

RET 04

Ymateb gan: Mark Jones, Prif Weithredwr, Coleg Gŵyr Abertawe

Response from: Mark Jones, Chief Executive, Gower College Swansea

1. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation.
2. I am the Chief Executive Officer of Gower College Swansea – having spent the past 20 years in this role in 2 different Further Education Colleges in South Wales who both operate in very competitive areas of Wales in terms of Post 16 education.
3. I will focus my response on the first of your consultation questions
 - *Quality of information given to learners about the full range of post-16 options (vocational and academic routes post 16, i.e. further education, sixth form, apprenticeships and training, and onward to higher education)*

and 3 of the sub-categories namely:

- *Quality and nature of information provided to learners within schools and those educated other than at school (EOTAS)*
- *The extent to which further education colleges are able to engage directly with learners in schools*
- *The extent to which learners in schools are made aware of the options available to them in school sixth forms and local further education colleges, and how closely schools engage with local colleges. Are there any conflicts of interest between sixth forms and further education colleges and is this more prevalent in some areas of Wales more than others?*

and then there will be a further response from the College in relation to all of the other questions.

4. I must begin by saying that it is disappointing that these questions are being asked yet again despite there being a plethora of research evidencing that, in parts of Wales, learners do not have easy access to the full range of post-16 options available in their area.

As recent examples of this I would point to the following –

- i) (Learners) feel that the advice that they receive from their teacher does not address the alternative pathways to A Level study sufficiently. They

report that staff members advice is often focused on encouraging learners to progress to the school 6th form.

Senior Leaders in schools with small sixth forms feel under particular pressure to secure enrolments and .. this can lead to limited promotion of alternative options to year 11 learners. In too many cases the advice and guidance given to learners ... does not consider sufficiently whether alternative providers in the area are better placed to meet the needs of any given learner.

Estyn: Post 16 Partnerships, Shared Planning and Provision between schools and colleges, January 21.

- ii) Learners in schools without their own sixth form generally receive substantially more information, advice and guidance about the variety of education and training routes available to them in their local area.

Learners in the majority of schools with their own sixth form receive detailed information about courses available in the sixth form. However relatively little, if any, information or other options at all levels or apprenticeship opportunities available through alternative local providers is provided routinely to learners in the majority of these schools. Learners feel that they should have the opportunity to meet with representatives from other providers in order to allow them to fully evaluate all available options, regardless of whether the school has its own 6th form.

Where schools with their own sixth forms do allow representatives into the school to meet with groups of learners studying in year 11 this is sometimes restricted to meeting specific groups of learners who are unlikely to progress into their own 6th form.

Estyn: 16-19 Curriculum, A review of the current 16 – 19 curriculum in Wales, October 22.

- iii) It is vital that the learner has full clarity on possible pathways following post compulsory education and .. there is a need for significant improvement in communication between schools and further education providers.

... learners within the gateway 11 – 14 cohort would benefit greatly from a more transparent and informal approach to future possibilities relating to learning and employment, which is best achieved through the collaboration of schools and colleges.

Recommendation: Welsh Government should ensure that learners have full clarity on what options are available to them in post compulsory education at an early stage, allowing them to make viable and informed choices.

Dr Hefin David – Transition to Employment June 23

- iv) As just one example of an Estyn inspection.

'Although there is some strong collaboration between schools for post 16 provision the degree of collaboration involving other schools with sixth forms and other providers in the area has declined in recent years. As a result the curriculum offer available to learners is more limited than it used to be'.

Recommendation 1: Review post 16 provision to ensure that it meets the needs of all learners

Estyn: A report on education services in City and County of Swansea, Oct 22

5. Over the years many Welsh Government publications have emphasised the importance of the information, advice and guidance available to learners when choosing their post-16 options.
6. The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 states that advice should be in the best interest of the young person and should not promote the interests of any institution.

The Welsh Government's National Mission action plan for education (Welsh Government, 2020a) states the intention to provide independent careers advice and guidance to all young people. This is further strengthened in the Welsh Government's Guidance on effective post-16 transitions and data sharing (Welsh Government 2019), which states that schools and colleges should work together to advise learners on their educational pathways and career aims.

