

Routes into post-16 education and training

Findings of stakeholder event & engagement visits

May 2025

During spring 2025 we held a stakeholder event and went on engagement visits to hear from front-line professionals, policy experts, learners and parents/guardians about issues relevant to post-16 education and training.

The stakeholder event was held on 22 January 2025. The event was hybrid (i.e. with both in-person and virtual participation). A full list of attendees is set out at annex A. Our engagement visits were held on Thursday 20 March. Some of the Committee visited Cardiff and the Vale College's Cardiff city centre campus. Others visited St Martin's Comprehensive School in Caerphilly.

The views set out in this report are those of the stakeholders with whom we spoke. They are unattributed to protect participants' anonymity. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Children, Young People and Education Committee. This report conveys the key points of the discussions that took place; it is not a verbatim record of discussion.



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1. Pre-16

The Curriculum for Wales

1. Various professionals across the post-16 sector told us that the Curriculum for Wales was flexible enough to facilitate discussions about issues like future careers and post-16 routes. One parent told us that their child was in a pilot school for the new curriculum and that they have since seen a difference in how the child engages with the world; they have built up skills that they wouldn't have done otherwise.
2. Some learners told us that they would have liked to try a wider range of subjects from the age of 14. They felt that working out what you want to do in the future depends on the opportunities you are given at school.
3. Other stakeholders went further, and argued that helping learners prepare for post-16 education and training should start in primary school. Some parents stressed that a longer transition time is particularly important for neuro-divergent learners. They said that the education system doesn't provide effective support for those children.
4. There was general agreement that there is a false dichotomy between academic and vocational education, and that the pre-16 school system needs to address this to avoid 'pigeonholing' children.

Qualifications

5. Some stakeholders agreed that the new curriculum is positive, but argued that as you introduce standardised assessments – like GCSEs – schools will inevitably default to more formal and prescriptive education. They felt that this goes against the ethos of the new curriculum.
6. Others told us that the new curriculum with revised qualifications should meet the needs of every learner, but that ultimately it was unrealistic to expect a single school to offer all of the available qualifications. Consequently, there is a need for collaboration between institutions to ensure that every young person can access what's right for them. This could take the form of a 'learner entitlement'.
7. We heard some significant concerns about the new vocational GCSEs (VCSEs), including that:

- there is a lack of capacity, expertise and facilities to teach them well at schools. One stakeholder told us that “vocational qualifications are all very well but how will they be delivered? Do we have the specialist teachers to teach construction in schools, for example?”;
- they may affect the junior apprenticeships programme, which some stakeholders told us was very effective;
- they may create a two-tier system if they are valued less than GCSEs; and
- it should be clear to learners that VCSEs are ‘tasters’ rather than a route into employment (i.e. they will not make you occupationally competent).

Junior Apprenticeships and other forms of alternative education

8. We heard that junior apprenticeships are an alternative form of education for children aged 14-16. They tend to be offered to young people who have struggled in a school setting: their attendance might be low, and they might have behavioural problems. For example, the Junior Apprenticeships programme at Cardiff and Vale College targets those most at risk of disengagement from school.

9. Cardiff and Vale College staff spoke with us about their Junior Apprenticeships programme. They explained that young people are given experience of high-quality vocational education in purpose-built facilities, often alongside older students (it was stressed to us that Junior Apprentices are always closely-supervised for safeguarding reasons).

10. We heard that learners on Junior Apprenticeship programmes tend to come out with level 1 qualifications and some GCSEs. Therefore, Junior Apprenticeships are not guaranteed stepping stones onto higher apprenticeship qualifications. Learners usually require a level 2 qualification to continue onto apprenticeship programmes. However, learners who complete the programme will usually have a guarantee of a place somewhere to continue their studies.

11. We saw internal raw data that suggested that Junior Apprenticeships have had significant successes in improving learners’ attendance and engagement with education. The overall course completion rates are very positive. We spoke to learners on a Junior Apprenticeship programme who were equally positive

about their experiences and the improvement in their engagement with education.

