



CYPE Committee - Routes into Post-16 Education & Training

Welsh Government Evidence Paper

24/03/2025

Overview

This paper provides a strategic overview of the Welsh Government's plans to increase participation in post-16 education.

The paper describes what we perceive to be the key issues we need to tackle in relation to post-16 participation, and what we are doing at each stage of the education system and beyond to encourage greater participation. It outlines how we are working with stakeholders and taking an evidence-based approach to addressing this challenge. The paper is built around the Welsh Government's strategic themes in relation to post-16 participation and sets out the actions and interventions we are putting in place around these themes, recognising that participation is a 'whole system' issue with co-dependencies across every part of the education system. Our three overarching themes in relation to participation are to:

1. reduce the number of young people who are Not in Education or Training (NET);
2. reduce inequalities in access and outcomes; and
3. increase the number of 16–24-year-olds with a level 3 qualification or higher.

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1. Introduction

The Welsh Government is committed to improving rates of post-16 participation. Both the Cabinet Secretary for Education and the Minister for Further and Higher Education are clear this is a top priority.

We are working in a new legislative landscape in Wales. The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (“TER Act 2022”) delivers a range of reforms – including establishing the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (now known as Medr). Medr became operational on 1 August 2024 and assumed the functions of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

Medr is the regulatory body responsible for the funding, oversight and regulation of post-16 education and research in Wales, encompassing further education, higher education, adult community learning and work-based education, apprenticeships, and local authority-maintained school sixth forms.

Given the breadth of Medr’s remit, and its role in dealing with all post-16 education as a single sector, the Act sets out eleven strategic duties under which Medr is required to exercise its functions, and one of these is to encourage increased, equitable participation in tertiary education.

The legislation also requires Welsh Ministers to publish a statement setting out their strategic priorities for post-16 education (along with research and innovation). In 2023, we published the ‘[Statement of strategic priorities for tertiary education and research and innovation](#)’, which detailed the key role Medr would play in ensuring pathways through post-16 education are clear.

Following its approval by Welsh Ministers, Medr has recently published its statutory strategic plan, which details the steps it intends to take to satisfy its strategic duties and address Ministerial priorities, including in relation to improved participation and clearer learner pathways. We will continue to work with Medr and stakeholders across the sector to make progress on this within the next 18 months.

A core ambition is to develop a holistic approach to tertiary education, better facilitating collaboration between further and higher education sectors in Wales, working with Medr and Qualifications Wales to ensure pathways are clearer and easier to navigate.

Improving participation in post-16 education requires a focus on the whole education system, including pre-16 education. We are investing an additional £96.5m (£70.2m resource and £26.3m capital) in the education system as a whole in 2025-26. This includes an additional £1.5m specifically for new interventions directly targeting participation.

Data and Evidence

High quality, reliable data is key to understanding participation trends and then tackling the challenges and opportunities, as well as the impact of interventions. There is limited robust evidence on the effectiveness of policy initiatives to increase participation, both in Wales, the UK and internationally. We have recognised this and have developed a ‘Participation in Tertiary Education Evidence Plan’ to strengthen our evidence base.

The evidence plan takes a multi-faceted approach, combining data linkage, social research and evidence reviews to triangulate available data and evidence. This will develop a shared understanding about learners' pathways through the education system, including the factors which impact their tertiary education choices and outcomes/destinations. As part of this, we are also analysing the effectiveness of interventions to raise participation with a view to developing new policies and approaches across the whole system, where the evidence of impact is clear.

Theme 1: To increase the number of 16–24-year-olds who are in full-time education, part-time education or training

The definitive source for NEET data in Wales is the annual statistical first release (SFR) [Participation of young people in education and the labour market](#), which uses a range of data sources to estimate the number and proportion of young people in education and the labour market. The latest annual SFR data was published in March 2025 and provisional data suggests the proportion of 16-18 year olds who were NEET decreased to 10.1% in 2023 (down from 12.3% in 2022, and 14.1% in 2021) yet increased for 19-24 year olds to 15.2% (up from 14.6% in 2022, yet lower than the 2021 rate of 16.9%). Participation specifically in education or training in 2023 was 73.2% for 16-18 year olds (a decrease from 73.7% in 2022), and 38.5% for 19-24 year olds (a slight increase from 38.4% in 2022).

