

Evidence from South East Wales Further Education Institutions

Colegau Cymru South East Wales Regional Group

The Colegau Cymru regional forum for Further Education Institutions in South-East Wales brings together the following colleges:

- Bridgend College
- Cardiff and Vale College
- Coleg Gwent
- Coleg y Cymoedd
- St David's Catholic Sixth Form College
- The College Merthyr Tydfil

The forum currently is asked to nominate one Principal/Chief Executive to sit as a member of the Cardiff Capital Region Skills Partnership.

In addition to this, one Principal/Chief Executive is a member of the Cardiff Capital Region Economic Growth Partnership.

Consultation Response

Introduction:

The responses provided here reflect the joint and shared views of the regional group of Further Education Institutions in South-East Wales. These responses are an observation of how arrangements in the South-East region are currently working as the colleges are not in a position to give detailed comments on other regions partnership arrangements.

Is the data and evidence being used by the RSP timely, valid and reliable?
Have there been any issues?

The data used by the RSP is not always current or the most recent data available. Much of the data used is able to inform a 'top level' understanding of the region but given that the region represents around half of the population and economic

activity of Wales, sub-regional trends and performance is not always covered. Useful sources of LMI that are routinely used by the colleges to inform their curriculum offer, such as EMSI Labour Market Analytics, are not seemingly used by the RSP. There has been closer working with the colleges to review skills planning and provision data for Welsh Government and this is welcomed by the colleges.

How well do the partnerships engage with and take into account the views of those who do not sit on the partnership board, and how well do they account for the views of the skills providers themselves?

The RSP understandably engages with a limited number of businesses across the region. In general these tend to be larger companies who have the resources to allow staff time to be released from their work. However, some very large regional employers are not actively involved in the RSP – the NHS for example. The interests of smaller businesses are only reflected through representative organisations such as the Federation of Small Businesses.

The views of skills providers are formally represented in the RSP. However the level of representation has been queried by the colleges given that there is greater representation of FE in the other RSPs. This does not seem right given the significantly greater size of the South-East region and the larger number of colleges operating in it.

There seems to be a lack of clarity currently around the administrative arrangements and organisation of the RSP. There is not a clear statement of the governance arrangements, rights of representation or the organisational structure below Board level.

Are the Regional Skills Partnerships able to actually reflect current and future skills demands within their regions? What about very specialised skills for which there may be low volumes of demand?

No. Much of the discussion and dialogue around skills demand is shaped by the aspiration of most stakeholders to support and grow 'high value' jobs. There is an understandable desire to try to support and promote economic growth in the region by focussing on higher level skills and sectors where technology is driving significant change. However, the LMI data continues to show that the bulk of employment 'openings' across the region in coming years will continue to be in lower skill areas (including occupations in care, hospitality, retail and food preparation). There is a gap in understanding for many employers that the very highest level of skills (above level 6) will inevitably be only required in a minority of

jobs across the region. The most significant demands will continue to be around addressing the Basic Skills deficit for many adults and for upskilling and reskilling the current workforce particularly around level 3 and 4.

The RSP has not considered the potential challenges posed by Brexit yet in any detail and the impact that this will have on future skills needs. The colleges through their own engagement with employers across the region know that there are certain sectors who anticipate major skills related impacts. These sectors include farming and food production, hospitality, health and care and tourism.

Do the Regional Skills Partnerships have sufficient knowledge and understanding of:

- a) The foundational economy and the needs of those employed within it; and
- b) The demand for skills provision through the medium of Welsh?

The RSP has recognised the importance of the foundational economy in its various skills plans and assessments. The RSP has established that it recognises the sector, and in particular health and social care, as a priority skills sector for the region.

There has not been any significant consideration of the demand for skills provision through the medium of Welsh.

Are the Regional Skills Partnerships adequately resourced to fulfil their growing role?

No. The RSP has developed around a number of participant groups who have volunteered time, supplemented by a very small staff team. This has not been sufficient to address the growing role of the RSP. At the same time the resourcing level of the RSP in the future should require and assume the support and commitment of the various stakeholder groups, while ensuring that any unnecessary duplication of work/effort is avoided.

Is there an appropriate balance between the work of the RSP and the wider views on skills demand?

No – given the responses to 1-5 above the balance is not appropriate. It would seem that the findings of the RSP to date, which are limited, have been given more weight than other tried and tested ways of gathering LMI to inform

priorities.

Is the level of operational detail set out by Welsh Government for skills provision in higher/further education and work based learning appropriate?

For further education and work based learning, yes the detail is appropriate. There is significant detail provided to the RSP around further education and work based learning provision. The RSP expresses an opinion on the sectors and provision that should be grown and those areas where there should be a reduction. There is a collaborative approach with the colleges and there is a detailed consideration of the RSPs stated priorities. Performance against this is then monitored and is reported on to Welsh Government. This is an area of growing monitoring and dialogue between the colleges and the RSP.

There is not a similar approach taken to Higher education.

If there are any, how are tensions between learner demand/learner progression reconciled with RSP conclusions and Welsh Government preference for funding higher level skills?

As explained above, much of the RSP approach does emphasise higher level skills, as does Welsh Government's approach. However, the provision of skills for adults at all levels are required – there is clear evidence that many adults require access to support the development of literacy, digital literacy and numeracy. These requirements are an essential precursor to gaining higher level technical and vocational skills for many people.

Have the RSP and Welsh Government been able to stimulate changes in skills provision 'on the ground' to reflect demand?

To an extent yes. There have been managed increases in, and reductions in, particular areas of the FE and work based learning provision in response to RSP identified sector priorities. However, a significant and sustained growth of provision generally in the STEM area at a regional level will require more young people to be encouraged to pursue this throughout their education – and this falls outside of the influence of the RSP.

We would question whether the RSP or Welsh Government have influenced the provision of the bulk of higher education programmes at first degree level. (This is at a time when we have seen very significant increases in the number of HE

foundation year courses being offered and ever increasing numbers of unconditional offers being made).

What improvements can be made?

Given that the RSPs are being given increasing influence over the prioritisation and spending of around £400m of public money, the colleges' view is that robust, accountable and transparent governance arrangements need to be in place. The current situation does not demonstrate this and the colleges would welcome the development of it and look forward to continuing to play a central part in the development of RSPs.