

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar [Llwybrau at addysg a hyfforddiant ôl-16](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) on the [Routes into post-16 education and training](#)

RET 36

Ymateb gan: Undeb Prifysgolion a Cholegau Cymru

Response from: University and College Union in Wales (UCU)

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The University and College Union in Wales (UCU Cymru) represents almost 7,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians, and postgraduates in universities, colleges, adult education, and training organisations across Wales.

As such we have access to the expertise and experience of our members and recognise our duty as a professional body and creative partner. We believe in the liberation of potential through education and training and are determined to pursue the academic and learner interest across a wide range of government policy.

We have prepared the following evidence in response to the CPYE's inquiry into routes into post-16 education and training.

### **Participation**

In 2024, both University Wales and Colegau Cymru reported declining rates of learner participation in Welsh institutions. Whilst college numbers have subsequently rallied, less Welsh domiciled learners are attending a university in any home nation, suggesting declining participation across the board

In seeking a partial explanation, the pandemic simultaneously highlighted and accelerated the underlying process of inequity in the Welsh education system. As of 2023 Wales confronted:

- [Record levels](#) of [poor behavior](#). Significantly concentrated in Years 5 & 6 and Years 10 & 11
- [Record authorized absences](#) following the same pattern.
- A dramatic growth in the qualification outcome attainment gap between pupils in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) – see [data](#) for 2022 to 2023

Whilst this does not provide a full explanation for declining rates in participation, it certainly signals an overall decline in learner engagement. In confronting this challenge, UCU Cymru notes the essential role of coherent and comprehensible pathways which are easily understood by learner, parent and teacher alike. However, and just as crucially, we also see how a more extensive collaboration between schools, universities and colleges can establish the conditions for aspiration and collaboration. As a point of departure, we believe that learners aspire to goals which they believe to be in their [reach](#). Moreover, evidence

suggests that children are more likely to relate to things which are visible and [familiar](#), as opposed to [remote](#).

In our evidence, UCU Cymru develops a suite of modest recommendations designed to promote coherence, practical parity and the sorts of effective collaboration which can boost participation from learners of all backgrounds.

### **Policy Context – a ‘gloomy apprehension’**

In lieu of a foreword, we believe that the committee should take stock of the industrial environment as it stands.

During and following the Pandemic, positive Barnett consequentials generated additional funding. Emphasizing the need for ‘an equality led recovery’, the Welsh Government made funding available for school and college improvement through various ‘reform and recovery’ budget streams.

More recently, UK fiscal constraints have dampened the mood of decision makers, disrupting the coherency of Welsh Government’s response to challenges emerging from the hysteresis of the pandemic and historical underfunding. Where previously we saw a system-wide vision, this has since been replaced by budgetary triage as government attempts to engage the isolated aspects of a much deeper structural problem.

Similarly, there is strong evidence to suggest that the school teaching profession is frayed. Not having had the occasion to recover from the shock of the Pandemic, teachers have been subject to a succession of reforms including the New Curriculum, ALN and, most recently, the abolition of the consortia.

Whilst the pressures of embedding (arguably under-resourced), legislation might be less apparent in universities and colleges – although the latter is struggling with ALN – a combination of job losses through voluntary severance, pay deferrals in universities and the constant threat of compulsory redundancies all impact bandwidth for reform.

To that end, rather than characterising the terrain as one of challenges and opportunities, it might be more accurate to describe opportunities emerging from crisis. On a more optimistic note, experience and engagement with our sister school unions suggests that teachers and lecturers remain committed to supporting learners. Indeed, whilst this might now be expressed more through the medium of [steely determination](#), we have not yet reached the tipping point whereby staff and leaders feel that they are simply making choices between bad outcomes.

It is within this context that UCU suggests that a renewed focus on learner pathways and enabled progression could contribute to a greater sense of satisfaction whilst also providing a spur to necessary system reform. However, it is also clear that we cannot afford to further increase the professional burden. Rather, it is time for government, organisations and the agencies to do the heavy lifting. For this reason, our strategic recommendations place a special emphasis on Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales, Estyn and Medr.