When comparisons need to be made between UK nations, the [Annual Population Survey \(APS\) NEET data](#) is used. While this uses a harmonised UK methodology, it is important to note this is not the definitive source of NEET data for Wales. The latest APS data shows the NEET rate for 16- to 18-year-olds in Wales for the year ending September 2024 was 4.9% (down 3.3 percentage points over the year and 3.7 percentage points over 5 years) and the NEET rate for 19 to 24 year olds was 13.2% (down 3.2 percentage points over the year and 2.2 percentage points over 5 years).

Although we are committed to supporting young people holistically in their post-16 pathways, our 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. Challenges surrounding education and training are sufficiently broad and complex, therefore a refined scope will ensure clear objectives. The Welsh Government provides a range of employability support for young people as part of the Young Person's Guarantee.

We are already taking a number of important steps to address this including:

Attendance and Attainment

Increasing school attendance and attainment are at the core of the firm foundations that we are putting in place to improve standards and drive increased participation. We are investing an additional 8.8m across 2024-25 and 2025-26 to support school attendance through a package of interventions aimed at tackling disaffection, engaging families and supporting learners to attend education. We are also investing an additional £10m to support learning and attainment in literacy and numeracy, the building blocks of learning.

Our work on school attendance and attainment is vital in supporting learners on their journey through secondary school, GCSE's and on to level 3 qualifications including A levels and vocational qualifications.

We recognise that some learners face additional barriers at compulsory school age which prevent them from engaging in school and these can be a barrier to individual

learners choosing to progress confidently to next steps. These include unmet mental health needs, those with additional learning needs, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The Welsh Government is committed to creating an inclusive education system for all young people, regardless of their needs and background, to ensure they can access a high standard of education and reach their full potential.

Curriculum for Wales

The Curriculum for Wales is designed to support learners to make meaningful progress in their learning, deepening and broadening their knowledge and understanding, skills and capacities, and attributes and dispositions. The four purposes of the curriculum, and the integral skills that support them are central to preparing learners for careers and employment. These support learners to be resilient, creative and ambitious, requiring them to solve problems, engage with different information and work independently.

In addition, a school's curriculum should support learners to make informed decisions about their next steps beyond school, including by developing learners' understanding of the breadth of opportunities available to them, and providing experiences relating to work and careers.

The mandatory Statements of What Matters for the **Health and Well-Being** Area of Learning and Experience mean that all schools' curricula should support learners to make better and more informed decisions, including helping prepare learners to make decisions on their future pathways, and ultimately to support continued participation.

Careers and Work-Related Experiences (CWRE) is a fundamental part of developing skills for work and life and is an integral part of the Curriculum for Wales. It is a cross-cutting theme for learners from age 3-16 which supports a learner's journey through their decision-making around careers from an early age. The CWRE statutory guidance has been developed to support schools and settings (including Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) and non-PRU EOTAS) to realise this in practice. From the age of 3, CWRE should enable learners to "become increasingly aware of the range of opportunities available to them, broadening their horizons".

Collaboration with post-16 providers can also support the development and delivery of high-quality CWRE. The guidance makes clear the role that further and higher education institutions, and work-based learning providers, can play. The guidance also encourages collaboration with employers to realise effective CWRE.

Curriculum including 14-16 guidance and work on the 16-19 local curricula

Transitions at 16 and 19 are key points in the learner journey when young people are more likely to leave education. To understand this better, we have worked with the OECD to produce the 'What Shapes Pathways and Transitions? A Comparative Perspective on Learners' Trajectories through Upper Secondary Education in Wales'.

The report points out distinctive elements for Wales (and the UK system more widely).

The overarching aspiration in the report is that 'universal completion of upper secondary should be a policy aspiration for all systems'. Upper secondary, in our terms, is 14-19 learning so includes A levels and post 16 vocational qualifications.