12. However, we also discovered that the cost of a Junior Apprenticeship is usually a lot more than a school-based education for the same period of time. At the moment, some funding is provided by the Welsh Government to cover the cost, but the bulk is borne by local authorities. This funding is in addition to the funding that is already provided to schools via local authorities for the child's school place. The significant additional costs associated with Junior Apprenticeships makes it difficult for local authorities to offer a Junior Apprenticeship to every child who may benefit from one.

13. Staff who support Junior Apprenticeship programmes also stressed to us that some learners who are not struggling with attendance or behaviour at school would also benefit from a Junior Apprenticeship. They felt that every young person should have the opportunity to experience vocational education and training, if they want to.

2. Transitions to post-16

Careers advice

Impartial careers advice and the role of Careers Wales

14. There was near universal agreement that learners need an impartial, learner-focused broker of high-quality and robust advice about post-16 options for learners and their families. Some education professionals and some learners felt that young people and their parents don't always understand the full options available to them, and that myths - such as that A-levels are necessary to go to university, or that 6th form is better than further education ("FE") - persist as a consequence.

15. Careers Wales professionals explained that Careers Wales offer an impartial careers advice service in Wales. They operate in every secondary school and Education Otherwise Than At School ("EOTAS") setting. They offer independent advice to young people and aim to give information on all options available to them. In general, they offer at least one careers advice appointment to every learner in years 10-11. They also provide teachers with up-to-date labour market information. Careers Wales say they ensure colleges are invited to post-16 open days to make sure that learners hear about all the options available to them.

16. Some professionals told us that Careers Wales has a support finder tool on their website, and free information targeted at different groups such as parents or learners with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). But we also heard that parents may not know this information exists.

17. However, we heard views that the role of Careers Wales has diminished due to reductions in funding. As a result, we heard it is only able to provide robust advice and guidance to specific learners (e.g. learners with ALN or learners who are at risk of disengagement with education) and that Careers Wales has moved some of their provision online. The general consensus was that the current funding model has inevitably affected Careers Wales and what it can do.

18. Some stakeholders representing further education told us that robust careers advice is not getting to some pupils who might really need it, even though they are doing well in school. It's just assumed that they're going on to do A-levels.

- 19.** We also heard that careers advice should prioritise support for young people who are struggling to get accepted on their preferred course. We heard that being rejected can be really difficult for learners, and it can knock their confidence.
- 20.** Others suggested that Careers Wales should directly engage with children and young people earlier. They currently hold meetings with most children during key stage 4, at which point many young people have already chosen their GCSE options by then and are already on their 'chosen' path. This was reinforced by some learners, who told us that their advice from Careers Wales was helpful in accessing information about future education choices and careers. However, many said that they had already decided what they wanted to do by that point.
- 21.** There were calls for better communication between all education partners, and for information to be provided in a form that is accessible for young people – for example, through social media influencers.

Careers advice in, and from, schools

- 22.** We heard from some stakeholders that teachers have the most impact on pupils' post-16 choices, alongside parents and peers. However, we were told regularly that the types of information available to learners differ in each local authority and are dependent on the post-16 provision available in the area.
- 23.** Almost every stakeholder we spoke to told us that competition for funding between post-16 institutions (the battle for 'bums on seats') means that the information provided to learners is not always as robust and unbiased as it could be. Many from across different post-16 institutions felt that this was particularly evident within schools that have 6th forms. We heard numerous reports indicating that some schools are not proactively ensuring that all of their pupils get access to information about FE and vocational routes, in particular. One stakeholder told us that some head teachers have openly said that they don't need to engage with FE. Others told us that schools with 6th forms attached to the school are more likely to assert to their learners that staying on in school is the best route to take, rather than giving other options (like moving to a FE college).
- 24.** FE professionals, in particular, regularly told us that whether or not they are welcomed into schools to talk to learners depends on their relationship with the school. For example, we heard anecdotal evidence saying that only one school in Neath Port Talbot will let FE colleges in to talk to learners. We also heard that

Bridgend Council approached Careers Wales to do a careers fair, but all schools with a 6th form attached initially refused to send learners.

