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Introduction

As a Work-Based Learning (WBL) training provider operating across Wales, our primary focus is on delivering apprenticeships, vocational training, and support for learners transitioning into post-16 education and training. We are also a sub-contractor delivering Jobs Growth Wales+ to 16-19 year-olds and have recently moved into vocational training for 14-19 year-olds both in school and Educated Other Than At School (EOTAS).

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and address the terms of reference outlined.

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Quality of information given to Learners about Post-16 options

As a Provider, we work closely with a variety of services, including schools and Careers Wales to ensure young people understand the variety of options available to them during Post-16 transition. We are committed to providing high-quality, impartial information about the full range of post-16 options available. Our approach ensures learners receive tailored guidance that aligns with their aspirations and career goals.

However, we believe that the information broadly offered to young people by support agencies, schools and Welsh Government literature can be confusing and lack clarity. This can result in misleading, biased, or incomplete guidance, leaving potential learners without access to the comprehensive range of options necessary to make informed decisions about their future.

Commentary:

1. **Schools and EOTAS Learners:** The quality of information provided within schools and for learners educated other than at school (EOTAS) is inconsistent. Careers Wales plays a key role, but stronger collaboration with providers like us would enhance relevance and inclusivity. Greater emphasis on integrating work-based options alongside traditional academic pathways can improve outcomes for all learners.

   Providers often face challenges in engaging directly with learners due to limited time within school timetables for career-focused activities. Dedicated opportunities for post-16 providers to showcase vocational work based learning routes would benefit learners.

2. The launch of the VCSE suite in September 2027 requires careful planning to ensure effective engagement and alignment with both school and learner expectations. It is essential for school staff to recognise the value of introducing vocational opportunities and the pathways they create. Schools should establish strong partnerships with Providers who can support vocational progression post-16, whether through further education, employment, or

apprenticeship opportunities. Ensuring these vocational options are presented with equal status to traditional academic routes and subjects is critical for their success and uptake.

3. **Careers Wales:** While Careers Wales (and its funded project Working Wales) is an important resource, there are gaps in tailoring advice to learners' specific contexts. Advisor s may not clearly link the pathways available to your people in order to move from compulsory education and into employment. Improved coordination between Careers Wales, schools, and training providers could address these gaps, ensuring all learners receive timely and relevant information.

4. **Sixth Forms & Colleges vs. Providers:** Challenges between sixth forms and local post-16 providers can lead to incomplete or biased guidance for learners. This is particularly evident in areas where competition for enrolment and outcomes are high. Clearer policies encouraging impartiality and collaboration between these institutions are needed.

5. **Employers and Careers Events:** Employer engagement in schools is variable, with some providing robust opportunities while others are limited. Post-16 Providers, particularly those offering placement or apprenticeship opportunities have large databases and networks with a wide range of micro to macro employers. These developed relationships can provide highly valuable insight for learners to understand different industries and employer expectations. Expanding careers events, including virtual options, can ensure equitable employer access across Wales.

6. **Influencers on Career Choices:** Parents/guardians, teachers, and peers significantly influence learners' decisions. However, these influencers often lack the resources or understanding of post-16 pathways to provide comprehensive support. Enhanced training and resources for parents and teachers are essential. Visual, simplified pathway options with associated benefits and 'best fit' guides would support.

Effectiveness of Careers Support at Compulsory School Age

Careers support during compulsory education is pivotal in shaping post-16 outcomes. While effective in some areas, gaps remain in its ability to address the diverse needs of all learners, as outlined above.

Commentary:

- **Positive Outcomes:** Learners who receive personalised guidance are more likely to make successful transitions into education, training, or employment. School-based "taster" sessions, particularly those focused on vocational learning, can play a crucial role in supporting learners' decision-making as they explore their options. This approach helps prevent indecision or frequent changes between subject areas, enabling learners to concentrate on achieving their qualifications.

- **Challenges:** Disparities in support across schools contribute to negative outcomes, including higher NEET rates. Expanding outreach initiatives, such as community-based support to re-engage 16-19 year olds, could address these gaps.