We also asked Estyn to undertake a thematic review of Post-16 partnerships. In response to the findings of this report, Welsh Government published statutory guidance for

schools on 14-16 learning under the Curriculum for Wales in September 2024. Central to the guidance is the 14 to 16 Learner Entitlement: the learning that all learners in year 10 and 11 will benefit from under the Curriculum for Wales. Post-16 planning is one of the four main components of the Learner Entitlement. The Learner Entitlement makes clear that supporting their learners to make informed choices about next steps is one of the most important roles for schools in year 10 and 11.

Similarly, to support transition and progression – and by extension participation - from pre- to post-16 learning, we are developing a collaborative programme of work with Medr to clarify policy and expectations. This will build on the 14-16 learning guidance published in September 2024 and will include provision of statutory guidance to Medr for post-16 learning. We are also working with Medr to update local curriculum guidance which sets out the range of courses available to learners and how post-16 education providers should work together to maximise opportunities for young people. We will also be working with a wide range of stakeholders to strengthen alignment between 16-18 local curricula and Curriculum for Wales.

Careers Wales

Careers Wales is our national all-age careers information, advice, guidance and coaching service. They work with all secondary schools, special schools, Pupil Referral Units and colleges across Wales. In recognition of the importance of work-related experience, through the short-term Renew and Reform funding, between September 2022 and March 2024, Welsh Government provided an additional £517,000 to Careers Wales to deliver a Tailored Work Experience Programme. The aim of this was to help re-engage Key Stage 4 learners with their GCSE studies to support their future transition onto the next stage of their education or training. In 2024/25, Careers Wales received a further £250,000 to enable the project to continue on a smaller scale.

Junior Apprenticeships

The Junior Apprenticeship Programme is targeted at year 10 and year 11 learners who are disengaging from school and at risk of becoming NEET. Under the Programme, these learners attend college on a full-time basis and undertake a two-year programme of work-related education with work experience built in, alongside a large vocational Level 2 course that is equivalent to four or five GCSEs, in a range of different vocational pathways. Each apprentice also studies GCSEs in mathematics and English. The aim of the programme is to ensure learners are employable or ready to progress onto a higher-level vocational course or apprenticeship at the age of 16.

Estyn's [thematic review](#) of the Junior Apprenticeship Programme (2024) includes recommendations to consider further developing and extending the programme (it is currently offered by five colleges in Wales). The budget for Junior Apprenticeships has been increased by 50% to £600k for 2025/26, allowing more learners to benefit from this programme. Officials are working with Medr to scope further expansion of the programme.

There are also partnerships across Wales between schools and colleges that offer 14-16-year-old learners the opportunity to study for vocational qualifications in college, while continuing to undertake the majority of their learning in school. For example, Coleg Cambria's [School Links 14 – 16 Programme](#) provides opportunities for learners in

Wrexham, Flintshire and Denbighshire to study a range of courses including Animal Care, Construction, Engineering, Hair and Beauty, and Public Services.

Young Person's Guarantee

In November 2021 we launched the Young Person's Guarantee (YPG) to provide everyone between 16 and 24 in Wales with the offer of support to gain a place in education or training, gain an apprenticeship, find a job, or become self-employed. Since its launch, over 48,500 young people have been supported through our employability and skills programmes.

Delivery of the YPG is underpinned by a variety of employability, business and training support options, with the primary referral mechanism being provided by Working Wales, which offers free and impartial careers advice and guidance for those aged 16 or above.

The approaches taken are designed to be tailored to the young people and to support them in understanding the variety of progression routes available.

Family Engagement Officers

Work we are doing across the education system is important in supporting post-16 participation in education and training. We have the ambition for all schools in Wales to be Community Focused Schools which respond to the needs of their community, build strong partnerships with families and collaborate effectively with other services. A Family Engagement Officer (FEO) is a member of school staff who works closely with families and the community which the school serves. By using a trauma-informed way of working, they will have the skills and expertise in family facilitation to build the trusting relationships required to work with families and ultimately support participation.

In 2024/25 we invested £6.5m in increasing the number of family engagement officers employed by schools, with part of their role being focused on improving pupil attendance. In December 2024, we announced a further £1.5m to support this work in-year and plan to further increase this funding to £9.5m in 2025/26. We are also continuing to fund a trial of community focused schools' managers, who will work on developing better engagement between schools and their communities.

