

RET 45

Ymateb gan: NPTC Grŵp Colegau

Response from: NPTC Group of Colleges

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The Committee would welcome written evidence on all or as many of the points below from professionals, individuals and organisations.

### **Terms of Reference**

The inquiry will focus on:

**1. 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)**

- **Quality and nature of information provided to learners within schools and those educated other than at school (EOTAS).**

Career information is available from many sources. There is sometimes a variation in the quality and nature of the information provided to learners depending on their locality. While colleges' endeavour to liaise with career advisors and secondary schools directly, there is a fundamental requirement that they are open to the process in the best interests of the learners. The College provides information on the full range of options available to all students post-16. This is available through various means including on-line, print and in person. The information is impartial and available on request or through planned events.

Pupils' access to high-quality career guidance can depend on the resources and priorities of individual schools, leading to variability in the information provided. Despite efforts to promote vocational education, some schools and families still emphasise academic routes like A Levels, sometimes undermining the perception of apprenticeships or vocational training. Not all teachers or career advisors are fully knowledgeable about vocational qualifications, local apprenticeships or the current /future employment opportunities which may limit the advice they can offer.

There are competing demands and pressures on school timetables but a focus on introducing vocational routes, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurial options more prominently at an earlier stage to diversify students' perceptions of success would be helpful. Teachers and career advisors would benefit from professional development to stay informed about labour market trends, emerging industries, and evolving qualifications. Also expanding partnerships between schools and employers could help bring real-world perspectives into classrooms and provide hands-on learning experiences.

At the College we have a strong relationship with the EOTAS team, for example attending regular coffee mornings with home educated young people and their families to discuss post-16 pathways and options. The College does receive

requests from the parents of electively home-schooled children enquiring about them attending college at 15 and 16 years of age.

- **Quality and nature of information provided directly to learners by Careers Wales.**

As a college, we organise specific events for the careers advisors that cover our geographical area. The sessions are bespoke and focus on course options and any curriculum changes. Student support and transport is also covered in these sessions. We recognise the importance of the work the careers advisors undertake. The wide range of information they are able to give, to ensure the learners are making informed choices. We are aware there has been a cut in the budget for Careers Wales which could lead to inconsistencies in career support for learners. The 'Choose Your Future' events have ceased to exist this academic year and as an institution we are working with stakeholders and partners to fill this void.

- **The extent to which further education colleges are able to engage directly with learners in schools.**

The nature of direct engagement with pupils in schools varies by county. The tertiary set up in Neath Port Talbot allows the College to directly access pupils in nearly all of the schools via assembly talks and in-school engagement sessions. In Powys, most engagement with schools involves bringing pupils to us at careers events and taster days, although schools have been increasingly receptive to the College delivering sessions in school in recent years. The College has worked hard to share its ethos of making sure all learners have access to the most appropriate forms of education with all schools in the counties we serve. Across Neath Port Talbot and Powys, the College has fostered excellent working relationships with school staff and senior leaders.

- **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?**

The degree of engagement is heavily influenced by the nature of the relationships between establishments. In tertiary areas the conflict of interests is largely removed. Engagement between the secondary schools and the College is high and relationships strong and supportive. In non-tertiary areas, there have been considerable improvements in relationships, improving engagement opportunities which focus on ensuring the learner is at the heart of the process, and that all relevant progression opportunities are discussed.

Engaging through employers has been a useful way to forge links with schools. For example, the Employer Engagement Group in Powys was set up by the College and invited School representation to develop shared relationships and address skills gaps, career and employability opportunities and post-16 choices. The Growing Mid Wales Work Experience App has been designed through an SPF project to facilitate work experience opportunities and has been run in partnership with Schools, Colleges and employers.

- **The extent to which employers are able to engage directly with learners in schools, for example at careers events.**

This is achieved through individual College engagement. The College's Employment Bureau provides opportunities for students to engage with employers through role model talks, visiting speakers and industry visits. The Employer in Residence Programme at NPTC has had a significant impact on direct engagement between employers and students whereby visiting employers take over the College's Bureau for a day each week. Employers deliver bespoke career advice, mock interviews and employability support directly to students. The rota is shared with local schools for wider pupil engagement. Specific curriculum events have been a useful way to encourage engagement between industry and curriculum areas. For example, the Net Zero Symposium introduced students to employers in renewable energy, electronics and construction.

