

Children and Young People Committee

CYP(4)-03-12 Paper 3

Inquiry into the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure (2009)

Evidence from Higher Education Wales



About Higher Education Wales

Higher Education Wales (HEW) represents the interests of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Wales and is a National Council of Universities UK. HEW's Governing Council consists of the Vice-Chancellors of all the HEIs in Wales. HEW provides an expert resource on the Welsh Higher Education sector.

Introduction

Higher Education Wales welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure (2009). Although HEW considers it too early in the process, with too few young people having gone through the system, to provide hard evidence of the impact that the Measure has had on the higher education sector, it is helpful that the Committee has requested information based on evidence received so far to allow us to add further clarity on specific matters.

This response addresses the specific questions in 4 groups:

1. Widening Access
2. Progression Routes
3. Parity of Esteem
4. Independent Advice.

1. Widening Access

- ***What changes do the higher education institutions in Wales expect to see as a result of the implementation of the Learning and Skills Wales Measure 2009? For example changes to the numbers and qualifications of applicants to higher education courses.***

The latest available data from HESA on entry qualifications shows an increase in students entering higher education with vocational qualifications. As these figures predate the

Measure, it is not possible to attribute its introduction to the changes but it is a positive indicator and there should be no reason why this increase will not continue.

It is possible that there will be a variable impact on the number of qualifications, based on resourcing differences within and between local authorities in respect of the learning support component of the Measure, as well as variable impact of the coordination and management of the 14-19 Learning Networks by those authorities. It is anticipated that the introduction of the Measure will result in the further development of the Welsh Baccalaureate, with many schools using coaches when developing students' vocational skills and work experience portfolios.

- ***How will the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure help to progress the Welsh Government's priority to address social injustice and to widen access to higher education?***

The Committee has heard anecdotal and empirical evidence that the wider choice of courses, both vocational and academic, resulting from the Measure, has led to more young people staying on at school or college until age 18/19. This could potentially increase the number of young people (especially those from non-traditional backgrounds) who may apply for higher education courses. It is crucial that the new tuition fees regime in Wales and the support available to Welsh domiciled students from the Welsh Government and individual universities, is clearly communicated. If prospective students do not understand the offer available to them, there is a risk that the new fees arrangements could work against the very groups that the Government is seeking to reach with its social justice and widening access policies.

It is accepted that those prospective students from more affluent areas are generally better informed with regard to access to university and the support available, and that those from Communities First neighbourhoods and families with previous low participation in higher education, less so. This is a growing concern as we move forward. The evidence base for these concerns is not yet available.

2. Progression Routes

- ***Has the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure had any effect to date on progression routes into higher education?***

There have been examples of changes in decisions made by young people, to continue onto higher education, drawing on the evidence from Learning Coaches case studies published in 2008 by Welsh Government, as well as local authority and individual school and college initiatives, for example in Caerphilly, Merthyr, the Vale, Powys and Neath. This is not a consistent pattern for all parts of Wales. Fundamentally, there is a requirement to improve the Key Stage 4 school attainment rate, currently 40%, to improve progression on to HE.

- ***How will the wider choice of academic and vocational courses for young people age 14 and 16, as a result of the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure, affect the admissions policies of Welsh higher education institutions?***

There is evidence of wider choice through the publication of options menus by each 14-19 network, but the evidence base of how this wider choice has impacted on admissions policies in HE is not yet available. More information on admissions is detailed below and is linked into the question of parity of esteem.

3. Parity of Esteem

- ***Has progress been made towards parity of esteem between vocational and academic courses in respect of admission policies into higher education courses?***

An institution's admissions policy underlies everything it does in the area of the admission of students - from enquiries, recruitment and outreach to making decisions, transmitting data to UCAS, relationship building, diversity, transition support, registration and beyond. All universities across the UK work closely with the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programme (SPA) on the development of fair admissions to maintain and enhance excellence and professionalism in admissions, student recruitment and widening access. Most universities employ the same admissions policies for vocational and academic courses, although the former tend to use interviews for professional suitability as an extra requirement. As the admissions criteria for courses evolve, many universities are mindful that some qualifications better prepare students for HE study than others. However, this is not along a vocational/academic divide per se and admissions officers continuously monitor course and curriculum content of 'new' qualifications (vocational and academic). As a general point, much will depend on the definition of vocational or academic that is applied. For example, is a degree in medicine considered a vocational course or an academic one?

All universities in Wales have a strong tradition of evaluating the suitability of applicants 'in the round' whether or not the qualifications presented at application are vocational and/or academic. In this way, parity of esteem between vocational and academic courses does exist. As part of widening access policies, universities seek to provide opportunities for all who are able to benefit - the important point is one of the assessment of an individual's potential to succeed in higher education and not just the qualification they achieve.

- ***Are there clear vocational progression routes for students who wish to enter higher education for some, or all, HE courses?***

The number of young people engaged in many different progression routes into FE and HE is growing in Wales. Routes include First Campus, 14-19 Level 4 Tasters and Outreach –

Family Learning. The Universities Heads of the Valleys Institute, for example, has developed a 14-19 taster strategy that maps progression, which is due to start in Merthyr and Blaenau Gwent in January 2012.

4. Independent Advice

- ***Is there professional independent advice available to 14 and 16 year olds (and their parents) on progression into higher education courses, especially for young people intending to choose vocational courses?***

There is some anecdotal evidence that parents have particular views over the question of vocational versus academic. At this stage, it is difficult to see how legislation alone will change perception of vocational courses, but it is possible this will evolve over time.

There is, however, independent advice available:

Existing Services - Young people in Wales are entitled to independent advice from qualified careers advisors. The programme of independent careers information, advice and guidance supplements the careers planning skills that are delivered to all young people in the age range 11-19 as part of the basic curriculum under the Careers and World of Work framework.

Future Services: Future Ambitions – An independent study of the careers service in Wales '*Careers Wales: A Review in an international perspective*' (Professor A G Watts May 2009 Research Document No: 033/2009) concluded that 'The attention to quality-related issues within Careers Wales is impressive and comparable with the best international practice.' (page 47). Professor Watt's study also highlights high levels of resourcing and outputs in Wales compared with other parts of the UK. (page 14).

'Future Ambitions: developing careers services in Wales' (WAG 10-11 11097) was published in November 2010, building upon Professor Watts' study and looking beyond the services provided by Careers Wales to the wider careers 'family'. It describes in some depth the wide-range of careers services providers in higher education, further education, schools, colleges, Work Based Learning Providers, Jobcentre Plus, Union Learning Representatives as well as Careers Wales – a whole 'family' of careers services providers. The report analyses their inter-relationships and attempts to scope a more co-ordinated service that has a shared identity and a shared outcome – citizens who are able to make well-informed learning and careers choices and are aware of the services on hand to help them towards fulfilling choices. The 60 detailed recommendations in *Future Ambitions* form the basis of a medium to long-term Action Plan to realise this vision.

Summary

Higher Education Wales welcomes the introduction of the Measure and looks forward to the benefit of further data so that it can provide a more evidence based analysis in the future.

HIGHER EDUCATION WALES
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