Youth Work and the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework

In 2024-25 Welsh Government allocated a total of £15.077m to youth engagement activity, including supporting and strengthening youth work provision and activity to support the Youth Engagement Progression Framework.

This includes funding via the Youth Support Grant (the Welsh Government's grant to support local authorities to work with their partners, including those in the voluntary sector, to help ensure the delivery of both open access and more targeted support for young people)- for the coordination of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework ("the Framework"). The purpose of the Framework is to ensure that 11- to 18-year-olds at risk of disengaging from learning, or who are at risk of youth homelessness, are identified and offered support. This includes work to ensure young people are allocated lead workers, to help them identify and overcome any barriers to progressing.

Lead workers, often drawn from Youth Services, are aware of which services are already working with young people and can negotiate with other support services and professionals and advocate on behalf of the young person, to help them progress. The Framework and the YPG both contribute towards the National Milestone of at least 90% of 16- to 24-year-olds being in education, employment, or training (EET) by 2050, though in different ways. The Framework is focussed on early identification and support whereas the YPG supports young people into education or training, provides help to get into work or to set up their own business.

Strengthening the Framework is a Programme for Government commitment, to ensure that, when young people finish school age education, more of them progress to a destination that is right for them.

2. Theme 2: To reduce inequalities in post-16 access and outcomes

Data analysis suggests that certain groups of learners are under-represented in certain post-compulsory education and training (PCET) settings and for particular types of provision.

Analysis by the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) found that learners from lower socio-economic and multiple deprivation backgrounds, as well as learners with Special Education Need status, had higher rates of vocational and work-based learning participation, and lower attainment rates. Inequities were less pronounced in higher education.

Analysis recently published by Medr shows the proportion of learners progressing to tertiary education from year 11 is persistently lower for learners eligible for free school meals. A higher proportion of females progress from year 11 to tertiary education than males and of learners that progressed to tertiary education in 2022/23, 71% of females studied at level 3 compared to 60% of males.

There are also inequalities in the system for those with additional learning needs who have lower rates of progression than those with no additional learning needs.

We recognise that we need to better understand and address inequities and the 'participation in Tertiary Education evidence plan' takes an equities lens, examining learner pathways data for different learner groups to build on the analysis conducted by the WCPP.

We nonetheless already have a range of programmes and interventions in place to address different elements, including:

Further Education Financial Support

The **Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)** is designed to remove financial barriers to study and contribute towards study materials, lunch and transport. As part of the evaluation of the scheme, around 2,500 EMA recipients were surveyed and 95% described EMA as fairly important or essential.

The EMA was uplifted to £40 per week in April 2023, in recognition of the rising cost of living. Wales provides the most generous weekly EMA rate in the UK and in the 2023/24 academic year, we provided EMA to over 16,000 post-16 learners studying full-time academic or vocational courses.

Earlier this year, we took the decision for the academic year starting in 2025, to increase the household income thresholds for learners' eligibility to open the scheme to approximately 3,500 more learners, addressing a recommendation of the evaluation.

The **Financial Contingency Fund** is targeted at learners who are experiencing financial hardship and provides help for eligible learners who might otherwise be unable to attend college. It can help with course-related costs such as childcare, transport, free

meals and equipment and learning materials. The FCF is targeted at those who need help with childcare costs; those on low income; and vulnerable learners, including carers, care leavers and those on probation. Colleges receive thousands of applications annually for FCF support, the bulk of these from young people aged 16-18. £6.88m was allocated for the FCF in the 2024-25 financial year. Medr is finalising the budget for 2025-26.

Higher Education Financial Support

The Welsh Government offers the most generous student living costs support for full-time undergraduates in the UK, with the highest levels of non-repayable grant support provided to those most in need. We provide living costs grants to support those who need it most. The highest levels of grant are targeted to those students from households with the lowest incomes. This grant system also means the average loan balance on entry into repayment for Welsh students remains, on average, lower than their English counterparts.