The College has organised specific career events in Powys where employers are also invited to attend. As well as subject areas, pupils are provided with the opportunity to discuss with employers, requirements, skills and qualifications to work in a variety of sectors. For example, when Careers Wales were no longer able to deliver the Choose Your Future events, Powys County Council, recognising the benefit of these events, asked the College to take over the running of the career's fairs with their backing. These events not only give pupils access to employers and information on college delivery but also allow engagement between the College and local employers.

Employers that have a HR/Training infrastructure can engage in raising awareness initiatives at local schools. They can promote their career pathways and employment opportunities. This is ad hoc and relies on the proactiveness of the employer. Micro businesses or SMEs do not have this capacity and miss out on this engagement. This can result in some pupils not receiving a balanced view of current and future opportunities available within their locality.

- **Who else influences learners future career choices (e.g. parents, teachers, peers), and how well are those people supported to do this.**

Undoubtedly the learners are influenced by people they trust. Parents, siblings, and teachers at secondary school pupils have a considerable influence. It is important

that parents, teachers, and career advisors are giving advice which is current and in the best interest of the learner. Engagement with parents at evening events at the secondary schools, or teachers when they visit during school 'taster days' at the College are of paramount importance. Building and maintaining relationships with schools is key to ensuring staff understand what options are available post-16.

From research, we also know that peers have a considerable influence on future career choices. We have found that parents attending open evenings, are often on a fact-finding mission and staff as well as current college students are readily available to provide support and answers to questions they may have.

## **2. How effective careers support is at compulsory school age**

- **To what extent careers support at pre-16 is resulting in positive or negative outcomes post-16 e.g. young people finding themselves not in education, employment or training (NEET).**

There is positive advice and guidance taking place alongside Careers Wales at points in school and the community to steer young people away from becoming NEET. In-school Cynnydd workers help guide young people towards FE and apprenticeship pathways, and the Ospreys in the Community programme effectively re-engages disengaged young people in Year 11 and provides post-16 guidance. The College has very positive relationships with Cynnydd and OitC and works with both organisations to promote further education as a post-16 route.

There is clear disparity in the quality and availability of careers advice from Careers Wales across different schools. While some schools still have onsite careers advisors, other schools have sporadic access to careers advice and advisors. Recent further cuts to the Careers Wales budget have also heavily impacted the way parents are able access careers advisors; this year, advisors' attendance at Year 11 parents' evenings has been limited to one event per school per year.

- **Whether work experience opportunities for learners of compulsory school are operational, effective and meaningful and any barriers in that regard.**

While work experience is a valuable part of careers education, access to high-quality placements can be inconsistent, particularly in rural areas where opportunities may be more limited. It would be helpful to see if there is any research on the types of work experience placements and the socio-economic background of the school pupil. Meaningful work experience is often provided by parents/carers or who the parents/carers know. If their parent/carer is unemployed, this immediately puts up a barrier for the school pupil in engaging in meaningful work experience and the gap widens.

### **3. Changes in routes post-18**

- **Is there evidence that learners are changing their choices post-18, including a drop in Higher Education enrolments, and if so why?**

Factors impacting on a reduction in HE student recruitment include the national picture of Higher Education across the media, with a reported fewer people in Wales applied to university for September 2024 entry than at any point in the last decade. The gap in 18-year-old participation between Wales and the UK, is also the widest it has ever been. Traditional academic university routes do not always allow students to balance employment alongside their studies. Many students are opting for vocational training (which can be achieved via a College Based Higher Education route) or some are entering the workforce to avoid a student loan.

There is evidence that parents/carers do not understand the student loan scheme and consequently advise their children from not studying at Level 4 and above due to the perception of debt and the fear of repayments and interest. Degree apprenticeships are an excellent option for meeting the demand for skills in certain industries, such as technology and healthcare. However, we have a long way to go in Wales with improving the funding opportunities for those wishing to pursue a degree apprenticeship.