**Recommendation 1: UCU Cymru recommends that the CYPE Committee give thought to workload impact when deliberating on the inquiry's findings.**

### **The New Curriculum conundrum**

Any serious examination of pathways will acknowledge that qualifications are the currency for progression. Principally for this reason, UCU Cymru is concerned that the new, learner focused curriculum will not align with the examination-based qualifications and PISA testing which will ultimately measure its success

Across the UK, our qualification and assessment systems are more geared towards selection than participation. For example, each year, precisely 33.4% of learners will necessarily fail to achieve a 'C' grade in math's and English so that the rest can pass. This '[forgotten third](#)' of predominantly working-class learners, who are neither empowered nor engaged by GCSE's, constitute a net loss to Wales. Many will drop out of education altogether either before, or following, examinations.

The qualifications regulator's recent 'Made in Wales' project provided an occasion to rethink assessment. Whilst Qualifications Wales entertained [progressive voices](#) at the development stage, this was all too easily undone when the WJEC moved on to design. As a case in point, at developmental stage, the new GCSE's envisaged a 40% to 50% creative coursework (NEA) element. However, upon reaching design, the WJEC determined that learners would have to carry out NEA under supervised classroom conditions - hence 'mini exams'.

High stakes testing at the age of 16 stands out as a peculiarly UK aberration. The committee should note that no other European, and very few international comparators, subjects' young people to a series of life-determining examinations at such a young age. Throughout Europe and the vast majority of other G20 countries, there is a general expectation that young people will remain in education up to the age of 18.

UCU Cymru believes that assessment must be designed to be more engaging and measure what learners can do in addition to what they can remember. Given that the effects of the Pandemic will work through the system for at least six years, unauthorized absence and self-exclusion will likely catalyze with a range of (frequently undiagnosed!) behavioral and developmental challenges.

All of this can serve to dampen the positive effects of a [demographic wave](#) - more young people will be coming through the system up to 2032 - and impact the profile of learners who do progress. Moreover, a system of didactic assessment which fails to align with the new curriculum will generate confusion leading to its ultimate failure.

Many teachers will openly admit that they are compelled to 'teach to the test'. During the past 25 years, each iteration of GCSE's and A Levels has demanded ever more classroom and notional teaching time. Militating against the core objects of the curriculum, it must be noted that Welsh schoolteachers now teach

anything up to 30% more than their bacculaureate European comparators. All of this precludes the opportunities for co-pedagogy, independent research and the formation of original thought. As [Pasi Sahlberg](#) says, the evidence firmly indicates that when we “[teach less we learn more](#)” where supported by professional autonomy, communities of practice and opportunities for action research.

As touched upon below, the liquidation of Welsh education consortia opens a valuable space for collaboration with universities. However, whether measured by increased staff morale and proficiency or learner outcomes, the success of new arrangements will depend upon freeing time for genuine professional learning and collaboration. To that end, and as with the efficacy of all pathways, qualification reform must ensure that the tail of assessment does not unduly wag the dog of curriculum and teaching.

### **Prevocational Qualifications – a welcome opportunity**

Following on from GCSE reform, Qualifications Wales responded to falling pupil engagement, by developing a range of novel pre-vocational and project qualifications.

Departing from the standpoint that a learner should be able to reach the same destination via a variety of different routes, UCU Cymru broadly welcomed this work as a thoughtful attempt not only to tailor progression to different learner strengths but also, and in common with young apprenticeships, offer an engaging route to those learners who are otherwise alienated by GCSE's.

Crucially, it should be noted that along with other education unions such as the National Education Union, our support remains contingent on VCSE's credibility as a currency that enables progression from level 2 to level 3. UCU Cymru would never wish to see a repetition of the GCSE/CSE scandal whereby children who were considered 'less able' were encouraged to pursue a qualification which was ultimately judged by many to be less than meaningless. Mitigating against this risk, Qualifications Wales has assured the sector that the level of take-up will be closely monitored so that any local or regional outliers can be sympathetically investigated.