The Seren Academy

Central to The Seren Academy's mission of supporting our brightest learners into the best provision available is the creation of an inclusive environment, free of barriers to engagement.

To maximize our contribution towards the well-being objective of reducing educational inequalities and raising standards, and in alignment with Programme for Government Commitments, we are exploring ways to increase opportunities for more of our most able learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in Seren

To reduce inequalities to access the Seren Academy, over the next year we will conduct active research to enhance equity of opportunity, ensure fair access, and improve provision within Seren, prioritising the needs of learners at its core.

Learner travel

41% of 16- to 24-year-olds involved in the [Young Person's Guarantee National Conversation](#) identified transport as being the number one barrier to starting a new course, training or job.

Transport arrangements may differ according to the type of institution and across Wales resulting in competition between establishments and inequity of access to different education provision. The review of EMA (2024) found that some FE colleges provided free or subsidised transport (funded by the FCF) where others did not, creating an inequity in provision.

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport & North Wales has committed to hold a **summit on Learner Travel** and we will ensure the voices of FE institutions and learners are heard within this forum. He has also asked his officials to work with the Children's Commissioner for Wales on an engagement exercise with young people to explore fare options as part of our preparatory work for bus reform and development of an integrated transport network across Wales.

There are also measures in place to help young people with transport costs. The MyTravelPass scheme provides **all** 16–21-year-olds with discounted travel (up to 1/3 off) on service buses, as well as the numerous discounts available on the rail network.

The budget includes £15 million of funding across 2025/26 and 2026/27 for a 1-year pilot scheme aimed at making travel more affordable for young people across Wales. This initiative will allow 16–21-year-olds to make any journey on the public bus network for just £1, with unlimited day tickets available for £3.

Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

The current academic year is the second year that young people move from compulsory education to further education under the new ALN system. Provisional figures for 2024/25 from Medr show that 86% of learners with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or ALN provision progressed to tertiary education compared to 91% of learners with no SEN or ALN provision.

The recent [Estyn thematic review](#) found that overall, colleges reported that they are at varying stages in implementation of the ALN Act.

Nearly all the colleges they visited reported an increase in learners with ALN as well as mental health and anxiety-based difficulties since the pandemic.

We have increased overall funding for FE through Medr, who have a range of strategic duties to plan for and meet the needs of ALN learners. Medr has provided £16.9m in the current financial year to enable further education institutions to provide the support necessary for learners with ALN to access the learning that is right for them, enabling them to achieve their potential while receiving support that encourages learner independence.

Further Education and Higher Education Equalities Plans

All colleges and universities have Strategic Equalities Plans in place, which cover actions around anti-racism, LGBTQ+, disability, and gender. They work collaboratively to achieve commitments including promoting equity of access and equality of opportunity.

This includes the commitments in our [Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan](#) (ARWAP), covering equality of opportunity, widening learner participation, identifying equality gaps in attainment, and supporting inclusive practices and recruitment policies in the workforce.

The commitments in the [LGBTQ+ Action Plan](#), focus on all colleges and universities in Wales being LGBTQ+ inclusive environments for students and staff. A [Progress Report](#) on these commitments is published every six months.

Medr analyse the data and ways in which learning around equalities has taken place, for instance how the ARWAP and LGBTQ+ Action Plan commitments have been embedded in colleges and universities. They will also compile and share best practice to support the sector further.

Welsh Language

The provision of tertiary education through the medium of Welsh is one of Medr's strategic duties. Welsh Ministers have designated Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to advise Medr on fulfilling these duties. Medr is expected to collaborate constructively with Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and other stakeholders to ensure these duties are met. In August 2024, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and Medr published a memorandum of

understanding, detailing how the Coleg will advise Medr on its statutory duties to enhance Welsh-medium and bilingual provision in the tertiary sector.

Medr's Strategic Plan sets out some of their commitments in relation to the Welsh language. These include the development and implementation of a national plan to increase and improve the provision and promotion of Welsh-medium education and assessment in tertiary education, and a commitment to increase the recruitment and retention of Welsh-speaking staff.

The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol also has a specific role to work with colleges, higher education institutions and apprenticeship providers to increase capacity in the tertiary sector. This provision supports learners to develop their skills to use Welsh in the workplace and in their daily lives.