### **4. Welsh-medium provision**

- **The availability of post-16 options (both academic and vocational) through the medium of Welsh, and how this impacts on young people's choices.**

Welsh-medium provision is stronger in areas where Welsh is widely spoken, such as Gwynedd and Carmarthenshire, but less robust in predominantly English-speaking regions like South-East Wales. Rural areas can face additional challenges, with limited subject choice and fewer specialised practitioners available for post-16 Welsh-medium education. More subjects are available as Qualifications Wales has reformed sectors in areas such as Health Social/Childcare and Construction. WJEC monopolises the General Education routes and most AS/A2 subjects are available through the medium of Welsh.

Vocational courses and apprenticeships have limited Welsh-medium or bilingual provision, leaving students in these pathways with fewer opportunities to study or train in Welsh. Employers and training providers may not always have the capacity to support Welsh-medium apprenticeships.

A shortage of qualified Welsh-speaking practitioners, particularly in STEM and vocational subjects, hampers the ability to offer a full range of post-16 courses in Welsh.

## **5. Equity of access**

- **Are some groups of learners disadvantaged by the current system (e.g. pupils from low-income households, learners with travel needs)?**

Some learners are disadvantaged by the current operating systems – the college has seen a significant increase in the number of young people who are accessing the financial contingency fund monies administered by the college on behalf of WG. Whilst there has been an increase in the weekly rate from £30 to £40 per because of recent public sector pay award settlements increasing numbers of students find themselves in households where the income is marginally above the specified threshold. Consideration should be given to increasing the household income threshold.

Currently, Local Authorities make independent decisions around travel support for post-16 learners. The variation between counties means young people in a single institution are often affected differently with some councils covering the cost of home to college travel and some not.

- **What support is available for learners to improve access (financial or otherwise)?**

The college works hard to ensure young people who are eligible for Student Finance Wales support get it. Young people who engage with the college pre-admission process are provided with advice and guidance and supported to make both Student Finance Wales applications and an application for the college financial contingency fund. Information is provided about home to college travel arrangements and its funding.

- **Is there any regional variation in the information and support provided about post-16 across Wales? Are there any particular challenges facing learners in rural areas?**

In rural areas, transport is a significant factor for many when deciding where to access post-16 education. Remote learning opportunities have attempted to address this issue.

- **Are there any other equality issues?**

As the allocation of funding for entry to Specialist Independent Colleges changes from Welsh Government to LAs there may be a period of uncertainty about application processes and the available funds to pay for fees. Some learners with more complex ALN may have their options restricted because of this.

Access varies significantly by location, with urban centres offering a greater variety of sectors and roles compared to rural areas where opportunities are often limited. Transport barriers in rural and economically deprived areas can restrict access, particularly for young people without their own means of travel.

Individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds may face additional barriers, such as a lack of awareness about opportunities or financial pressures to seek immediate full-time work instead of training-based roles or full-time education. The living costs associated with low apprenticeship wages can deter some individuals, especially those with dependents or housing needs.

Cultural biases towards academic routes in some communities, schools, and families can discourage young people from considering apprenticeships as a viable career option.

## **6. Post-16 destination data**

- **Is there sufficient post-16 destination data collected to understand trends and inform what education institutions deliver? If not, what data is required to fully understand the post-16 landscape?**

The effectiveness and accessibility of post-16 destination data in Wales have improved over recent years, but challenges remain in ensuring it is comprehensive, user-friendly, and consistently applied across all regions and institutions. Destination data is vital for understanding the pathways taken by young people after leaving school, sixth form, or further education, and for informing policy, improving careers guidance, and ensuring accountability in the education and training system.

## **7. Welsh Government's role**

- **How effective is the Welsh Government's approach to support participation in the full range of post-16 education and training options?**

Despite progress, vocational education and apprenticeships can still be undervalued compared to academic routes. The Government's efforts to promote parity of esteem are vital in addressing this imbalance.

Emerging industries (e.g., green energy, digital technology) require specialised skills. The Government's role in identifying skills gaps and funding relevant training is important.

- **Are learners, their families and schools aware of available Wales-wide support and programmes, such as the Young Person's Guarantee?**

Many families will not be aware of the Young Person's Guarantee (YPG) and how they can access it. However, Further Education colleges cover all the options featured under the YPG. It would be really helpful if the YPG website include Further Education Colleges as another option for studying Higher Education (not just universities). This is currently missing and would improve the HE participation rate in Wales.