25. We spoke to some learners who had been visited by FE colleges while they were at school to provide information about post-16 options. They told us that their school provided a good balance of advice about both vocational and academic choices. Staff had advised learners of the benefits in attending a FE college because of the greater access to technical equipment. The learners felt that, on balance, school staff had offered them objective advice.

26. However, we also heard that there is a general bias in schools towards academic courses and away from vocational routes. We heard that some teachers are seen to be quite 'institutionalised' in favour of learners staying at school, having taken an academic route themselves. This 'bias' can mean that the advice the learner receives may not be right for them. Some of the parents we spoke to agreed, telling us that young people can be funnelled down academic routes in school, whether or not the 6th form route is right for them.

27. Others raised concerns about the extent to which school staff have the expertise and capacity to provide high-quality careers advice to learners. They stressed that it is important to understand the long-term pathways to careers, rather than just the immediate next steps. They felt that some schools struggle to understand that longer-term view.

28. Some stakeholders from FE institutions fed back that in areas of the country where there is a so-called 'tertiary' model (i.e., a model whereby all learners progress from year 11 in schools to colleges, whether as part of a vocational/academic/mixed route) the support for young people is better because there is no competition between schools and colleges.

29. Overall, stakeholders agreed that it should be in schools' interest to collaborate with FE institutions to improve the quality of post-16 guidance and advice. There was a consensus that competition reduces collaboration, which in turn can affect quality and impartiality of the support and advice offered. Some advocated introducing a statutory learner entitlement, which should ensure consistent post-16 advice across schools' curricula to bring equity and balance across Wales.

30. We heard the following calls for changes to improve how careers advice across schools:

- Some learners told us that they wanted more information about the choices available to them. They called for less dependency on schools, or even on the persistence of individual learners and their parents, to get a full picture of what post-16 options are available.
- Some professionals argued in favour of an entirely tertiary education model, which they argued would entirely remove the element of competition that can hamper effective careers advice within schools. One individual pointed us towards Merthyr Tydfil, claiming that outcomes for children at Key Stage 4 had improved since the 6th forms were closed.
- Others urged Estyn to take action to ensure advice and guidance are given on an unbiased basis. However, we heard that although Estyn considers the quality and completeness of post-16 advice, that information might get lost within the overall inspection report for a school.
- We heard that the UK Government has aimed to counter the challenges surrounding access to schools in England via the so-called 'Baker Clause'. The Baker Clause is a statutory requirement for all schools to share information about learners' post-16 options in a unbiased way. There is no similar legislative duty in Wales. However, we also heard that many schools do not comply with the Baker Clause, so it has not led to consistent, meaningful change.
- One professional called for a national school-age communication strategy to set our clearly national expectations for careers advice across schools.

Parents

31. We heard consistently that parents play a critical role in the overall package of post-16 advice and guidance that young people receive. Some even stressed to us that the most important thing is to ensure that parents – rather than schools – provide high quality advice to young people.

32. However, we were told that parents often don't know about the whole range of options to their children. We also heard that many parents still see A-levels as the 'gold standard', and there are lots of misconceptions about FE. Consequently, a lot of parents are inadvertently pushing children in a direction that may not be right for the child.

33. We also heard that it is very difficult for parents to stay abreast of all the options available to young people. Some education professionals felt that this is because it can be hard to get parents into the school to find out more about their children's post-16 options.

34. Some stakeholders advocated providing high-quality information to the whole family, not just the learner. This case was made particularly strongly in relation to families of learners with ALN, and/or for parents who may themselves have ALN. There may be a "hidden range of options" suitable for learners who are neurodiverse.

