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Welsh Government

Welsh Government
Consultation – summary of responses

Support for foundation years

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

Support for foundation years

Audience	Higher education institutions, further education institutions, other providers of higher education, and respondents to the consultation.
Overview	Summary of responses to the Welsh Government's consultation on support for foundation years
Action required	None – for information only.
Further information	Enquiries about this document should be directed to: Higher Education Division Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning Group Welsh Government Cathays Park Cardiff CF10 3NQ e-mail: HEDConsultationsMailbox@wales.gsi.gov.uk
Additional copies	This document can be accessed from the Welsh Government's website at gov.wales/consultations
Related documents	<i>Support for foundation years</i> (2016) https://consultations.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultation-documents/160303-fy-consultation-doc-en.pdf

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Introduction

1. The Welsh Government undertook consultation¹ on the provision of financial support to students taking undergraduate courses with a foundation year. This document summarises the responses received to that consultation and provides a Welsh Government response.

¹ [Support for foundation years, Welsh Government, 2016, WG28123.](#)

Summary

2. There has been some debate in the further and higher education sectors about support for foundation years, which, among other things, extend the duration of some undergraduate degrees by adding a year of study. Undergraduate degrees become four years instead of the usual three. The Welsh Government sees this provision as potentially problematic as it 1) burdens students with an additional year of debt and 2) increases the cost to the Welsh Government.

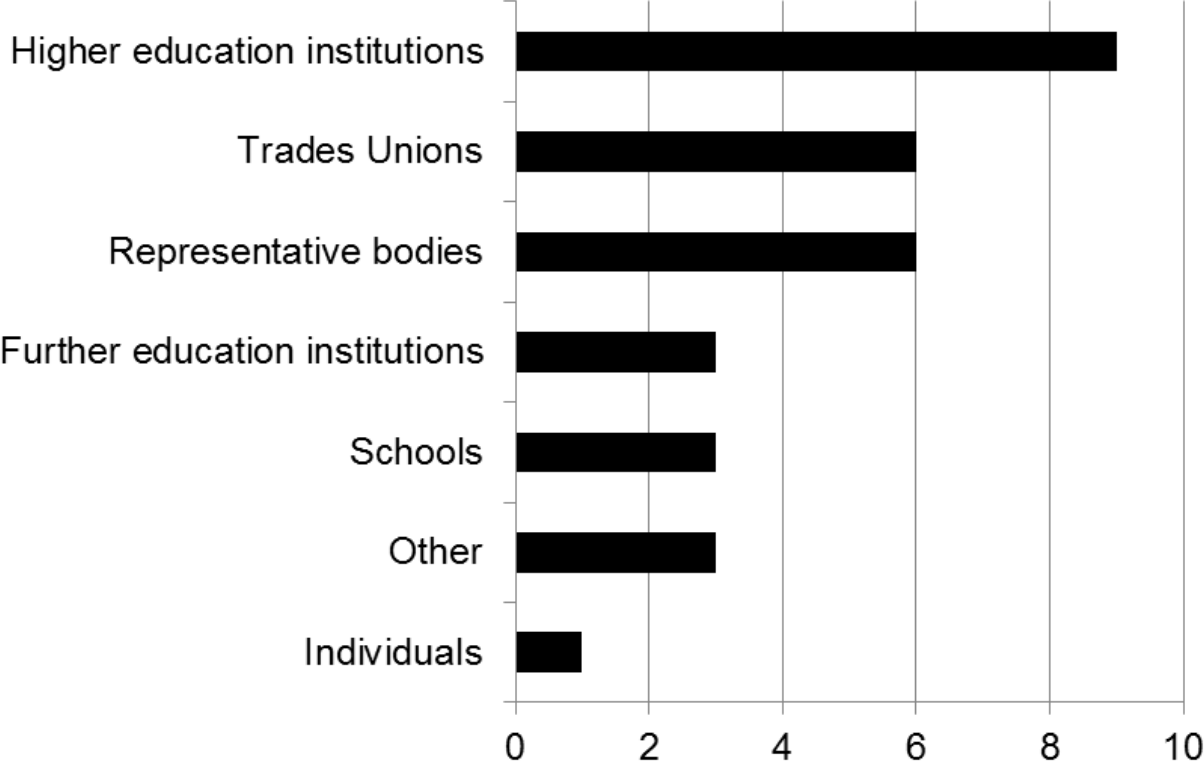
3. The consultation ran between 3 March and 26 May 2016. Thirty-one responses were received. The Welsh Government is grateful to those who responded.