For 2024-25 the Coleg's budget was maintained at 2023-24 levels, with the Coleg receiving an additional £2.825m. The final budget for the next financial year (2025-26) includes an allocation of over ten million (£10.382m) for the Coleg, an increase of £0.494m compared to 2024-25. This additional funding will enable the Coleg to resume work to extend provision, by expanding its programme of development grants for further education colleges and apprenticeship providers.

Education Other Than At School (EOTAS)

Education other than at school (EOTAS) is provided by Local Authorities. As highlighted in the statutory [Curriculum for Wales EOTAS guidance](#), one of the key elements of EOTAS provision should be to "*support reintegration into and/or transition to mainstream or specialist provision and/or enable learners to progress towards further education, training or the world of work*".

The Curriculum for Wales has been developed to be accessible to all. The planning, design and implementation of a curriculum in PRUs and other EOTAS settings should provide a clear progression pathway to support each learner.

In 2022/23, the former Minister for Education and Welsh Language requested a [thematic report from Estyn on curriculum experiences for pupils attending EOTAS providers across Wales](#). This thematic review highlighted some good practice, particularly in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) to support pupils to transition into further education, training or employment.

Careers Wales have a team of careers advisers who support young people who are educated in a setting outside mainstream schools (EOTAS) or at home. They help ensure young people are aware of all their future pathway options. We provide specific funding to Careers Wales annually to enable Careers Wales to expand on their current offer of support and advice for home educated children and to improve the data available on the destination of home educated children. Careers Wales published a [report on pupils who were home educated](#) which shows the impact that careers guidance has on pupils with 82% of home educated students who received one on one careers advice continuing to positive destinations, compared to 54% for those who did not receive guidance.

Mental Health Support

The Welsh Government report on '*Learner Experiences in Post-16 Education*' published in December 2024 found that poor mental health was reported as a disruptor to education, with the most vulnerable learners, such as those with additional learning needs or care-experienced learners, being most affected. Over a third of respondents to the original survey indicated that their original education plans had changed due to the pandemic, with poor mental health a frequently cited reason for a change. We recognise that poor mental health can be a significant factor affecting learner participation at various stages of education, and in planning future education pathways.

The TER Act contains a package of new requirements for providers in respect of equality of opportunity, learner voice, learner complaints, and learner protections. These will help to deliver a tertiary education system which is centred on supporting the learner and has excellence, equality and engagement at its heart.

The TER Act requires Medr to develop a new registration and funding condition for learning providers, and we expect that this will create a common framework for mental health support across tertiary education, making it clear to students the baseline that they can expect from their providers in this area. This register is scheduled to be established in July 2026, with full implementation set for the academic year 2027/28.

The TER Act will require Medr to ensure that it is satisfied with the effectiveness of tertiary education providers' arrangements for supporting and promoting the welfare of its students and staff. Medr will be required to set out clear expectations for universities and colleges regarding their policies, services, and processes for supporting student and staff wellbeing, welfare, and safety. This will include arrangements for long-term monitoring and oversight of mental health and wellbeing in the sector.

In 2024-25, Medr allocated £4m funding to Further Education Institutions (FEIs) with £3.7m allocated directly to FEIs and £300k for FE national projects to build capacity in the sector. This £3.7m was allocated by Medr to the Further Education Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund. The purpose of the funding is to enable Further Education to build capacity to support learner and staff mental health and wellbeing. The funding can be used for activities that reflect institutions' individual priorities, based on policies and identified needs of learners and staff.

In 2024-25, Medr allocated £4m funding to support students in Higher Education: £2m to universities to support 2024-25 well-being and health strategy implementation plans; and £2m to universities (and directly funded providers of higher education) to well-being and health, including mental health and in support of student financial hardship.

Of the additional £2m in 2025/26 that has been allocated via Medr for well-being and mental health, Medr have proposed allocating this to several areas. These may include increasing and broadening suicide prevention and self-harm activity, and expanding mental health provision in HE and FE. Increasing the financial support that HE/FE is able to provide to students and learners is important, as financial support is often cited as a reason for non-continuation of study and impacting on mental health and well-being.