Peers

35. We also heard from both stakeholders and learners that peers have a significant impact on young people's post-16 choices. A lot of learners want to go to 6th form because that's where their friends are going. Even if they have been well-informed about other options they can be adamant that they want to stay with their friends.

36. We heard from some people that peer role models would be helpful, particularly for learners who are neurodiverse.

Employers

37. Some stakeholders felt that employers should engage better with schools. We heard of some examples of good practice, like the Cardiff Commitment, which some professionals reported to be very effective.

38. But generally we heard that there isn't a real, impartial way that parents and young people can find out directly from employers about the range of professional opportunities available to them.

Other sources of careers advice

39. We heard that there should be more resources that are accessible to learners who do not attend a mainstream school in towns/cities (such as those in rural areas, learners who attend an EOTAS setting or learners who are home-educated) with a potential role for online activities.

40. Some professionals argued that youth workers need more training and support working alongside careers workers.

Work experience

- 41.** Stakeholders explained to us that the responsibility for organising work experience fell on Careers Wales until 2015, at which point the funding was withdrawn. Since then the responsibility for the administration of work experience and associated paperwork and safeguards now sits with schools and local authorities.
- 42.** However, we heard consistently that they don't have the capacity to organise it for every child. Consequently, there is relatively little work experience available to learners. There are only very targeted pilots supported by specific, time-bound funding, such as the Inspire programme, which provides work experience to children in Year 11 who are Not in Education, Employment or Training ("NEET") or at risk of disengaging with education. Ultimately, we heard that, for most pupils, whether or not work experience is available is down either to the hard work of individual staff in that particular school, or to the capacity of the learner themselves or their family to arrange something for them. For example, some 6th form students we spoke to told us that they had arranged work experience themselves in areas of their own interest. Others said they found alternate routes to gaining experience such as through the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme.
- 43.** The learners we spoke to generally agreed that all pupils would benefit from work experience. The professionals we asked generally agreed that work experiences are really beneficial. We also heard that often children who you might expect to struggle during work experience tend to get the most out of it.
- 44.** One professional suggested that funding should be provided to schools to employ work experience champions, whose responsibility would be to organise appropriate work experience that meets the needs of the learners.
- 45.** However, some stakeholders felt that, ultimately, schools cannot be expected to be able to organise work experience for everyone. It takes too long to identify placement opportunities, vet the employers, put the necessary insurance in place, etc. We heard some calls for Careers Wales to be made responsible for facilitating work experience placements once again, with additional funding to enable them to do so.
- 46.** Others told us that, from the point of view of an employer, hosting work experience can be difficult, and an extra pressure on businesses. It is easier to

find work experience in some areas, such as hospitality, than in others. It can also be difficult to find willing employers in more rural areas.

Barriers to post-16 education and training

Competition and funding pressures

47. We heard some stark views from stakeholders about the extent to which the post-16 sector is meeting the needs of learners. Some told us that we need to question how competition and pressure on funding is distorting the quality of advice and options available to learners. Professionals representing all of the post-16 sectors were in general agreement that they need to work together to cut down barriers between schools, colleges, and universities for the benefit of learners.

48. Some stakeholders argued that the post-16 sector needs to be incentivised to work collaboratively, in the learners' best interests. We heard that colleges and schools take pride in their learners' destinations, and celebrating that success might be a way to encourage institutions to work effectively together.

49. Some professionals argued in favour of a coherent and holistic post-16 education strategy, rather than breaking down different post-16 sectors. They told us that the strategy should be a cohesive overview of post-16 education that addressed challenges like financial sustainability. We heard that the strategy should be underpinned by a clear communications strategy and a strong independent advice and guidance offer for learners and their families. The stakeholders stressed that learners – not post-16 institutions – should be right at the centre of the strategy.

Travel

50. We heard frequently that the cost or availability of travel can be a reason why learners choose one post-16 option over another, or even why some learners do not engage in post-16 education and training at all.