  Vocational and work-based learning opportunities often offer flexible pathways tailored to individuals with diverse additional and specific needs, providing access to specialist support

and necessary adaptations. These pathways can significantly enhance employment prospects by connecting learners with employers who are open to nurturing and developing their workforce.

- **Broadening Careers Guidance:** Ensuring all learners, regardless of academic performance, receive a balanced view of all pathways is critical to reducing NEET rates.

Work Experience Opportunities

Commentary:

Work experience is a vital aspect of careers education, yet opportunities can differ widely depending on school and local authority policies. For instance, the Cardiff Commitment funds the "What's Next" awards, which emphasise collaboration between schools and employers to provide work experience opportunities. This initiative should be funded, expanded, and implemented across all local authorities, leveraging post-16 providers' extensive employer networks to enhance employer engagement and participation.

Networking and career coaching are essential for helping young people explore and prepare for the workplace. By fostering these opportunities, a talent pipeline can be developed and nurtured, bridging the gap between industry skill needs and resource shortage

Barriers to employer involvement must be identified and addressed to ensure meaningful engagement. This includes providing access to remote technologies for rural learners or those unable to travel, enabling them to connect with employers virtually. Employers should be supported through free coaching, mentoring, and staff retention training to enhance their capacity to offer high-quality placements. Additionally, any health and safety or safeguarding concerns should be resolved to further encourage employer participation.

Changes in Routes Post-18

Commentary:

- **Decline in Higher Education Enrolments:** Rising tuition fees, living costs, and awareness of alternative pathways such as apprenticeships are driving a shift away from Higher Education. Practical, work-based routes are increasingly appealing to learners seeking to avoid student debt and gain immediate employment.

- **Recommendations:** Enhanced careers guidance and awareness campaigns are needed to ensure learners make well-informed decisions about their post-18 pathways.

Welsh-Medium Provision

The availability of Welsh-medium post-16 options significantly impacts learners' choices and broader efforts to promote the Welsh language.

Commentary:

- **Challenges:** Limited Welsh-medium provision in some areas restricts opportunities for learners to pursue their education or training in their preferred language.

  Learners leaving Welsh Medium education predominantly wish to continue their post-16 learning in English.   They report a need to improve their written and comprehension skills, broadening their employment prospects.

- **Recommendations:** Expanding bi-lingual options and raising awareness of available opportunities are essential to support learners and promote linguistic equity.

  Addressing challenges in gaining essential skills qualifications through Welsh by providing additional preparation and review time.

Equity of Access

Commentary:

- **Disadvantaged Groups:** Learners from low-income households and those with travel needs face notable barriers to accessing post-16 options. Financial support varies regionally, with learners in rural areas particularly disadvantaged.

- **Recommendations:**

  - Provide upfront financial assistance schemes rather than reimbursement models for travel.

  - Develop community hubs with robust internet access and safe environments for learners to study.

  - Address the technology gap by increasing access to digital tools and resources.

Post-16 Destination Data

Commentary:

- **Data Gaps:** While some data is collected, it is insufficient to fully understand trends and inform future provision. Comprehensive destination data, including granular insights into vocational pathways, is essential to shape the post-16 landscape effectively.

- **Recommendations:** Establishing a Wales-wide system for tracking post-16 outcomes would provide valuable insights to guide policy and practice.

Welsh Government's Role

Commentary:

- **Support for Programmes:** Awareness of initiatives like the Young Person's Guarantee varies, limiting their effectiveness. Consistent promotion and clear communication to schools, families, and learners are vital to maximise uptake.

- **Recommendations:** Strengthening partnerships between the Welsh Government, schools, and providers will ensure these programmes reach their full potential. Differentiating between apprenticeship vacancies and funded apprenticeship routes could improve clarity and engagement.

Conclusion

We are committed to working collaboratively with the Welsh Government, schools, and stakeholders to improve routes into post-16 education and training. By addressing the gaps outlined in this submission, we can ensure that every learner in Wales has access to high-quality, equitable opportunities that align with their aspirations and contribute to their success.