As an additional dividend, we hope that VCE's will further develop the conditions for closer system-wide collaboration. For example, a lack of information sharing between schools and colleges frequently impedes teaching and arrests the development of effective planning and pedagogies. A more coherent system could drastically improve learner outcomes - particularly from the standpoint of ALN.

By way of caution, care must be taken to offset the risk of additional bureaucratic strain. For this reason, UCU identifies information sharing as a fertile area in which the profession can work in partnership to develop AI as a valuable augmentation. For this reason, we would recommend that Estyn undertake a thematic review which considers the efficacy of current information sharing arrangements to prefigure the prospect of game-changing innovation.

**Recommendation 2: UCU Cymru recommends that Estyn undertake a thematic review which considers the efficacy of current information sharing arrangements to prefigure the prospect of game-changing innovation. We further recommend that Welsh Government work in social partnership with schools, Colegau Cymru, education unions, Medr and JISC to assess whether AI can augment information sharing.**

### **Towards a whole education system - schools and colleges in partnership**

Focusing on collaboration, a lot has been [written](#) about the rivalry which exists between colleges and some sixth forms. In a 2022 report, Estyn certainly reported localised instances in which college outreach staff had been 'run off the school premises'. However, and as explored in more detail below, the phenomena of sixth form competition is not limited to colleges and should be more accurately regarded as an accidental outgrowth of English academisation in an otherwise colligate Welsh system.

Similarly, it would be unfair to single out sixth forms as engines of competition when colleges are frequently forced, or perversely incentivised, to [compete](#) with one another. Where different colleges operations overlap, competition can lead to a severe reduction in part-time provision. Speaking directly to this risk, the seminal [Colleges of the Future](#) report made the following recommendation:

*"Oversight systems across the four nations must be simplified, driving efficiency, engendering greater trust and enabling better strategic coordination to deliver for systems outcomes across people, productivity and place. This must include developing a single post-16 education oversight and funding body within each nation (or in the case of NI, a coordinated approach within government) – crucial to ensuring a coherent lifelong education service, and to addressing nugatory competition between colleges and with other education providers."*

Within the Welsh context, the buck clearly stops with Medr. Usefully, we recommend that the funding regulator begins by focusing on what is working well and adopt VCSE's as an opportunity to incentivise school college partnerships.

Talking to UCU members from Gower college, practitioners identified the following advantages:

- Learners can start vocational courses pre-16 in an appropriate setting with specialist lecturers and relevant equipment which schools may not have access to.
- Learners that are disengaged in a traditional school setting see the relevance of what they are learning and know they can progress on to a level 2/3 course aged 16 if they are successful at level 1/2 which gives them motivation. Outside of a traditional classroom setting previously difficult students can flourish in a more practical, hands-on environment.

- Learners become familiar with the college and lecturers and know what to expect if they choose a full -time vocational course post 16 so they are more likely to make the right choice and stay with that course and have a successful outcome.
- Schools are free to focus their time and energy on learners and subjects they feel comfortable with to achieve the highest outcomes.

On the proviso that the subsequent qualification bears sufficient currency to ensure meaningful progression (see below), UCU Cymru sees little to argue with.

Indeed, we would recommend that Medr funds to incentivise valuable behaviours, but in order to get there, we need to develop a clearer relationship between Medr and the compulsory sector. With this in mind, UCU Cymru supports Colegau Cymru's call that collaboration between schools and colleges must be improved to benefit learners adding only that this collaboration must be reflected on a system-wide scale.

**Recommendation 3: UCU Cymru recommends that Welsh Government seizes VCSE's as an opportunity to incentivise colleges to develop school partnerships. We further recommend that Welsh Government work with Medr and schools to align structure which can improve collaboration.**

### **NEETS of the Future**

Focusing on NEET's, whilst the committee's interest in those out of work and education makes perfect sense, UCU Cymru believes government should also focus on young people who leave education to find work in the lower rungs of the Welsh service economy.

