

# Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill

Note of virtual roundtable discussions held by the CYPE Committee on 1 October 2020

As part of Stage 1 scrutiny of the Curriculum and Assessment Wales Bill Members wanted to explore **how the legislation would impact on specific groups of people**.

In light of the public health situation, the Committee undertook this work in four one-hour long **virtual roundtable discussions**. These discussions took place on 1 October 2020 on Microsoft Teams.

The roundtables were facilitated by Members. Eight to ten representatives of the following groups participated in each roundtable discussion: **children and young people; parents and carers; higher education, further education, and adult learning; and employers / employability**.

This note has been prepared with the permission of all those who participated. It summarises the **key themes arising in each discussion**. Its purpose is to inform the Committee's consideration of evidence on the Bill, and its final report and recommendations. In order to maintain the privacy of those with whom Members spoke, **comments have not been attributed to individuals**.

The Committee would like to **thank** all the children, young people, parents, carers, HE, FE, lifelong learning and employer representatives who enabled these roundtables to take place and gave their time to help Members with this work. A list of organisations who supported the Committee to arrange participants to speak from each of these perspectives is attached as an Annex to this note.



# 1. Discussion with children and young people

Members in attendance: Siân Gwenllian MS and Laura Anne Jones MS

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## How well the curriculum prepares young people for adult life

- Children and young people are **not taught what they need**. We are taught for exams rather than skills for life.
- The current curriculum is too academically oriented. Children and young people are all different and schools need to nurture those individual needs. There **needs to be more emphasis on vocational interest and trade skills**.
- There are **some really good elements of the current curriculum** but there are also some large gaps. The curriculum needs to give young people the skills and knowledge to apply to all sorts of areas.
- There are **major gaps in the current curriculum around life skills**. We learn some aspects of running a business through the Welsh Baccalaureate but would like to learn about managing taxes etc.
- Young people **need to leave school ready for adult life** and the workplace.
- Schools often do not know how to deal with pupils' **mental health**.
- We learn about the promotion of good health but we **do not learn enough about mental health problems and specific conditions**, such as ADHD. This increases stigma of such conditions and a lack of awareness which can lead to bullying etc.
- The current curriculum does not facilitate the involvement of specialists – not just in mental health but other subjects such as business. It should not be all down to the teachers – **outside expertise should be used and a collaborative approach adopted**. The third sector should be involved to teach about a much wider range of topics and skills.

## What children and young people want to learn about in school

- The purposes of the new curriculum look great but we **need the opportunity to acquire life skills** such as financial literacy and political citizenship.

- Relationships and Sexuality Education (**RSE**) and Religion, Values and Ethics (**RVE**) are the **best features** of the new curriculum – schools are currently lacking in this. However, given parents will have no right to withdraw their children from lessons, there could be tensions within families and between families and schools. It will depend on the religious character of the school. There **needs to be a compromise** regarding RSE and RVE – it is **important that we do not alienate people**.
- It is important that children and young people know about their human rights, for example the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (**UNCRC**).
- The curriculum **needs to promote business as an option**. It is an excellent way of making a success out of yourself but not much time is spent on it in school.
- There **needs to be more emphasis on mental health** and how to deal with hormones and issues such as panic attacks. Children have lots of complex issues to deal with, which has been **made worse by COVID-19**. Schools need to teach them how to deal with this.
- Young people need to be taught about how to build up resilience and support each other. They also **need to be able to distinguish between normal emotional swings and genuine mental health problems**. This needs to be embedded into the whole school ethos.
- **Mental health should be covered at an earlier age**, in primary schools. There is no age limit on problems such as anxiety, which children can experience at any age.
- Children and young people are **exposed to issues regarding relationships and sexuality at a relatively early age**, therefore it is right that it is taught as early as possible. It also needs to be more than just a few times a year, as currently, and also needs to be more specialised.
- It is **best to learn languages early** – not just Welsh but other Modern Foreign Languages as well.
- There are some negative attitudes about Welsh amongst some young people but it opens up career and job opportunities. **Learning Welsh is important in embracing your culture and communities**. It is not just a qualification but adds to your identity.