51. Some of the learners we spoke to agreed. They told us that transport to FE colleges was a barrier to attending FE. Many of these students lived within a reasonable distance of the school or had good transport links. Others told us that the unreliability of public transport often means that you are late for college. Some young people even raised concerns about the reliability of the dedicated transport provided to learners by some colleges.

52. Stakeholders regularly raised concerns about the variation between local authorities in how much transport support is provided to learners, and the negative impact a lack of support can have in encouraging children to continue their education.

53. We also heard that learners attending some colleges struggle less with travel issues than learners attending others. For example, Cardiff and Vale College is a large college, and is situated in areas that benefit from relatively good transport links. Other colleges, for example in west Wales, are more isolated. Those colleges often do not benefit from the same economic of scale that benefit Cardiff and Vale College, for example, which makes it more challenging to help learners with travel. Some stakeholders felt that rural areas are disproportionately impacted by transport issues, and that funding formulas should better reflect those challenges.

54. Some stakeholders argued for a subsidy or free transport for all learners. They argued that access to transport should form part of a wider learner entitlement.

55. However others felt that, even if the cost of transport were reduced, it still wouldn't solve the problem. They told us that in some areas, particularly rural areas, learners are unable to get to college on time as the local service does not start early enough. This affects the choice of location and access to courses and choices of appropriate apprenticeships.

56. Others highlighted that some children have specific transport needs that should be accommodated, too. Learners with ALN and asylum seeking children were highlighted to us as groups of children who may struggle with the 'standard' transport available to young people.

Poverty

57. Some stakeholders argued that poverty and other systemic barriers can affect education and training post-16. We also heard that standards of learners entering college have fallen with an increasing number of learners going in at entry level rather than Level 3, particularly in areas of deprivation. Others told us that applying for free school meals can be difficult for some parents at the end of compulsory school age, which can also put young people off post-16 education.

58. One stakeholder told us that sometimes family circumstances can have a big impact on a young person's post-16 choices. They gave an example of an academically successful student (Year 11 leaver) who wants to do an

apprenticeship, which comes with a £16k income. However, his mother has stopped him doing it as she will lose her benefits.

Provision through the medium of Welsh

59. We heard that there are barriers to accessing vocational education post-16 through the medium of Welsh. One learner we spoke to who was studying at a college called for improved Welsh provision post-16, and for more support for learners who had gone to Welsh-language schools to adjust to English-speaking environments if Welsh-language provision isn't available. Generally, professionals from different post-16 sectors acknowledged that there aren't always vocational offers through the medium of Welsh.

Other barriers

Ambition for learners

60. We heard that some young people are battling against poor literacy and numeracy levels. Some of these young people may struggle to make future career choices.

61. Others told us that sometimes school staff aren't ambitious enough for learners with ALN, who can often go on to be very successful post-16 with the right support.

Lack of transition time

62. Different groups of stakeholders spoke to us about the important of giving robust support to learners with additional needs, such as transition days to support children to adjust to post-16 education and training. Some college professionals agreed, calling for early access to information from schools about learners with ALN.

Reaching home educated children

63. Some professionals told us that learners who are electively home educated may not always be supported as well as they should, because there is no direct route for professionals to access them to talk about their post-16 options.

3. Provision for 16-18 year olds

Data

64. We heard frequently that there needs to be data that follows learners throughout their post-16 journey to understand where the challenges are in the system. Some professionals felt that we need to know more than just why people aren't going to university – the data needs to track them over the long term.

65. In addition to its published data, we learnt from some professionals that Careers Wales collects more detailed destination data, which is shared with schools locally.

Academic routes

66. We heard concern from many stakeholders, particularly those representing higher education (“HE”), about the drop in the proportion of learners who are choosing to study A-levels (33% of learners in Wales study A-levels, compared to 47% in England¹). Some professionals told us that the proportion of learners from deprived backgrounds doing A-levels is particularly concerning.