Whether constituting the 'forgotten third' of learners who failed to achieve a 'C Grade' in English, Welsh or Math's or young people seeking a break from formal education, this cohort is not only distant from learning but also subject to precarious employment in sectors which are vulnerable to technological supersession. Similarly, there is some evidence to suggest that increasing numbers of learners from wealthier backgrounds are taking time out of education to work.

Whereas it was once popular to apply to university, then defer and travel, the experience of the pandemic (a record number of students sought to repeat a year at level 3) has caused many learners to crave a break from education. Typically living within the family home, they are free to earn. We might assume that many will enjoy the experience of relative wealth and choose to delay entry into tertiary education well into their twenties. The fact is, we simply do not know.

Clearly, the predicament of this 'hard to reach group' commands more research. A desktop review reveals how little attention has been afforded to school-leavers employed in 'bad' or 'unfair' work. During an era of triage and emergency, one

suspects that policy makers might conclude that any employment is preferable to destitution or dependence on welfare.

UCU Cymru would staunchly disagree, going as far as to suggest that any business employing or 'contracting' with a person below the age of 16 in Wales should be made subject to a range of non-onerous duties intended to promote aspiration and enable access to study. These might include the distribution of publicity from local college or university. Of course, should an employer choose to work in collaboration and enter into partnership with either, a closer and more useful relationship might become foreseeable.

**Recommendation 4: UCU Cymru recommends that Welsh Government undertakes research to assess the issue and predicament of young people who leave education to find work in the lower rungs of the Welsh service economy.**

### **Sixth form verses college - a policy fallacy**

Notwithstanding the evidenced localised competition, recent EPI and [WCPP](#) reports have focused on comparative learner outcomes between colleges and sixth forms. In his WCPP 'think piece' Luke Sibieta goes as far as to suggest that it is this issue which drives lower Welsh learner participation in HE. In some quarters, this thinking has subsequently been satirised as a tautological assertion that 'because poorer learners go to college, colleges make learners poor'!

UCU Cymru approaches such suggestions with deep scepticism. It is a fact that most Welsh learners pursue A-Level courses in a college setting. Moreover, the evidence indicates very similar learner outcomes in both sixth form and colleges (with a markedly higher non-completion rate in the latter owing to learner background).

Crucially, and as far as UCU Cymru is aware, no commentator has considered the effects of selective and competitive practises in Welsh sixth form. Simply put, whereas urban school sixth forms once offered a seamless pathway for their own cohort, they now select from their Year 11 whilst increasingly seeking to recruit the 'best learners' from other schools. A basic desktop review of sixth form [websites](#) in [Cardiff](#) and [Swansea](#) reveals how widespread these practises have become.

The existence of widespread competitive selection not only impacts on data analysis but also risks an escalation of local and regional inequalities. Given the risk that 'bad data' might be pushing the debate in the wrong direction, we feel that there is an urgent need for Welsh Government, Medr and/or Estyn (through its scheme of thematic reviews) to undertake serious research around the impact of competitive selection.

Throughout our response, UCU Cymru argues that it is time to innovate and readjust the dial between selection and access. In previous years Sixth Forms

would automatically accept learners from their own cohort with 5 C+ GCSE's (inc maths and English). If it is found that competition is acting to curtail choice, both government and Medr must stand ready to intervene. There are various precedents for action - most recently, regulations designed to ensure the affordability of school uniforms. Either way, Wales has successfully resisted 'academisation' which, when considering our levels of poverty and regional inequalities, would arguably prove disastrous.

**Recommendation 5: UCU Cymru recommends that Welsh Government invite Estyn to undertake a Thematic Review on the wider impact of competitive selection in sixth form.**

### **Coproduction - 'The same destination via a range of different routes'**

Coherent and easily comprehensible pathways are not only essential to the task of promoting equity but also play an essential role in ensuring the conditions for national development. A 5.0 Welsh economy will require an adaptable workforce in possession of a broad range of transferable medium/high level skills. To that end, all areas of the tertiary system will need to collaborate to tackle qualification cul-de-sacs in addition to the residual snobbery which polices the academic/vocational divide. As we explain below, policy makers are prone to citing parity of esteem as a lofty ambition when, and examined in the cold light of day, it merely equates to a practical choice.