4. The Welsh Government has weighed the responses to the consultation and has determined that there is insufficient evidence to make a change to student support at this time. Nevertheless, the responses to the consultation have not demonstrated that the concerns the Welsh Government has with this provision are groundless. Two significant concerns remain.

Responses

5. By group, the largest response came from the higher education sector, as the summary below demonstrates. A full list of respondents is at annex 1.

Figure 1
Number of respondents, by group



Questions

6. We asked a number of questions. A number of common themes emerged against each and are summarised briefly below. The full responses have been published separately.

Question 1 - We have outlined a series of concerns regarding foundation year provision principally that it represents poor value for money and does not obviously provide any benefit to the student when compared to the available alternative routes to higher education. Do you agree with this analysis? Why?

7. A majority of respondents, but not all, disagreed with this proposition. The position roughly followed sector lines. Higher education institutions (HEIs) and their representatives largely disagreed, while further education institutions (FEIs) and their representatives tended to agree. The position amongst Trade Unions was mixed. Schools disagreed.

8. Several themes emerged.

Foundation years succeed

9. Perhaps the first theme to note is the strongly held opinion of respondents from HEIs, as well as other respondents, that these courses are successful in assisting the target groups to proceed to usual undergraduate study. A number offered statistics from their own institution and comments from, or surveys of, students to corroborate their position. Some respondents were critical of a perceived lack of robust data in the consultation document.

10. The Welsh Government recognises that these courses appear to be successful and agrees that robust data should be used to carefully monitor the adequacy of progression. A high level of progression is essential given that students pay the costs of these courses.

The institutional environment

11. A number of respondents pointed to the excellent academic facilities in HEIs, teaching by regular academic staff, excellent pastoral support, strong ancillary facilities (for example, sporting) and a range of other benefits – academic and otherwise – that, the Welsh Government agrees, accrue to students in HEIs in Wales.

Introduction to higher education

12. In a similar vein, respondents noted the foundation courses offer a successful introduction and transition to higher education.

Value for money

13. The issue of value for money was addressed by respondents. Some noted that an assessment of value for money is not possible without objective data on the success of foundation years as compared to other routes. Others, mainly HEIs, suggested that the outcomes being achieved did represent value for money (in absolute terms). FEIs argued that foundation years represent poor value for money when compared to the alternatives.

14. The Welsh Government accepts the need for more robust data to assess value for money. We are not convinced that simply because successful outcomes are achieved that this demonstrates, in the absence of a comparison with other routes to higher education, adequate value for money.

Target groups

15. Four target groups for this provision emerged from the responses:

- individuals from groups under-represented in higher education;
- individuals who do not have adequate academic achievement to study at the usual undergraduate level;
- individuals who are converting from one academic discipline to another, usually to a Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM) subject; and
- mature students.

16. These groups are not mutually exclusive.

Availability of financial support

17. A number of respondents noted that the availability of student support finance was an important reason for the attractiveness of these courses. The support available to students undertaking designated courses of higher education (especially maintenance support) is substantially more than is available to support study in other routes.

18. Finance may represent a barrier to study. While resource constraints exist, it would be preferable if choice was not constrained by the availability of support.

Constraints on FE funding and the availability of adult learning

19. Some respondents suggested that constraints on the funding of the further education sector may have resulted in some of the growth in these courses at HEIs.

20. The Welsh Government is mindful that funding to FEIs has not grown in recent years. While it is for FEIs to determine how best to allocate their resources, the Welsh Government recognises that financial pressures must be accommodated and the limited funding available for adult education may be impacting on the availability of level 3 and access courses to some groups. This may be most pronounced for education for those aged over 25 years. It would be preferable if a broad offer of access provision was available in a range of settings and localities.

Additional student debt

21. Some respondents suggested that additional debt is an issue; others, a matter of personal choice.

Lack of sufficient evidence on which to make an informed decision

22. Some respondents noted that there was insufficient evidence – in the consultation document and more widely – to make an informed decision on a change in policy on foundation courses.

National and international provision

23. HEIs noted that students on foundation courses in Wales come from both the UK and beyond, providing a boost to the revenue of Welsh HEIs, as well as to the economy.

Equity between Welsh and other students

24. Some respondents thought it would be inequitable to treat Welsh students differently to their peers from elsewhere in the United Kingdom, should funding be removed.