The Welsh Government's longer-term vision for mental health services and support across Wales will be set out in the strategies and delivery plans that the mental health teams are currently developing. We are using the findings from the recent consultation to inform the final versions which will be published in the new financial year. The strategies are based on a cross-Government and multi-agency approach and cover primary prevention, right through to specialist services.

Both strategies will build upon the cross-Government and cross-sectoral approach that we have developed through the current strategies. The strategies recognise the importance of developing a connected system where we recognise the impact areas such as education, housing, employment and finances can have on our mental wellbeing. They will be based on an all-age, person centred, rights-based approach with a focus on tackling mental health inequalities.

3. Theme 3: To increase the number of 16–24-year-olds with a level 3 qualification or higher

Statistics recently published by Medr show a recent decrease in the proportion of learners studying at level 3. Provisional figures show that the proportion of those progressing who went on to study at level 3 is 62%, and this number has gradually decreased since a peak of 68% in 2020/21 and 2021/22. The proportion of learners progressing to level 2 tertiary provision in 2024/25 is 17%, which is up six percentage points on 2020/21 and the highest proportion since 2017/18. We will seek to understand further the recent trends around qualification levels, however attainment at level 2 is a necessary precursor to increasing the number of 16–24-year-olds with a level 3 qualification. We have a range of interventions in place to build on this including:

GCSEs, VCSEs and Level 3 Qualifications

From September 2025, schools will be teaching the first wave of reformed, made-for-Wales GCSEs, that have been developed to align with Curriculum for Wales. An important principle which Qualifications Wales have applied when designing and approving the new GCSEs is that they must allow learners to develop a strong foundation of knowledge, skills and understanding which support progression to post-16 study, including A levels.

Qualifications Wales have recently asked WJEC to conduct a targeted review of approved AS and A levels in Wales to identify any inconsistencies with, or gaps in relation to, the new GCSEs and related qualifications. Where appropriate, WJEC will then amend the current AS and A level qualifications. This will help ensure that learners' transition from GCSEs to AS and A levels is as smooth and successful as possible.

From September 2027, schools will be able to deliver 15 new VCSEs (Vocational Certificates of Secondary Education). They will be available in a range of work-related subjects, enabling young people to learn about occupational areas through a practical approach to learning and assessment; and will span both Level 1 and Level 2, the same as GCSEs. As well as providing learners with an introduction to an employment sector, the new VCSEs will support participation by developing learners' knowledge, understanding and skills with an emphasis on practical-based approaches; promoting positive, engaging learning experiences; and facilitating progression into post-16 vocational study.

Our work on school attendance and attainment, discussed earlier in this paper, is vital to maintain the pipeline from secondary school, through GCSE's and on to A-levels or other level 3 qualifications. Similarly, the work with Medr on 16-19 local curricula will be an important feature of this work.

Vocational Qualifications

The Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales and the report on Transitions into Employment were published by the previous Minister for Education and the Welsh Language.

Taking forward the recommendations from these reviews remains a key priority for Welsh Government. Our aim in implementing the recommendations is to align with the wider participation agenda, including in relation to the 16-19 local curricula and work with Medr, Careers Wales, the UK Government and other stakeholders on skills priorities. The aim is to ensure clearer and more accessible pathways, with all learners being supported to access the learning that is best for them.

Work has commenced on the development of an implementation plan to take forward the recommendations from the Review of Vocational Qualifications and Transitions to Employment reports. We are engaging with our key strategic stakeholders including Medr, Qualifications Wales and, in particular Colegau Cymru over the coming weeks and months. Wider stakeholder engagement will follow.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships provide valuable skills and training, empowering individuals to build successful careers. They open doors to a wide variety of career pathways, allowing individuals to explore different industries and roles. Opportunities in Wales span from foundation to degree-level apprenticeships.

We continue to invest heavily in apprenticeships. This year, and in 2025-26 we are investing £144m in apprenticeships to ensure delivery of our 100,000 new apprenticeships target.

Apprentices gain work experience, learn new skills and gain a nationally recognised qualification while earning a wage.