Whereas previous governments have failed to recognize the essential relationship between pathways, progression and regional development, we are optimistic that current exigencies might force an urgent evaluation.

In our [response](#) to the 202e Welsh Government Draft Innovation Strategy, UCU Cymru wrote:

*"Wales' ability to grow its middle will not only determine the shape of the future Welsh economy but also play a large part in determining whether social partnership takes hold in the private sector. Acknowledging how the OECD and other organisations link successful social partnership with effective innovation, it is significant that the 'Mittelstand' provides the backbone for both across the devolved German Lande. Clarifying the relationship between Welsh Government, Regional Partnership Boards and CTER (Medr) can provide a structure for this work. Similarly, the Welsh Regional Investment Plan and Welsh Innovation Strategy supplies a blueprint. However, neither offer the conditions – a flexible and agile workforce equipped with the capabilities, skills and habits of mind necessary to navigating a rapidly evolving economy".*

Put another way, the existence of coherent pathway will not only furnish future workers with the wherewithal to bargain in tomorrow's economy but will also determine the shape, character and import of Wales.

As an immediate step, greater and more systematic engagement by all parts of the tertiary sector with Qualifications Wales and the WJEC can generate opportunities for useful coproduction. UCU Cymru recommends that the

Memorandum of Understanding concluded between Medr and the qualifications regulator should incorporate a firm promise to publish intended pathways at both the development and design stage. Not only would this necessitate a greater emphasis on iterative collaboration but also mitigate against the threat of 'white elephant' qualifications which lock learners into a singular route. After all, if qualifications are the currency of progression, it makes perfect sense to ensure that providers value their liquidity.

Whilst expansive in breadth, the 2023 [Lusher Review](#) never quite touched upon the issue of portability. As a core principle, 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. Consequently, and as a medium-term aim, UCU Cymru would like to see a greater emphasis on horizontal movement between colleges and universities.

Likewise, greater learner participation means ending the partial monopoly of A-Levels as the principal currency for entering higher education. After all, and in common with past gold-standards, their 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.

Conversely, the far smaller proportion of vocational learners who, for example, access an engineering university course, tend to exhibit less book knowledge but greater self-sufficiency in learning. UCU Cymru also notes the relatively sharp decline in accepted application from learners with BTEC backgrounds. Primarily for this reason, a meaningful discussion about pathways must involve a practical focus on qualification reform, purpose and progression. We envisage a tertiary system in which a young apprentice can enter college at the age of 14 and, if so motivated, progress all the way to level 6. Such stories would be considered banal throughout Spain and Northern Europe. The fact that we hold them to be inspiring tells us something about our continuing 'academic and vocational divide'.

One useful target might be that by 2035, Welsh universities will recruit a determined proportion of the domiciled cohort with vocational backgrounds. Similarly, UCU Cymru supports Colegau Cymru's call on the Welsh Government to develop a strategy for Vocational Education and Training. As touched upon above, this would require movement towards a unified Welsh Credit & Qualification transfer system and can be better enabled through collaboration between colleges and universities as well as funding incentives. Indeed, it is within the realms of collaboration where the true opportunities lie.

**Recommendation 6: UCU Cymru recommends that Qualifications Wales and awarding bodies undertake to publish a simple graphic capturing intended pathway and progression routes at both the development and design stage**

**Recommendation 7: UCU Cymru recommends that Medr initiates a conversation with Welsh Universities, Qualifications Wales and Awarding bodies with a view to establishing a recruitment target for Welsh learners with vocational backgrounds.**

**Universities and colleges in schools – inspire to aspire**

In tandem with qualification & assessment reform, funding institutions to visibly engage in Primary and Secondary schools can normalize the notion of post-compulsory education and raise learner aspirations across the board.

In terms of practical examples of successful partnership, Trinity College St Davids and the University of Manchester both successfully engage in working alongside schools and the school curriculum. UCU Cymru believes that Medr should fund to drastically expand this work.

