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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Buffy Williams MS
Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee

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Dear Buffy

Thank you for your letter of 29 September following my appearance before the Committee where I provided evidence on the teacher recruitment and retention inquiry. Please find below the information that I committed to provide in relation to class sizes in secondary schools and responses to the questions that you did not have a chance to cover during the session.

Update on data in relation to class sizes in secondary schools

Data on class sizes in infant and junior schools is collected annually as it is a requirement of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. The data that I referred to during the committee session can be found here: [Schools' census results: January 2025](#).

The Schools' Census does collect information on class sizes in secondary schools but it is not published. The data is only collected for the third period in the school timetable on the day of the Census and is not a reliable indicator of the size of all classes running in secondary schools during a typical one or two week timetable cycle. A more appropriate measure for secondary schools is the pupil teacher ratio (PTR) which is published annually. This PTR is calculated by dividing the full-time equivalent (FTE) number of pupils by the FTE number of qualified teachers (head teachers, acting head teachers, assistant head teachers, deputy heads and other qualified teachers). The PTR in secondary schools in January 2025 was 17.5. The PTR has increased in nursery, primary, middle and secondary schools in 2025, but is lower in all sectors except secondary compared with 2021. The data can be found in table 9 of the spreadsheet that accompanies this statistical release: [Schools' census results: January 2025](#).

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

1. The Committee has heard that there are issues for how ITE providers can plan provision given the time taken between UCAS offering a place at ITE and a student's acceptance. The Committee has also heard that, in order to apply for a postgraduate course, students have access to the undergraduate part of the UCAS website. Are you aware of these issues, have you had any discussions with UCAS about them, and to what extent are you able to influence them?

We are aware of the issues, and my officials have worked with UCAS and our ITE Partnerships to find resolutions. Previously UCAS had a bespoke teacher training application process used by UK Universities however when England set up their own teacher training application system, to include school-based teacher training programmes not accessible under UCAS, UCAS took the decision to close their teacher training application system for universities. This change affected both Wales and Scotland. My officials worked with UK Government's department for education to ensure the new English teacher training application system would not impact on cross border recruitment and discussions were also held on Wales' providers being able to utilise the new English application system. At that time it was determined to not be feasible.

Welsh Government also explored developing and running a bespoke Welsh ITE application system however economies of scale meant this was also not feasible at that time.

We have worked with UCAS and our ITE Partnerships to resolve previous issues related to ways of working under UCAS' general undergraduate application system. Given the continued issues being experienced by our providers we will look again at potential solutions for our Welsh ITE system.

Universities and UCAS have their own contractual arrangements and obligations, and the Welsh Government has limited levers in this regard. The decision to use UCAS is a matter for the ITE Partnerships; we are aware that not all our ITE Partnerships do so.

2. The Committee has heard concerns about routes into school leadership and the NPQH in relation to the cap on numbers and whether it is broad enough. Are you aware of these concerns and how can they be addressed?

Developing, nurturing and inspiring school leaders now and for the future remains a key commitment. We want to develop the next generation of headteachers to lead our schools through our education reform agenda to inspire our children and young people.

I recognise that headship is a rewarding but challenging job. Our aim is to ensure that all prospective leaders are supported and developed as they take the next step in their careers. I also want to ensure that there is support and continued opportunities for our experienced headteachers to develop too.

Dysgu will now take forward the work of reviewing all the existing leadership programmes and support available for middle and senior leaders and experienced headteachers. Working with local authorities, Dysgu will develop provision that meets the needs of our existing and future leaders in a range of areas. We need to ensure that support is available for leaders to network to share experiences and to develop their leadership skills through a coherent suite of professional learning.

I am aware of some of the concerns about the cap on numbers for the NPQH. Following an extensive review of the qualification for headship, the new national programme for developing our future headteachers began delivery in January 2025. As this is a new programme, we wanted to ensure that it was thoroughly piloted with a restricted number of participants. 48 individuals are taking part in the first cohort and will be supported through a range of opportunities to develop their skills. A second cohort of 48 participants started in September 2025. Following the pilot phase, we will work with Dysgu to review the number of participants that can be funded to undertake the programme moving forward.

