of differentiated high performing and actively engaged institutions, providing a breadth of educational, research and student experiences from 16 years throughout active life; developing the knowledge and skills that Welsh citizens need to contribute to society throughout their lives, while attracting international talent; graduates able to succeed in the labour market, fuel and sustain personal, social and economic development, and underpin civil society; and operating successfully in the global market, international in perspective and responsive to change' (ibid, section 1).

The report also identifies a series of issues or problems to be overcome, such as a lack of strategic thinking at government and institutional level, insufficient collaboration, too much competition, confusion at overlapping roles between and across institutions and agencies, and an absence of coherent pathways, especially throughout working lives.

The major recommendations of the report stress the need to work at system level (and, it might be observed represent a very different approach to the marketisation embodied in the Westminster Higher Education and Research Bill and preceding White Paper (James, 2017). Indeed, the thrust of the recommendations may be summed up by three 'reform directions':

- 'Adoption of a post-compulsory system perspective which can ensure a strategic, coordinated and coherent approach to educational provision for all learners and society;
- Establishment of a new post-compulsory intermediary body with the legislative authority to undertake and implement system planning coordination functions;

- Better alignment between national policy priorities, institutional funding and mission, and performance and productivity whilst respecting institutional autonomy' (ibid, section 2.3).

It is recognised the new legislation will be needed. There are many other important aspects and many details yet to be worked out. For now, it seems the most significant features are (a) the establishment of a new single 'Tertiary Education Authority', (b) finding a 'better balance between supply-led and demand-led education...away from a market-demand driven system to a mix of regulation and competition-based funding' (section 2.5). The review recognises that there will need to be consideration of where 6th forms 'sit' in the new arrangements (perhaps anticipating something of a battle).

What seem to be the main issues?

Generally, a critique of marketization is, to some extent, visible in Wales policy.

Parity of esteem – a difficulty that will never be completely avoided, but also one likely to be exacerbated by lack of IAG (with the stress on *Independence*), competing needs/interests in accountability between schools and colleges, and by student financial reality. On the latter, the minimum wage for a 19 year-old apprentice is much lower than that for an employed 18 year-old, and both are lower than the Diamond Review's estimates about support for higher level study.

Brexit – Economic uncertainty in general, but also much more specific concerns, such as that the WG Apprenticeship programme is supported by the European Social Fund which is likely to become out of reach.

Sharp increase in demand from employers - Apprenticeship levy generating sudden rise in awareness and therefore demand. However, the demand cannot be met, for both regulatory and resource reasons. Limits to college flexibility include 'the 10% rule' which means that colleges can only deliver up to 10% in WG non-priority areas of provision. There is a real problem of generating new expectations that cannot be met, after which some employers will at best lose interest, at worse become irreversibly disillusioned or highly vocally critical with an Apprenticeship system which does not readily serve their needs.

Equity issues. E.g. Wales has greater disparities than the rest of the UK amongst disabled people (both unemployment and poverty are more prevalent in Wales for this group). There are ongoing concerns about Apprenticeships remaining highly gendered (especially in Construction). More generally, former industrial and mining areas have very high levels of poverty and other marked indices of disadvantage. At times, FE and skills are still seen as part of a possible long-term solution here.

Key Sources

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