

Evidence from South West and Mid Wales Education Institutions

The following 4 Further Education Colleges operate SW and Mid Wales and have a single representative on the RLSP Board:

- Coleg Sir Gar and Coleg Ceredigion
- Grwp NPTC
- Pembrokeshire College
- Gower College Swansea

The attached response reflects the joint and shared views of the regional group of Further Education Colleges above. These responses are in relation to arrangements in the South West and Mid Wales region as we are unable to give detailed comments on other regions partnership arrangements.

1. In recent years, the SW and Mid Wales RLSP (RSP) has carried out less direct research as a result of reduced funding for this work. However, the RSP still has access to a wide range of employers of all sizes and has carried out an annual “demand” assessment across this employer “base”, although clearly the results of this assessment are based only on the responses that are received.

In recognising this potential deficit, all Further Education Colleges use economic and labour market analytical tools such as EMSI to help plan the curriculum that they offer.

2. Most roles on the RSP Board are representative roles, including 8 employer representatives of specific industry “cluster” groups, as well as representatives from across the education sector, including local authorities (representing the school sixth forms), further education, work based learning and higher education.

As such, the views of education providers are not only heard, but taken account of in the Board’s discussions and considerations.

There is a particular challenge for the SW and Mid Wales RLSPs that it covers a very wide geographic area – from Port Talbot across to

Pembrokeshire and up to the top of Mid Wales – and therefore it is difficult for all areas to have effective representation.

3. The RSP has the lead role for delivering one of the 11 SW Wales City Deal projects, being the Skills and Talent initiative, and in doing so, supporting the other 10 projects as well as supporting the Growing Mid Wales Growth Deal.
4. (5,7) The challenge here is that in view of their set-up, RSPs are “representative”, and for that reason, any analysis of skills needs is always going to be at least a little selective and heavily dependent on such factors as eg the make-up of the cluster groups, the attendance at meetings, the responses to surveys, as well as the employers who “shout the loudest”. Indeed often we can get distorted views where the sectors views are not properly represented around the table.

One example of this ‘deficit’ would be the visitor economy (catering, hospitality, leisure and tourism) where there are skills gaps which have not been highlighted as these as these employers are generally under-represented.

6. RSPs are sufficiently resourced to co-ordinate meetings and prepare the annual Employment and Skills Plan. However, there would be a benefit in having a centrally co-ordinated labour market assessment across all sectors and across the region, but this would require some additional resource.
8. Currently, the level of changes required by Welsh Government in terms of increases/decreases in required enrolment numbers is generally very small and can cause challenges. For example, if we have to reduce our enrolment numbers on any particular course by say 6 students, that simply means that we have to run a smaller class and as such, this does not generate any savings to offset the reduction in income.

However, it is also difficult in the short term to reduce numbers in one curriculum area e.g. hairdressing by say 40 students, and to increase another area e.g. engineering by the same number – as we are unlikely to be able to retrain the hairdressing lecturers to become engineering lecturers and therefore would effectively have to make staff redundant.

9. With many of our students arriving at College with often minimal GCSEs – particularly in English or Mathematics – remedial work is often needed at Levels 1 or 2 to develop basic skills. Therefore, with a focus on higher level skills – for reasons that we understand – there is a risk that we may have to

reduce the number of lower level courses which may e.g. increase the level of potential NEETs in the system.

10. There are plenty of examples of changes to planned curriculum within the Further Education and Work Based Learning sectors, although the changes to the numbers of students enrolled on these programmes are still relatively small.

However to date there have been very few changes in e.g. the school sector and we would question whether there has been effective communication with parents and – if not – maybe this is an additional role that RLSPs could play?

11. The Further Education sector has engaged very positively with the RSP and has used the available funding (provided by the Welsh Government) through e.g. the Skills Priorities Programme and the Skills Development Fund, to develop and then “pilot” initial delivery of new programmes that respond to the needs identified by the RSP.

Indeed the 4 Colleges are committed to working in partnership particularly in relation to joint planning and within the context of a shrinking public sector purse. However there are inherent challenges due to the fact that we operate across a large geographic area which has a very varied economic infrastructure.

12. At the current time, the changes to proposed curriculum need to equally apply to both schools – pre 16 and particularly 6th forms in terms of A Level options - and higher education, as to date, it has only impacted on FE and WBL. It simply doesn't make sense not to include all areas of provision and not just those who are more acceptive of the proposals.