67. Some argued strongly that fewer people studying A-levels compared to Scotland, England, and Northern Ireland is not good for learners' prospects, or for the wider economy. We heard from some stakeholders that, in their view, there is a general perception across learners in Wales that academic education in England is better than in Wales, which is damaging. They argued that we need to find innovative ways to engage with pupils to ensure that they achieve their potential.

68. Some stakeholders, predominantly representing HE institutions, argued in favour of a target for A-level entrants. They reflected on the high profile that apprenticeships have been given with targets, and suggested that a similar push for A-levels would be beneficial.

69. Others, primarily from the further education (“FE”) sector, expressed concerns about a target for A-level entrance. They felt that a target might inappropriately push some children into academic education.

¹ [Letter from Universities Wales to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#), 6 March 2025

70. Some professionals lamented the decreased funding for widening access programs, previously disseminated through the then Higher Education Funding Council Wales (“HEFCW”), which they felt has had an impact on A-level entrant rates.

71. Some professionals working in FE told us that data across Wales suggests that there are significant numbers of dropouts from A-level in favour of vocational pathways.

72. University professionals told us that there are myths around A-levels and university – such as that they are for middle-class children, or only for children who do very well at GCSE - which are problematic for how people progress into HE. They argued that educational aspirations are often determined when children are much younger than 16, and we need to fundamentally change that to address what they perceive to be a problem in tertiary education participation.

Vocational routes

73. Many stakeholders stressed to us that there is a problem with parity of esteem between pupils studying vocational routes and those who are taking academic routes. The majority of professionals we spoke to stressed the value of vocational education for young people – including for learners who also enjoy academic learning, too. We repeatedly heard that vocational education should not be viewed as “just for ‘naughty’ children”.

74. However, some stakeholders working in vocational post-16 education told us that many pupils arrive at college feeling like failures because they have struggled with academic education. They stressed that struggling with academic education does not mean that a young person is a failure, and the propagation of that myth should be challenged. They argued that many of the same learners who have been made to feel like a failure will go on to have successful careers in industry.

75. We also heard that some learners want to get out of school as early as possible, because they’ve struggled with the school environment. Some of the learners we spoke to who had decided not to stay on into their schools’ 6th forms told us that they wanted to study in college because they were ready to start a ‘new chapter’ in their life.

76. During our discussions with stakeholders and on our visits, we heard that some 6th forms offer vocational qualifications alongside A-levels (in a similar way to how schools will offer VCSEs alongside GCSEs). However, we also heard

concern from some professionals about how those school-based vocational qualifications will be delivered. Specifically, we heard doubt over whether there are the specialist teachers and facilities to deliver high-quality vocational education in schools.

Work-based learning

77. We heard from college professionals there are lots of high paid, quality roles at the end of apprenticeship pathways. But talented learners need to access those pathways. They called for more investment in apprenticeships and support from schools to encourage any learner who might benefit to consider an apprenticeship. We heard regularly that there should be a recognition that it is OK for academically strong learners to undertake apprenticeships. They should be celebrated.

78. However, we heard that the availability of apprenticeships depends on the area of Wales. There is significant economic and geographical variation across Wales. Some felt that it's fundamentally easier to access apprenticeships in Cardiff, for example, than in other areas. Others argued that there is a general lack of apprenticeship opportunities, including in Cardiff. Professionals told us that if they struggle to find them, learners and their families will inevitably struggle to find them too. One stakeholder told us that young people are looking for apprenticeships at Hinckley Point because there are no options nearer home, which means moving out of Wales.

79. Some told us that the minimum requirements for maths and English for some apprenticeships can put learners off. They explained that this can be frustrating because some employers report that they do not even need the minimum requirements, especially for maths.

80. Some professionals told us that, from a employers perspective, it is not always attractive to offer apprenticeships. It costs them time and money to train, and many can't afford to do so. Others agreed that there should be greater business involvement to make apprenticeships more attractive, because many young people are eager to get out into the community and start their careers.

81. Some professionals told us that, ultimately, qualifications should be aligned with skills. They argued that there is little experience in schools working with Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics ("STEM"), robotics, etc.