It is important to note in this context that there are currently over 700 people working in schools across Wales who already hold the NPQH. We therefore need to support those individuals to take the step into headship, as well as developing the next pipeline. I will be asking Dysgu to work with local authorities to identify these individuals who already hold the NPQH and develop support for them to take their next steps.

3. Estyn's evidence said that there are no national approaches to identify future leaders and provide pathways to leadership for those early in their career. To what extent does this impact on the recruitment and retention of school leaders and in what ways do you see the Welsh Government having a role in improving this? During the evidence session you referenced the work Dysgu will be doing to review the existing leadership programmes with a view to developing provision that meets the needs of potential future leaders. Do you know what the timeline is for this initial work, and will it inform the development of the Strategic Education Workforce Plan?

I agree that we need a better approach to identify our future leaders. Further to my response to question 2 above, we also need to work closely with local authorities to improve workforce planning based on a better understanding of the projected number of learners and demographic data. This is complex, but it is crucial that we develop a shared understanding for the demand for teachers and succession planning for school leaders over the next 5-10 years. The Strategic Education Workforce Plan will set out how this will be taken forward.

I have been clear with Dysgu that the leadership programmes will be an initial priority during the transition phase. Work has already started to review the existing leadership programmes, working with partners to identify gaps in the provision. Dysgu is also contributing to the design and delivery of the NPQH pilot.

4. The Committee has heard that there may be an under-representation of teachers with disabilities within the workforce. To what extent do you agree with this and have you considered any incentives or other ways to support more disabled people to become teachers?

Our ITE Partnerships have statutory responsibilities under the Equality Act. They need to ensure that their admission policy promotes equality of opportunity and does not discriminate against any group of potential applicants. In addition, under the Welsh Government's Criteria for the Accreditation of ITE Programmes in Wales, ITE Partnerships must use their recruitment, application, and selection data to improve the quality and diversity of their student intake and ensure that their processes are equitable. This is assessed and monitored by the EWC.

Data on the number of first year students on ITE courses in Wales by disability can be found in the table below. Nearly 13% of students recorded a known disability in 2021/22, which is the most recent data we hold.

First years on ITE courses in Wales by disability and year, 2010/11 to 2021/22

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
No known disability	1075	960	950	1445	1400
Known disability	125	105	125	235	210
Specific Learning Difficulty e.g. dyslexia	50	55	60	110	80
Blind/ Partially sighted	5
Deaf/ Hearing impairment	5	5	5	5	5
Physical impairment / mobility issues	5	.	5	.	5
Mental health condition, e.g. depression	20	15	30	55	60
Social/communication impairment e.g. autistic spectrum disorder	5	5	.	10	5
A long-standing illness / health condition e.g. diabetes, cancer	20	15	10	25	15
Multiple disabilities	10	5	5	20	25
Other disability not listed	15	10	10	15	15
Total (all student teachers)	1200	1065	1080	1680	1610

Source: HESA

Data from the 2021 Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) showed that 8.2% of young people aged 5 to 15 had a disability that limited ability to carry-out day-to-day activities a little or a lot.

From information in the School Workforce Annual Census (SWAC) 210 teachers (0.8%) reported having a physical or mental health condition expected to last 12 months or more in 2023/24. However, there may be factors affecting how this information is recorded where many may prefer not to declare their disability as they consider it to not affect their ability to undertake the duties of their role. The definition of disability used in both the SWAC and the 2021 PLASC is where a person is reported as having a physical or mental health condition or illness that has lasted or is expected to last 12 months or more, and that reduces their ability to carry out day-to-day activities.

So, although we should treat the data with care, there does appear to be significant under-representation of teachers with disabilities within the workforce. We are looking at this, and the diversity of the workforce more broadly, as part of developing our strategic education workforce plan.

