

William Powell AM
Chair
Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

8 October 2013

Dear William

Petition on Brighter Future for Young People

I apologise for not responding to your letter of 24 April 2013 seeking the views of Colegau Cymru on a petition urging the Welsh Government to put forward effective and positive steps to ensure a brighter future for the current generation of young people.

Colegau Cymru represents 16 further education (FE) colleges and FE institutions in Wales. In 2010/11, there were 82,985 students attending FE colleges, of which 59,355 students were aged below 20¹.

FE colleges have a twin purpose – promoting social justice and inclusion and supporting a buoyant economy.

(i) Promoting social justice

Investing in the future of our young people and tackling disadvantage are both core to the approach taken by colleges – indeed they are the *raison d'être* of colleges' existence.

A survey of 15 colleges in Wales in July 2013 showed that almost 37,000 learners received Educational Maintenance Allowances, Assembly Learning Grants or college Financial Contingency Funds. This funding ensures that those requiring financial support are not deterred from enrolling on courses. Colleges have almost 500 looked-after children to whom they give specialist and dedicated support. Providing support to all these learners is at the heart of what colleges do; it is nonetheless time consuming and expensive. Investment needs to be sustained to ensure the most disadvantaged learners are catered for. Where does a learner go if deprived of a second chance opportunity? Maintaining investment in these learners ensures that they do not become NEET (not in employment, education or training).

¹ Further Education, Work-based Learning and Community Learning in Wales Statistics 2010/11 Welsh Government 2012

Colleges make probably the single biggest impact to reducing those who are NEET by either being the first point of contact for the young persons or being the point of first referral by other agencies in many cases.

Colleges received Financial Contingency Funds (FCF) of £7m from the Welsh Government in 2011/12. There were 17,145 successful applications for funds from students, 88% of which were from full-time students. The highest costs were for childcare and transport with other key areas being luncheon vouchers, equipment and books.

16 year olds who choose to remain in school may continue to receive means-tested free school meals (FSM). There is no dedicated FSM funding for college students. Colleges often increase the amount of funding available to disadvantaged learners by reallocating sums earned from entrepreneurial activity.

Colleges also receive funding for learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In 2012/13 this amounted to £6.4m. This funding contributes towards providing specialist support in areas such as sign language and Braille and in-class (ancillary) support.

As well as providing financial support through grants, colleges deliver curriculum specifically designed for those from disadvantaged or vulnerable groups – that is, education and training provision as well as financial support. This provision, some of which can be termed as ‘uneconomic’, means that classes can be run in smaller groups, or that classes can be run in the community. By so doing, colleges encourage learners to participate in learning where they may not have done so previously.

In addition, colleges use a significant amount of resources to boost levels of literacy and numeracy. Estyn has pointed out the differences between chronological age and reading age for example, and colleges seek to compensate for these gaps. In November 2010, a survey carried out by ColegauCymru showed that 43% of their new full-time students had literacy levels below level 1 on entry to college, with the comparable figure being 48% for level 1 numeracy. Improving literacy and numeracy levels is crucial in tackling disadvantage.

(ii) Supporting a buoyant economy

The second key element is the major contribution made by colleges to the economy in Wales by raising skills levels in Wales. This is particularly significant as the increased level of long term unemployment in Wales since the recession in 2008 runs the risk of denuding the skills base of our country.

ColegauCymru believes that despite the extremely testing economic outlook, Wales has the opportunity to rebuild its industrial future based on an ever more highly skilled workforce with FE colleges responding positively to the needs of business and industry.

According to the latest large scale UKCES *Employers' Skills Survey*, FE colleges in Wales prepare 17-18 year old 'education leavers' better than school sixth forms in Wales by a margin of 10%. 75% of employers in the survey stated that college leavers

are 'well prepared' or better compared to less than two thirds of school leavers who were so.²

Work with business has remained a central priority for the sector over many years. Most colleges now have a commercial arm or business unit and promote their services to a wide range of employers. ColegauCymru has estimated that colleges engage with over 25,000 businesses every year to work to develop a suite of products designed to meet the needs of private and public sector employers in Wales. Such services range from work on apprenticeships (all levels), bespoke training programmes for staff, consultancies, product innovation and general advice on future skill needs of their workforce. Colleges are constantly seeking to make sure that their work with business is nimble, at the cutting edge and suited to individual employer needs. This is a central goal for colleges in Wales.

Colleges have responded to the Welsh Government's investment with an improving quality profile year-on-year. For example, the Department for Education and Skills' (DfES) annual *Learner Outcomes Reports for 2010/11* showed that 90% of students completed their courses in FE colleges and of these 90% achieved their qualifications – making an overall success rate of 81%. This can be compared with a 40% successful completion in 2000/01.

Sustaining public investment in skills in the medium to long term is crucial. Vocational education delivered by colleges makes a major contribution to meeting the aims of Wales' ambitious skills agenda. Approximately 85% of courses (at level 3 and below) offered by colleges in Wales are vocational or vocationally related. Colleges are therefore, by a large margin, the predominant providers of vocational and technical education in Wales.

The need to develop a skills base for a renewed emphasis on industrial and construction industry growth is supported by clear evidence on projected labour demand in Wales up to 2020. According to the latest estimates from the UK Commission on Employment and Skills' *Working Futures* report: "*Wales is the only nation/region [in the UK] where skilled trades occupations are expected to grow in employment, and not decline*" and employment growth in Wales is projected to be: "*above the UK average ... for the primary sector and utilities, construction, and trade, accommodation and transport*". This gives a particular impetus to investment focused on enhancing Wales' crucial vocational skills base.

Colleges enrol more 16-19 students than do school sixth forms. Colleges provide a "sixth form" provision which is often unrecognised by many politicians. Key features:

- ❁ results are very good – the 2013 AS/A level results showed outstanding performance in many colleges with results comparable to school sixth forms
- ❁ in several areas tertiary colleges widen student choice and provide specialist support
- ❁ tertiary reorganisation is cost effective and provides a more efficient and fair solution than just reducing budgets and cuts out unnecessary competition for 16-19 students.

² UK Commission for Employment and Skills: *Employer Skills Survey 2011: Wales Results*, Evidence Report 62, Nov 2012, fig. 3.1 p.28.

Comment

Colleges play a key role in investing in the future of 16-24 year olds. They are supporting disadvantaged learners; promoting opportunities for developing vocational qualifications; supporting apprenticeships and vocational learning routes; raising standards for all learners – academic and vocational; and seeking to ensure that young people and adults are equipped with the skills necessary to take on jobs when the economy eventually improves. Colleges have invested heavily in their student support services which provide appropriate support and guidance and independent careers advice that meets the needs of young people.

In short, colleges are playing key role in ensuring that 16-24 year olds do not become a 'lost generation'. Rather, they are providing an education and skills environment that will help ensure a brighter future for young people in Wales.

Yours sincerely

Dr John Graystone
Chief Executive

c Mark Jones
Ken Skates, Deputy Minister for Skills and Technology

(signed copy in the post)