We can avoid overstretch when government curbs some of its regulatory ambition and allows the tertiary sector to do all do the things that we are good at. Looking overseas, collaboration takes hold where the correct financial incentives and requisite industrial conditions are in place. This can then provide the bandwidth for innovation.

For instance, with proposed changes to the regional consortia there is an importunity to use the experience and expertise of the post 16 sector to evolve sector improvement and enhance research based professional learning. Not only could this expand the bandwidth for action research in educational settings but would also have the virtue of keeping money within the system (and out of the hands of consultants).

For those of us who live in university towns and cities, the fact that many children never see, let alone visit, a university might not seem obvious. As posed in our introduction, learners will aspire to pathways which are both accessible and obtainable in their everyday life. Consequently, if a young person does not see or build a relationship with a university, evidence suggests that the advantages of a university education will remain remote.

As an effective remedy, UCU Cymru would like to draw the Committees attention to the Russel Groups excellent 2020 [Pathways for Potential](#) Report.

The work captures a collection of [case studies](#) which, when combined, offer concrete steps that universities can take both to boost local recruitment and augment opportunities for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Crucially, most of these projects involve a visible and tangible HE presence in the school environment:

***The University of Manchester** has adopted a whole-university approach to supporting schools in the most disadvantaged areas. The university has developed a long-term programme overseen by its Access and Participation Strategy Group, which is chaired by the Vice-President for Teaching, Learning and Students. This includes a seven-year initiative to recruit and place academic*

and professional staff and alumni from the university as school governors, and the scheme has now trained over 1,000 people. Of the schools where staff are governors, 142 schools (92% of the schools with a current Ofsted judgement) were rated good or outstanding in 2019. The scheme has also improved relationships with the schools themselves. The links created with senior leaders in schools support the promotion of widening access activities and events, leading to an improvement in attendance and take up of widening participation programmes

**Queen's University Belfast** uses sport to foster early engagement with male pupils, primarily from white working-class backgrounds, in years 8 to 10. The university works with a total of 110 young males every year from non-selective secondary schools across Northern Ireland; participants are identified based on a range of factors including having a low household income, care experience or a disability, and/ or parents who have not attended university. The programme aims to foster a sense of pride and self-confidence, as well as the aspiration to progress to university in later years

**The University of Liverpool** works with a local Somali and Yemeni community group to build successful relationships with prospective students through their Fast Trackers initiative. Due to the longevity of the programme, previous participants entering the university are now working as mentors for the next generation of students, acting as positive role models and embedding the project further within the community.

**The University of York's** Shine programme works with young people from the final year of primary school right through to year 11, providing a range of activities to inspire and motivate participants to succeed at school and to consider applying to university. In 2017/18, 89% of pupils said that as a result of taking part in Shine, they are now more likely to apply to higher education.

**Queen Mary University of London** is involved in several innovative partnerships with state schools in east London, helping to improve standards of education and inspiring young people to fulfil their potential. The university co-sponsors the Drapers' Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) in the London Borough of Havering and supports the MAT's specialisms in mathematics and science through close collaboration with academic departments to enrich the curriculum and support improvements in pupil attainment. In addition to the academic curriculum, Queen Mary delivers a comprehensive progression curriculum from year 7 through to year 13, which is designed to increase students' knowledge and capacity to navigate towards higher education. Queen Mary is also a partner in the St Paul's Way Trust School in Tower Hamlets along with King's College London, the Institute of Education (at University College London) and the University of Warwick. St Paul's Way Trust School has noticeably improved its GCSE results in recent years, and currently holds an 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating. The latest Ofsted report references the positive impact the universities have in extending the experiences of students within and beyond the school day. Queen Mary also supports the involvement of student volunteers (primarily in offering mathematics tuition) across state schools, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby providing role models for school pupils.