Institution-specific issues

Sixth forms

82. We heard consistently that many 6th forms are struggling to remain financially sustainable. Class sizes are often very small, and some schools have had to stop teaching some A-level subjects. We heard from some professionals that, effectively, 6th forms are being subsidised by general school funding. Many felt that the funding challenge facing rural 6th forms is even more acute, and consequently the offer for learners is even more limited than elsewhere. We heard that small schools with 6th forms are particularly vulnerable.

83. We heard that some 6th forms offer vocational qualifications too, as well as A-levels. Consequently, staying in a school 6th form could give a learner access to both academic and vocational routes.

84. For many stakeholders, it is important to ensure that 6th forms remain viable. Some of the students we spoke to shared similar views. Some told us that they had decided to study in 6th form, rather than college, because it would be an easier transition as they were comfortable in the environment, knew the teachers and liked smaller classes. They also felt that the school's timetable allowed greater freedom with more time for revision and extra-curricular activities.

Colleges

85. Some school-based professionals told us that some students initially choose to study at a college, but struggle to settle in, and ultimately return to 6th form.

Young people not in work, education or training (“NEETS”) at 16-18

86. We heard some positive feedback about the downward trend in the number of young people who are NEET in Wales. However, others told us that they have noticed that more learners are becoming disengaged from school at years 9 and 10.

87. One stakeholder told us about the ‘Inspire’ programme, which targeted children in Year 11 who were considered at risk of becoming NEET. They reported that many of the children who you would expect to struggle engaged really well in the programme.

88. We heard from stakeholders about various push factors that lead to young people disengaging after age 16, including: long-term consequences of COVID, a lack of resilience, travel challenges, difficult timetables, poor mental health, and a desire to be working and earning money. We heard that it is a big jump from GCSE to A-level, and many young people have external pressures like caring responsibilities.

Compulsory education to 18

89. Some professionals representing the higher education (“HE”) sector argued in favour of compulsory education to 18, similar to the law in England. They felt this would improve participation in post-16 education, and reduce the number of young people who are NEET.

4. Transitions to post-18

Careers advice

90. Some learners who were now engaged in post-16 education told us that year 11 was an appropriate time to have careers advice. Most of these learners wanted to attend university. They felt that their choices were largely based on the subjects that they enjoyed, personal interests and their life experiences.

91. Some 6th form students told us that some universities proactively engage with learners to talk about their post-18 futures while they are in 6th form. Others told us that they had gone to a UCAS fair to help them make decisions about post-18 education and training, which they felt was very helpful.

92. However, some university representatives reported that access to students in schools and colleges isn't always good, and barriers have worsened in recent years. They felt that the curriculum is overburdened, and consequently teachers don't feel they can create spaces in timetables for universities to engage with prospective students.

93. Some of our stakeholders told us that there is an increasing need for tailored careers advice for learners in years 12 and 13 who are not going on to university and who are deferring or changing their minds about HE. They said that this trend should be looked at in its broadest sense as there are a range of issues that impact learner choice.

94. Other stakeholders – primarily from non-HE sectors – told us that there is an assumption that young people who achieve well at school should go on to university. However, they also said that university isn't for everyone, no matter what your grades. They argued in favour of being learner-centred, and focusing on the long-term needs of the individual. They added that Medr has a role to promote learner-centred careers advice, and to bring the various post-16 sectors together for the interests of the individual.

95. We were told that the school system doesn't make it clear to young people that they can get into university without 5 GCSEs (for example by going down a BTEC route). Similarly, we heard that we should not assume that higher FE numbers lead to lower HE participation.

96. One professional told us that young people at older ages need career advice, too. They reported that Careers Wales are seeing a lot of young people coming to them seeking careers advice after getting a degree.

97. Some stakeholders raised the Welsh Government's Seren programme. They told us that the programme, which they felt aims to increase applicants from Wales going to Oxbridge, has partially succeeded, but that there is still nowhere near 5% of the population attending.

