

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i'r [Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg](#) ar [Llwybrau at addysg a hyfforddiant ôl-16](#)

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) on the [Routes into post-16 education and training](#)

RET 06

Ymateb gan: Undeb Addysg Cenedlaethol Cymru

Response from: National Education Union Cymru (NEU)

National Education Union (NEU) Cymru response

Background

NEU Cymru welcomes that the Children, Young People and Education Committee is looking into Routes into post-16 education. NEU Cymru are deeply concerned by the levels of participation amongst learners in post-16 in Wales, and believe it is critical that learners have a diverse range of options for post-16 learning.

NEU Cymru represents members across the post-16 sectors from lecturers to support staff in a range of settings, including Further Education and 6th Form provision. It is important to recognise that 6th Form provision is intrinsically linked to the education of learners within the secondary sector – and there will be both explicit and implicit advantages to attending a secondary school with a sixth form. Not least that the teachers will be able to support learners in terms of transition, especially in terms of preparedness for A levels, in terms of the syllabus.

From our members perspective it is highly important that Welsh Government supports tackling any barriers there are for people who want to attend post-16 provision – which can include transport, funding, and support available.

Participation in post-16

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) ran an analysis of post-16 across the UK. We are deeply concerned that levels of participation at post-16 in Wales are lower in Wales, with high levels of young people classed as Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET). As the EPI report¹ says:

“Higher share of pupils ‘Not in Education, Employment or Training’ (NEET) in Wales. Nearly 11 per cent of young people aged 16-18 in Wales were classified as NEET in 2022-23, compared with 8 per

¹ <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/UK-Nations-post-16-Report-1-FINAL.pdf>

cent in England, 9 per cent in Scotland and 5 per cent in Northern Ireland. We also see a bigger recent rise in Wales, with NEET rates for this age group up from 6 per cent in 2021-22.”

Whilst according to Welsh Government data this figure has shown a stark decline in the last recorded 12 months (down to 5.4%²), the statistical analysis warns against short term conclusions, due to the size of the data sample.

This highlights the need for better data in the post-16 sector, and we would welcome WG producing better insight into the post-16 landscape.

Disadvantaged Groups

Poverty

For people living in poverty, there can be multiple barriers to accessing education. There are certainly some anomalies within the system which need to be addressed, which further disadvantage some learners.

For example, access to transport to attend FE can vary between colleges, and should be free to all. Free School Meals are available for young people who attend a school sixth form (and are eligible), but not for those in FE. We do welcome that the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is available for learners in Wales – but we really don't think this should be spent on expensive transport.

The EMA is critical for many learners, in supporting their decision to stay on in post-16. Some courses, such as the more vocational ones, can be more expensive in terms of materials needed. Students should be enabled to study the course which is right for them and not restrained by cost, which includes purchasing equipment.

Age

It is worth noting, young people aged 24 are most likely not to be classed as NEET – indeed the WG figures state that 20%³ of them were NEET when the data was last analysed. Although we cannot know the specific cause of this figure, it is worrying and should give cause for alarm.

² <https://www.gov.wales/young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet-july-2023-june-2024-html>

³ <https://www.gov.wales/young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet-july-2023-june-2024-html>

This clearly highlights the need for greater support for adult learning in the sector and for the need to ensure that young people are enabled to enter the education system as and when they need to. We would be concerned about young people leaving school to enter highly insecure and low paid work, only to find that they find it harder to enter back into the education system.

Disabled young people

The figures for disabled people are truly alarming, with nearly 40% of them aged 19-24 classed as NEET:

“In the three-year period ending June 2024, the proportion of disabled people who are NEET rises from 17.9% at age 16 to 18, to 38.7% at age 19 to 24.”

This shocking figure coincides with the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs and Tribunals (Wales) Act, which aimed to give more integrated support to learners in post-16 – focusing on transition. However, these figures reflect a failure to support disabled young people as they leave compulsory school age.

Our members tell us that there are also increasing expectations of them as lecturers as more young people are expected to attend mainstream settings. It is our belief that disabled young people deserve better than these figures, and that their needs in terms of education and employment must be supported.