In Wales UCU Cymru applauds access [work](#) already undertaken by Welsh Universities. However, we have no doubt that outcomes can be massively improved if institutions are supported to adapt good practice from the UK and Europe. Whereas it might be difficult to envisage a single winning strategy (the Welsh sector is as diverse as the nations geography!), there is a very good chance that active collaborations with schools can begin to address the stubborn issues of participation and poverty. As it stands, this opportunity is frustrated by a catastrophic funding environment which continues to privilege international franchising over local recruitment.

While [excellent work](#) is already undertaken between compulsory and non-compulsory sectors, it is not heavily publicised or co-ordinated. Ring fenced funding can create cross sector professional network, including support between sectors for professional learning, mentorship, research, immersive campus visits and subject specific workshops. The removal of many subject specialists from school improvement services has left a void which cross sectoral collaboration can fill. This will allow current and new strategies teaching to be embedded the profession, promote lifelong learning and aligned with industry demands to meet the challenges that lie ahead.

Finally, UCU Cymru shares the concerns of University Wales in relation to the Seren Academy. At a time when many excellent institutions are suffering deficit and (in some cases) liquidity issues, we feel that it is perverse that Welsh public money is spent on sending Welsh learners to England. Welsh government should work with Medr and the HE sector to radically overhaul Seren and bring its focus into line with the Programme of Government and institutional civic mission.

For this reason, UCU Cymru recommends that University Wales, Medr and Welsh Government work with their partners to engage in a joined-up investigation around UK best practice. We then further recommend that Medr give serious thought to how successful efforts are funded.

**Recommendation 8: UCU Cymru recommends that the Welsh government work with Medr and the HE sector to radically overhaul Seren and bring its focus into line with the Programme of Government and institutional civic mission.**

**Recommendation 9: UCU Cymru recommends that University Wales, Medr and Welsh Government work with their partners to engage in a joined-up investigation around UK best practice. We further recommend that Welsh Government & Medr give serious thought to how successful efforts are funded.**

### **Adult Education & Family learning - a second chance nation in an age of constraints**

Lifelong learning must be the goal for every citizen who is able to take advantage of this offer. However, this cannot be achieved if Medr does not start

by focusing on the structural barriers which currently hold back genuine collaborative working within the sector. The strategy must also include easy access to financial support for those who can only study in small chunks, such as one module at a time, because of family commitments and other life pressures. In time, Medr must strive to develop a coherent long-term strategy to ensure that every Welsh citizen build sufficient confidence to access learning in such a way that suits their lives. This 'social model of education' will necessarily dismantle barriers and establish a genuinely learner-centred baseline.

If we are going to prioritise coherent pathways across the system, serious thought must also be given to the position of adult education. Current arrangements lack clear coordination and depend upon fragmented funders who are not obliged to provide a consistent level of support.

Responding to Welsh Governments Draft Child Poverty Strategy in 2023, UCU Cymru identified a process whereby single parent families had become increasingly distant from well-paid, fair work and education. Briefly exploring the relationship between poverty and trauma, we explained how the current qualification system reproduced poverty by inculcating a 'lifelong dread of learning' in many of the disproportionately poorest children who do not achieve a 'C Grade' at level GCSE. Adopting a whole family approach model, we then referred to Welsh Government's current policy suite to explore a range of remedies which can simultaneously re-engage parent and child in a beneficial learning experience whilst also tackling the systemic failures which stymie participation and contribute to withdrawal from educational opportunity.

Acknowledging the urgent need to raise awareness engage disadvantaged parents in a conversation around pathways, we believe that Community Schools will be uniquely placed to offer cost effective family learning solutions.

Finally, there is a recognised need to develop medium-level skills throughout every Welsh Region. Under these conditions, it is essential that courses are funded to take account of existing and actual need. In some cases, this will mean adopting a more flexible approach to how learning is delivered and what constitutes a qualification or output from learning. A portable and flexible credit system constitutes the best opportunity to engage old and new learners. However, the Medr must work along multiple tiers of government to create the space and funding for experimentation.

The potential advantages of a unified credit and qualification transfer system are not widely understood by policy makers. To assist the committee, we include an accessible draft of evidence which UCU Cymru commissioned from Professor Wayne Turnbull (Liverpool John Morre University) in May 2022.