Barriers to post-18 education and training

Financial barriers

98. Of the year 11 and 6th form students who spoke to us who were considering university, none were deterred by the associated costs.

99. However, other professionals reported that many children and their families *are* deterred by concerns about debt.

100. Some stakeholders told us that apprenticeships are more appealing now because some learners see them as a more direct route out of poverty.

101. One professional spoke about data trends in one area of Wales, which showed that learners who took a gap year after A-levels during which time they worked, often don't take up university places after that. The professional suggested that the experience of earning money, combined with the impression that university puts you in debt and the cost of living, pushes young people away from university.

102. Many professionals suggested that the understanding and awareness of student finance in Wales is low. It was pointed out to us on many occasions that Wales has the most generous support system but the lowest levels of university participation in the UK. Some argued that young people need to be taught that the cost of university is paid back over a very long time based on their income, so arguably it is actually more like a personal tax than a debt. They stressed that unbiased advice around that is needed.

Impact of the pandemic

103. Some professionals working with young people told us that, because of the pandemic, 6th formers are 'younger' and are less independent.

5. Post-18 provision

Data

104. Some stakeholders stressed that we need to understand better why people aren't going to university. They argued that better data is needed to better understand provision and what young people are doing, the advice being offered and outcomes.

Higher education

Universities

105. We heard considerable concern, particularly from representatives of the HE sector, about participation levels in HE in the years following leaving compulsory education. Some professionals told us that Welsh universities are filling the gap of home students by recruiting more English domiciled students.

106. We also heard that a significant number of Welsh-domiciled students go to England and a perception they tend to stay in England, whereas those coming from England to Wales to university tend to go back to England after studying as there are more job opportunities. They argued that the consequence of that is a 'brain-drain' leaving Wales, and that there needs to be opportunities in Wales to encourage them to return.

107. Some professionals told us that destination trends have regional, urban and rural dimensions. They set out that that HE participation is actually higher among young people from rural areas than urban areas. Some young people don't want to leave their own town. They told us that it would be beneficial for Careers Wales to share any data they have on this.

108. Some university professionals felt that the Seren programme effectively incentivises Welsh students to study outside Wales. They told us that this doesn't help Wales' own institutions. There told us that there is a 'double whammy effect', simultaneously sending the message that HE is only for the elite and encouraging Welsh learners to go to England. We heard a view that there is general support amongst university staff for a refocusing of the Seren programme.

109. Some other reasons for lower HE participation in the years following leaving compulsory education that we heard included:

- Covid and a perception of the reduced emotional resilience of young people generally.
- The attractiveness of earning money via employment.

Degree apprenticeships

110. Some stakeholders told us their view that Wales is 'behind England' in terms of degree apprenticeship provision, but that that gives us a chance to learn from what went well and what did not go well in England, particularly how we can encourage take-up.

Annex A: List of stakeholder event attendees

22 January 2025

Organisation	Name(s)
Colegau Cymru	Aled Jones-Griffith Andrew Cornish ? Kathryn Robson ? Yana Williams Sharon James-Evans David Hagendyk
Universities Wales	Prof Jon Timmis Marian Wyn Jones Prof Elwen Evans Gwen Williams
Local Authorities	Elfed Morris Chris Millis ? Sharon Davies
Parents voices in Wales	Deb Austin Ceri Reed Karen Berell
Careers Wales	Toni-Jo Stables ? Bobbie Doward Joanne Page ? Linda J Thomas Sioned Balbini

Annex B: Committee engagement visits

20 March 2025

Date	Host organisation/event	Summary of engagement activity
20 March 2025	St Martin's School, Caerphilly	To talk to school staff and learners about post-16 education and training. To visit a school 6 th form.
20 March 2025	Cardiff and Vale College, Cardiff City Centre campus	To talk to college staff and learners about post-16 education and training. To visit a Junior Apprenticeship provider. To visit a further education institution.