The Welsh Government is working with Medr to ensure clear pathways and progression between apprenticeship levels and qualifications. Our aim is 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.

Routes into Higher Education

We remain committed to supporting young people into higher education where this is the chosen pathway for the learner. This is why we provide the most generous student support package of any UK nation to ensure that financial support is not a barrier.

Whilst the latest UCAS data for the 2025 cycle shows a slight decrease in the number of Welsh 18-year-olds applying to university for the 2025 cycle, the number remains higher than before the pandemic. We have seen a slight (4.5%) increase in the number of 18-year-olds applying from the most deprived areas, compared with the same point last year.

The data also shows the 18-year-old application rate for Welsh domiciles was 32% compared with 41.3% for English domiciles. However, this only reflects the number of 18-year-olds who apply through UCAS and so is only part of the picture. Wales has a higher proportion of mature and part-time students and the latest available data from HESA shows that in 2022/23, 36% of all Welsh students were studying part-time, compared with 23% of English students and 66% of Welsh students were aged 21 and above compared with 59% of English students.

Medr recently published a Welsh Higher Education Initial Participation (HEIP) measure: an estimate of the probability that a Welsh domiciled person will participate in HE by the

age of 30. These statistics are classified as Official Statistics in Development as the measure is still being developed and there are limitations to the methodology used. The HEIP measure in 2022/23 was 54.6%. This means that the estimated probability of a Welsh domiciled person participating in HE by the age of 30 is 54.6% based on the initial participation rates for each age from 17 to 30 in 2022/23. After a drop between 2016/17 and 2017/18, the HEIP measure increased every year from 2017/18 to 2020/21 reaching a high of 58.9%. From this peak in 2020/21 there has been a decline in the following two years down to the figure of 54.6% in 2022/23. The Covid-19 pandemic will have been a factor influencing the levels of participation in the most recent years.

We see increasing overall post-16 participation and increasing numbers of young people qualified to level 3 as an essential pre-requisite of increasing HE participation. This is a longer-term challenge, particularly with evidence suggesting increasing entry to post-16 education below level 3. That is why 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.

4. Welsh Government's role

The Welsh Government has a key strategic, leadership role in setting direction and emphasising the importance of improving rates of post-16 participation in education and training.

Welsh Government issued Medr with a Statement of Strategic Priorities in February 2024, which includes a focus on learner pathways and outcomes, high standards, collaboration and a diversity of tertiary education provision. This included an ask to intensify work on widening participation and to take steps to ensure a more equitable and excellent system for all.

The Medr Strategic Plan articulates a commitment to ensure that people from underrepresented groups and those with Additional Learning Needs are supported to access the learning that is right for them. More specifically, the Plan includes a long-term commitment to promote the benefits of learning throughout life and set targets to increase participation. The Welsh language is also a key focus of the Plan, including a commitment to encourage greater use of the Welsh language - increasing demand for and participation in learning and assessment through the medium of Welsh. We will work with Medr on the implementation of their strategic plan, and development of their operational plan, to ensure these values are fully embedded.

In collaboration with Medr, we will continue to take a more meaningful approach to establishing a culture of sustainable, creative social partnership working and collaboration across our further and higher education sectors. We have firm foundations in place on which to build and develop a culture where working in social partnership is the norm across further and higher education.

We continue to work closely with our providers to increase participation across the education system including within sixth forms, FE and HE. The workforce is key to that aim. Options for improving and supporting the current post-compulsory education and training initial teacher education framework are going to be considered by a high-level expert advisory board, due to be established shortly. We will be working closely with Medr on any potential forward work programme prompted by the work of that board, including any changes to the current framework, ensuring they are managed in a measured and collaborative way. This is part of wider considerations surrounding the continuous professional development of our valued workforce, recognising the diverse and distinct contributions they all make.

It is vital that the Welsh Government and Medr continue to work with the sector including Universities Wales, Colegau Cymru, the WLGGA, Qualifications Wales and the National Training Federation Wales, as well as others to ensure a joined-up approach across the sector to improve outcomes across the whole system and ensure all our learners reach their full potential through participation in high-quality learning that is best for them.