- There was **no clear view about whether Welsh should be compulsory**, for example at GCSE level. There were also mixed views about whether it should be treated differently to English.

### The merits of giving schools greater freedom in relation to what they teach pupils

- If curriculum design is done on a school by school basis, how do we ensure that all young people learn diverse history? **Leaving it up to schools could still result in gaps. This could be a particular issue where children move schools** – they could be transferring to a quite different curriculum, which could result in gaps in their knowledge and skills. (This was raised specifically in relation to **Looked After Children** who are more likely to move schools.)
- It is a good idea to allow schools flexibility in how and what is taught but this could exclude some key topics from being covered. It **could lead to regional and local variations, as well as greater inequality** as schools with fewer challenges will find it easier and vice-versa.
- **Schools' unconscious bias** may affect the curriculum they put in place for their pupils. They will need training so they can cover everything fairly for all pupils.
- Teachers will **need a lot of training and support** to deliver the new curriculum.
- Participants were in favour of the principles behind the new curriculum, which has the **potential to revolutionise education**.
- The power head teachers will have to **disapply Year 10 and 11 pupils' choices** will need to have adequate checks so that it is not abused or used excessively.
- Children and young people, parents and school staff **all need to be involved** in the development of the new curriculum so everyone is content with what is taught.
- The Humanities What Matters content currently has a narrow view of what is meant by history. There **needs to be more attention given to Black History**.

## 2. Discussion with parents and carers

Members in attendance: Suzy Davies MS and Hefin David MS

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### How well the curriculum prepares young people for adult life

- A broader curriculum should help schools to ensure that learning can **meet the individual needs** of learners. The curriculum needs to be relevant for learners. This is an opportunity to make learning interesting and engaging.
- It is good that **digital competency** is on a par with literacy and numeracy.
- It is important to **expand the curriculum to bring it up to date**.
- **Mental health and well-being** aspects are really important especially given the growth of social media and its impact on children and young people's mental health. Well-being is especially important for looked after or formerly looked after children. Some schools may not understand the impact of trauma on learner behaviour (although ACE training helps with this). The new curriculum will help give equality of opportunity for looked after and formerly looked after children.
- It is welcome that consideration is being given to Black Asian and Minority Ethnic issues are being considered in the Bill and that the **curriculum will be able to adapt for potential changes in society**.
- A survey by Parentkind found that parents' concerns were about mental health, life skills, being a good adult and critical thinking. The new curriculum could be a **good framework** to address these concerns.
- There is a need to consider **how parents are being informed and 'brought along' with the reforms**. Consideration needs to be given as to how parents will be consulted about their local school curriculum. Parents should be able to engage in dialogue at the beginning of the process. Parents being involved in the education process helps them support learning at home. Communication between school and home is currently not there. There is a need for a **parental engagement framework**.

### Advantages/disadvantages of local curriculum

- There needs to be **underpinning similarities in the curriculum** as children may change schools. The needs of children vary considerably, for example

some areas have greater deprivation, so teachers can respond to needs of children within the basic structure.

- There were some **reservations over the potential for inconsistency in local curricula** and formerly looked after children may need consistency.
- **Assessment of the quality of curriculum** will need to be carefully considered and there will need to be some monitoring (not inspection).
- There may be concerns that **parents may not be confident with very different curricula**.
- Teachers **may only teach what they are comfortable with teaching**, but professional development may help this.

### Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS)

- All pupils should have **equal access to the curriculum**. There were concerns that EOTAS pupils may not have the necessary **breadth of education**. All learners need the same opportunities and same preparation for adult life.
- The new curriculum may be beneficial for Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) as they may be able to provide **more bespoke education** for individual learners.
- Currently, schools may not meet the needs of children who are therefore receiving EOTAS. The new curriculum may meet their needs better.
- Those who are providing **home tuition** (in relation to EOTAS) need to be involved in any training.

### Mandatory elements within the Bill

#### Welsh and English

- It is welcome that children have the opportunity to **become bilingual from an early age**. There should be consistency between how much Welsh and English being taught.
- There may be issues for learners whose **first language is neither English or Welsh**, who are learning these as a second language. The introduction of a third language may cause confusion.

- The **language profile of the community is important** and there is a need for parental engagement.