5. The Education Workforce Council told the Committee that the teaching workforce in Wales is supplemented by those who have gained their PGCE in England. Given they would not have been exposed to the new curriculum in Wales, do you have any concerns about how this will impact its successful implementation?

I am pleased that teachers who have trained in England are choosing to move to Wales to teach. Many of whom I'm sure are from Wales, while others may be choosing to move to Wales because of the extensive reforms that we are undertaking to improve education. I am keen to understand better their reasons for moving to Wales to work and will ask EWC for this information.

However, as you point out, we need to ensure that these individuals understand the Curriculum for Wales and our other reforms.

All teachers, regardless of where they have gained qualified teacher status, are required to complete a statutory induction period in order to teach in Wales. Those who have trained in England and then move to Wales to teach will be required to undertake professional learning on a range of matters, including Curriculum for Wales and the policies and practices in our schools that differ to England as part of their statutory induction period.

Our existing support for Curriculum for Wales would also be open to all teachers in Wales, and I would want schools who appoint teachers from outside of Wales to prioritise this professional learning. Working with Dysgu, we could signpost relevant professional learning opportunities and resources for those new to the education system in Wales so that all the support is easily accessible to them.

As part of the Cynllun Pontio, we have specifically targeted Welsh speaking teachers currently living outside of Wales who could return to teach in our schools. Over the past 6 years, 8 individuals have returned through the programme, from England and further afield. As part of the programme, they are given time to observe and work with their peers to develop their understanding of the Curriculum for Wales. There's an opportunity for us to learn from their experiences to ensure that we're providing sufficient support for any qualified teachers who want to move to Wales in the future.

6. During the session, you briefly referred to teaching assistants sometimes covering lessons. To what extent do you understand the scale of the evidence that they and HLTAs are being asked to teach classes? How can we better understand this and address associated concerns?

I am very concerned about the pay and conditions of our teaching assistants. As I made clear in my Written Statement on 3 September, this is a key priority for the Strategic Education Workforce Plan. Teaching assistants support some of our most vulnerable learners and deserve, in line with the Welsh Government's commitment to social justice, to be recognised, remunerated and treated fairly for the fantastic work that they do.

Through the Schools Social Partnership Forum, which involves Welsh Government, union, and employer representatives we have undertaken work to develop common job descriptions for teaching assistants and higher-level teaching assistants (HLTAs) in an attempt to standardise the way in which they are deployed in schools. I am deeply frustrated that this approach has not been implemented at local authority level. I am pursuing this as a matter of urgency with our social partners. I want to make sure that we identify, agree and take actions in the short term, as well as working on longer-term reforms such as developing options for a School Support Staff Negotiating Body.

To be clear, only people holding qualified teacher status (QTS) are permitted to be employed to teach, which is also known as “specified work” as defined by the Education Workforce Council (Main Functions) (Wales) Regulations 2015 and the Education (Wales) Act 2014. ‘Qualified teachers’ do not include teaching assistants, HLTAs or other support staff who do not hold QTS.

However, people who do not hold QTS can undertake “specified work”, in certain circumstances. They are permitted to teach either as an ‘unqualified teacher’ (where the unqualified teacher is employed for a limited time as a school teacher and registered with EWC to undertake specified work) or in certain time limited circumstances where they are subject to the direction and supervision of qualified teachers as defined by the legislation. People employed in a school as teaching assistants or HLTAs cannot be a school teacher for the purpose of the legislation even if they hold QTS.

The evidence we have on HLTAs and teaching assistants being asked to teach classes is anecdotal at present. It is not something which Welsh Government collects data on. However, we need to develop an understanding of this issue, and I will be asking local authorities to take this work forward as part of our proposals in the Strategic Education Workforce Plan.

I agree that it is not acceptable for members of staff to be asked to undertake duties that are beyond their remit. It is right that a qualified teacher should be available and the statutory requirements here in Wales are clear, as set out above.

I would like to take the opportunity to once again thank you for your ongoing work and support on this matter. I look forward to receiving the report in due course.

Yours sincerely



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