And the updated Welsh Government's National Mission: High standards and aspirations for all (March 2023) statement 'Our tertiary education and research reforms will support the different but complementary strengths of all institutions, so that learners of all ages have access to the full range of opportunities....'

And of course, all this is so important as identified in Strategic Aim 1 of Medr's Strategic Plan (Dec 2024) 'To focus the tertiary education sector around the needs of the learner ... ensuring that they are involved in decision making and encouraging participation'

7. So what are the reasons as to why learners don't have access to the full range of options available?

Well for me there are 3 reasons:

- 6.1 The existence of competition at post-16 between different schools and Further Education Colleges means that many institutions often put the interests (and particularly the financial interests) of their own institution first rather than the interests of the learner.

Put simply many schools with 6th forms make every effort possible to retain their students on post-16 programmes within the school by e.g. refusing access to other institutions to speak to potential learners, by holding 'open evenings' that focus on post-16 provision within that school only, and by

using all available opportunities to 'talk up' the school offer and to 'talk down' the offer from other providers in e.g. 6th form prospectuses (I can provide examples) and even on GCSE results morning when significant pressure can be put on students to stay on in the school 6th form. This is both disingenuous and inappropriate but many of our College students tell us that this continues to take place.

6.2 Regretfully there is a lack of leadership in tackling to address these issues.

The Welsh Government leaves the responsibility for overseeing this process to the individual Local Authorities – and then Local Authorities look to pass on the responsibility to individual Schools and their Governing Bodies. Throughout all of this there are clear political pressures which everyone recognises but which are clearly in the 'too hard to handle' category. As such in some parts of Wales progress over the last 20 years has been minimal.

6.3 The existing and new structures across Wales don't help in addressing these issues as there are artificial lines drawn between different sectors when we should be looking at these challenges together.

So for example Medr currently only look after the post-16 sector but the problem with ensuring that all pre-16 children have access to the full range of post-16 options lies outside Medr's remit and is the responsibility of the Welsh Government. Similarly, we have a Further Education and Higher Education Minister who has oversight of Further Education Colleges – but the responsibility for school 6th forms lies with the Cabinet Secretary.

Estyn too will take a holistic view across all of a school's provision often commenting favourably on the school when the 6th form can be underperforming.

8. I think that it is important to appreciate some of the different impacts of not making all options available to all learners and as such potentially putting the individual learners on the wrong courses for them.

For example, with more school learners encouraged to do A-Levels – despite weaker GCSE results – is it any surprise that the progression rate (%) of Welsh learners progressing onto Higher Education is relatively low.

Those learners who are encouraged to study vocational education at a school – who generally will have both inexperienced staff and limited facilities to deliver vocational provision – may well be discouraged from learning 'skills' by the poor quality of education that they receive. As a result, NEET's figure will inevitably be relatively higher and this is of course happening at the same time as well as employers are complaining about the lack of skilled employees.

Schools who run classes with small numbers will generally be running these courses at a loss and as such they will need to take money from their pre-16 provision – money which could be used e.g. to develop greater literacy or numeracy skills – to subsidise their post-16 provision.

And students who are initially enrolled on the wrong course will then after 1 or 2 years change to a different programme meaning that they are double funded at a time when funding remains tight across all of the education sector.

9. So what can and should we do?

Well we need to ensure that – as outlined in Medr’s Strategic Aim 1 – we put the interests of the learners first at all times rather than the interests of the institutions – and in achieving this all pre-16 pupils should be made aware of and have access to the full range of post-16 options available to them in their local area.

Indeed, as a minimum I would suggest that we should:

- ensure compulsory access for all students to independent advice and guidance by e.g. creating mandatory requirements for careers events that host all possible post-16 providers
 - ensure collaborations between schools and colleges through some designated funding to support collaborative activity, thereby rewarding collaboration
 - establish standardised student feedback mechanisms to evaluate the quality of guidance received
 - ensure that future Estyn inspections specifically focus on this issue
- with the overall aim being that in 5 years time we are continuing to ask the same questions that we have been asking – and answering for the past 20 years.