### **Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE)**

- There is agreement that RSE should be taught, but it **should be age appropriate and appropriate for the level of understanding** of the learner.
- Parents need to be engaged and informed of what is going to be taught so they can be prepared for questions. In the Parentkind survey, **views of parents were very polarised** perhaps because they do not understand what will be taught.
- Concerns were expressed about RSE being taught where **children may have had adverse experiences and this trigger negative reactions** for some children. Teachers may not be aware of the experiences of learners.

### **Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE)**

- It is important for children to have **a broad understanding of all religions or belief systems** as this supports inclusivity. Children may present the values and ethics of parent.
- While there was **support for the removal of the right to withdraw**, learners of some faiths may believe that undertaking some faith based practices or learning may be harmful for them and this needs to be considered.
- There is a potential that the removal of the right to withdraw **may lead to more elective home education** as the mandatory elements are being taught throughout the whole curriculum, so a pupil cannot just not be present for a particular RVE lesson.



### 3. Discussion with higher education, further education and adult learning

Member present: Suzy Davies MS

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- The new curriculum does a lot to **address independent learning** and takes away spoon-feeding. Learners may have all had different experiences so this may lead to difficulties in further education, but diversity is welcome and colleges and universities are used to teaching students from all areas of the country.
- It was queried whether, in creating their curriculum, **headteachers and governors would have training in working with FE Colleges and employers in meeting the demands of the local economy.**
- It was felt that it was not clear **where vocational training fits in with the new curriculum.**
- While teachers have co-constructed the curriculum, they will **need training in curriculum development.**
- Schools may be **collaborating at a local and regional level at the moment but this is at the will of individual heads.** There is no framework to support it. This needs to be better communicated and facilitated. Currently, collaboration works well if schools, local authorities and FE work together to offer programmes that schools do not for example. Hopefully that will continue.
- It was suggested that a **fourth mandatory element of civic skills** could be added to include learning about political structures.
- The **'building blocks' for more technical study may not be included in the new curriculum** for STEM subjects, like engineering. This may affect learner resilience when they move into further education.
- There is a **need for change in post-16** education, given the dramatic changes in pre-16 education. FE will need to work in partnership with schools once curriculum content is settled.
- **Qualifications dictate what happens in the curriculum.** Learning for GCSEs and A levels begins in Key Stage 3. There is a need to look at qualification routes as it seems that only one type of qualification is valued. There is



**unlikely to be parity of esteem** between vocational and academic qualifications when GCSE and A level are seen as gold standard.

- Whatever form of **assessment there is should be equitable** and different assessment methods suit different subjects. Examinations may not reflect the totality of a student's learning. Traditional exams do not fit many learners needs. However, employers will demand qualifications and specific grades.
- In **setting their own curricula, universities go through very rigorous moderation and validation**. There are many checks and balances.

## 4. Discussion with employers and employability representatives

Members in attendance: Siân Gwenllian MS and Laura Anne Jones MS

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### How well the curriculum prepares young people for adult life

- Employers report that **young people do not have the necessary skills**, including ‘soft skills’, communication skills and work experience.
- Levels of literacy and numeracy amongst young people are a big problem. School leavers have **insufficient literacy and numeracy skills** and a lot of time is spent in the post-16 sector bringing their levels of literacy and numeracy up to the required standard. The focus on literacy and numeracy must not be lost in this major curriculum reform.
- **Computing skills are severely lacking** in young people leaving school. Often, they cannot use PCs as they are so used to hand held devices. Businesses are having to spend considerable time and resources upskilling employees and apprentices on digital skills.
- **Careers and work related education needs to be taught earlier**, as early as in primary schools.
- Parents are big influencers in exposing children to certain career paths. Young people **need to be exposed to a full range** of careers and options.
- COVID has meant **businesses have had to rethink their strategies**, which could create opportunities for young people, for example those with skills in digital marketing. Young people can bring a fresh, different approach.
- **Careers and work related education should be specified on the face of the Bill**, as it is in the existing primary curriculum legislation. It needs to be embedded across all Areas of Learning and Experience as there is a real need for good careers education.