Funding

Funding within post-16 has meant many changes in recent years, and we are yet to see the full meaning of the Medr for the post-16 sector.

Funding for the sector has seen many challenges, and it is important to recognise how varied it is in terms of provision.

Reorganisation of the sector

NEU Cymru are yet to see how the reorganisation of the sector through the creation of the Medr would look like. During the passage of the legislation to create the Medr, we worked with the other trade unions to ensure there is a strategic duty for Medr to “promote partnership between tertiary education providers and their recognised trade unions”.

We are disappointed that the Medr has had minimal engagement with us as a trade union to date, and are especially disappointed that the

Cabinet Secretary did not decide to expand the representation of associate union members on the board to include those who represent the teaching workforce.

If Medr's assertion that there are no schools, just providers, within the post-16 sector, there should be efforts made to reach out to those different types of trade unions who represent the workforce in different types of providers.

Furthermore, on the reorganisation, we will be responding to the Welsh Government's current consultation on the School's Organisational Code, to ensure they are enacting promises made during the passage of legislation, to ensure that any decisions to close school sixth forms will go to the Minister, if there is a complaint in writing.

Careers Support

Careers Wales used to have a more substantial role supporting learners to access work experience – our members believe it should be their role, and not that of a school, to find local opportunities for learners.

Professional learning is critical for education professionals working in this area, and they should be enabled to support carer and work-related learning. Fundamental to this is the need for young people to have access to learning about trade unions, and their role.

We are concerned that young people access insecure and low paid roles on leaving education, without the knowledge to equip them for the workplace. Indeed, it is important that Careers Wales should have a role in helping support young people to find employment which suits their skills but also is secure and has access to recognised trade unions.

Schools and colleges working together

NEU Cymru recognises that there is effectively a market for learners in the post-16 sector in Wales. This model does not encourage collaborative working.

It is our belief that different learners at post-16 will thrive best in different settings. We believe each learner should have access to the full range of vocational and academic options and be enabled to attend which one works for them.

This sector must be about enabling learners to participate and ensuring that courses fit individual learners. Any review of post-16 education must

ensure that qualifications do not have the look and feel of those which are exams based.

It is worth asking the question about compulsory post-16 education, as Wales is an outlier on this, compared to the other UK nations. Should learners in Wales have to attend education until they are 18, and would this help ensure fewer NEETs, and great opportunities for further progression within education?

Qualifications

NEU Cymru would like Wales to take this opportunity to ensure that learners in post-16 have access to the full range of qualifications and that there is clear parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications – enabling them to progress to the next stage of life .

For young people re-sitting qualifications, it is important that these qualifications are as accessible as possible, relying on a mix of assessment methods, including teacher assessment.

We are concerned that planned changes to GCSEs increasingly look and feel like they are exam focused, through the over-use of in-classroom timed assessments, which can narrow the curriculum, and create extra workload for education professionals.

The qualifications offer in post-16 must be wide, and support learners to thrive in a range of subjects. We would question arguments around so-called ‘duplication’, as courses are not the only reason young people choose their options for post-16.

Welsh Language

We would agree there are sometimes more limited choices for learners through the medium of Welsh. We are clear that a workforce plan is needed to ensure that the workforce has the opportunity to learn Welsh to a level at which they are confident enough to teach.

We surveyed our members in Wales on the White Paper proposals in 2023, and asked respondents to place themselves in one of seven Welsh speaking categories, e.g. I am a confident, but not fluent, Welsh speaker, and would like more support to be confident enough to teach through the medium of Welsh. Fifty-five per cent (55%) of respondents who either speak a lot of Welsh, are confident, or fluent Welsh speakers said they’d like more support to be confident enough to teach through the medium of Welsh.

Welsh-medium sixth forms are an essential component in the Cymraeg 2050 strategy. They not only deepen and embed Welsh-language skills, but they are also a vital link towards career pathways in various sectors where Welsh-speakers are very much in demand, including the health and education workforces.

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