### How the new curriculum relates to qualifications and future career pathways

- The Bill needs to be seen as part of the wider context of **schools opening their doors to employers and other stakeholders** who are better placed to deliver some of the work-related education to young people.

- Careers advice and guidance is generally given by teachers who can usually only advise on academic routes. There is **a need to bring others in from the outside** to make consideration of careers and work related education, and the influence this has on the school's curriculum, **as all-encompassing as possible**. The curriculum is delivered in schools but needs to embrace other organisations.
- There needs to be a focus on other participants in education beyond learners, including parents and teachers. A lot of teachers go into education direct from education, and therefore may have limited knowledge and experiences of business and employment. Perhaps **teachers themselves should undertake work experience placements** in order to better understand business and the world of work.
- A key challenge is how to **apply learning in schools to the workplace context** and explain its relevance to careers and the world of work.
- At what point do skills, rather than qualifications, become relevant in the curriculum? **Is teaching and learning geared towards skills outcomes or qualifications outcomes?** This is an important question as it influences how early learners might be encouraged along a vocational pathway rather than academic pathway.
- In a rapidly changing world, the challenge for education and the economy **is skilling people up for jobs that don't exist yet**. This requires young people to be flexible and open to many different career paths.
- Getting the connection between the curriculum and qualifications is vital. Whilst teaching and learning should not necessarily be completely about achieving qualifications, **qualifications definitely have their place and provide a really useful benchmark** of ability and achievement.
- Qualifications are a **certificate of achievement and show that an individual meets a standard**. They are evidence that a candidate can do the job and fulfil the functions required.
- Qualifications Wales' initial consultation on qualification reform alongside the new curriculum saw significant **support for keeping the GCSE brand**. Employers concur with this and urge for the brand to be retained, even if the content changes.
- There will **always be the need for a skilled workforce**. From an employers' perspective, the competition for talent is fierce.

## The merits of greater freedom for schools to put in place a curriculum to meet the needs of their pupils

- There is a **risk in moving away from a prescriptive curriculum** to one of considerable flexibility. Accountability for schools is still needed.
- Introducing more autonomy for schools to design curricula **could lead to more variation**. Where is the evidence that supports giving head teachers this level of autonomy in deciding what their pupils are taught?
- Greater school autonomy **could lead to greater competition between schools**, related to the type of curriculum on offer. It could become an important consideration in parents' applications for school places.
- Careers Wales should have input into the curriculum the head teacher designs for their school. For example, **local and regional labour market information** should be available to schools in their curriculum planning.
- The approach being taken lends itself to localism, however, there **needs to be a national framework, which the curriculum feeds into**. Such a framework should extend beyond education and needs to be **closely aligned with economic strategies**. Otherwise, there could be a lack of strategic approach to the new curriculum, especially if schools are all doing their own thing and the curriculum they are providing to their pupils is not sufficiently linked to regional and national economic and workforce/skills priorities.
- Who will sign off a school's local curriculum plan? The Bill requires it to comply with certain requirements but other than that, the head teacher designs the curriculum and the governing body must adopt it. School governance will be crucial but **will there be necessary oversight of the individual curricula which schools develop?**
- **Implementation is the potential pitfall** to this area of work. The opportunities provided by the Bill are potentially game-changing but everyone needs to have a role in realising the purposes behind the new curriculum.

## ANNEX – Supporting organisations

### Children and young people roundtable

- Children’s Commissioner for Wales
- Welsh Youth Parliament
- Voices from Care
- Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team (EYST) Wales
- Children in Wales

### Parents and carers roundtable

- Parentkind
- Adoption UK
- The Fostering Network

### HE, FE and adult learning roundtable

- Colegau Cymru
- Coleg y Cymoedd
- Grwp Llandrillo Menai
- Cardiff and Vale College
- CaBan
- Universities Wales
- Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education
- UCU
- NUS Wales
- Adult Learning Partnership Wales

### Employers and employability roundtable

- South West and Mid Wales Regional Skills Partnership
- North Wales and West Chester Chamber of Commerce
- North Wales Regional Skills Partnership
- South East Wales Regional Skills Partnership
- Learning and Work Institute
- National Training Federation Wales
- Groundwork Wales
- Careers Wales
- BT