Question 2 - Which of the four proposals do you think should be implemented? Why?

25. Most respondents argued that 'do nothing' is the preferred option. Some, mainly but not solely HEIs, argued that these courses are a success and should be supported. Others argued only that there was a lack of adequate evidence on which to base any change.

26. Some, mainly FEIs, argued these courses represent poor value for money and support should be ceased.

27. A small number of respondents selected other options. One HEI, based in England, selected 'do nothing' but noted that providing a reduced fee and maintenance support may also be an option, albeit less preferred. One respondent from an HEI agreed with removing support 'where alternative routes are available'. One respondent suggested that growth and fee levels ought to be kept under review, especially in non-STEM areas.

Question 3 - Do you think our definition of foundation years at paragraph 30 will capture the type of provision we have discussed?

28. A number of respondents agreed with the definition. A majority of respondents either disagreed or stated that the points presented did not constitute a definition.

29. Respondents suggested additional factors including whether the year is an integrated preparatory year, socio-economic background of the student and entry requirements.

Question 4 - What do you think the impact on widening access will be if the Welsh Ministers were to cease support for these courses? Do you think any particular groups would be disadvantaged by this policy? What are the characteristics of the people taking these courses?

30. Responses to this important question principally focused upon the impact on the target groups identified above, stating that widening access would suffer. Eliminating or reducing support may deter students from lower income households, perhaps especially from disadvantaged areas, mature students who need maintenance support and those from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds.

31. A differential impact on disabled students was also raised, as some HEIs noted that disabled students make up a greater share of those on foundation courses than in the HE population generally. A similar point was made for women on STEM foundation courses and part time foundation courses. It was noted that STEM foundation courses are relatively popular and thus may be disproportionately affected.

32. FEIs noted that impact could be minimal if the alternatives in the FE sector were clearly communicated and funding improved.

Question 5 - Other comments

33. A number of respondents made additional comments. Of note were:

- the need for any proposals to align with the recommendations of the Diamond review²;
- the possible establishment of a Tertiary Education Authority overseeing both further and higher education (the Hazelkorn review)³; and
- a long-term strategy for further and higher education.

² [Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance Arrangements in Wales.](#)

³ [Review of the Oversight and Regulation of Post-Compulsory Education and Training in Wales.](#)

Welsh Government response

34. The Welsh Government has weighed the responses to the consultation and has determined that there is insufficient evidence to make a change to student support at this time.

35. Nevertheless, the responses to the consultation have not demonstrated sufficiently strongly that the concerns the Welsh Government has with this provision are groundless. Two significant concerns remain. These are discussed in the context of the four target groups for this provision, recognising that these groups are not mutually exclusive.

Individuals from groups under-represented in higher education

36. These are the groups to which widening access strategies usually apply. Our first concern is the cost to this group and the implied policy position. Individuals who are under-represented in higher education can access higher education (via a foundation year) only at a greater cost to themselves (of one year's debt) when compared to those students not so under-represented. While the Welsh Government recognises that these courses represent only one of a number of ways in which HEIs widen access, this is a somewhat perverse position.

37. The Welsh Government recognises that widening access activity must be resourced and that in a system which relies on students meeting fees and maintenance costs through Government-provided grants and loans it is not surprising that these courses have emerged. But we cannot ignore the problem of those under-represented in higher education being asked in some cases to pay more for their education.

Individuals who do not have adequate academic achievement to study at the usual undergraduate level

38. Provision of foundation years to this group was an important reason for undertaking the consultation. Responses to the consultation suggest this is a target group for this provision.

39. When asked about the cost of foundation years, a number of respondents pointed to such things as excellent academic facilities, teaching by regular academic staff, excellent pastoral support, strong ancillary facilities and a range of other benefits – academic and otherwise – that, the Welsh Government agrees, accrue to students in higher education institutions in Wales.

40. The Welsh Government does not dispute that these benefits accrue but is mindful that this appears to be, in effect, the traditional model of delivery of undergraduate education applied to what is chiefly level 3 provision.

41. It is unclear whether this level of cost is justifiable when alternatives exist and could be developed further for this particular group. There is a range of provision at level 3 in a number of settings across Wales. While it may be the case that HEIs are adept at providing this alongside their traditional offer, it is not clear to the Welsh Government that supporting relatively expensive provision which may compete with or displace existing provision is a

rational policy approach. This is our second concern and responses to the consultation do not dispel it.

Individuals who are converting from one academic discipline to another

42. Respondents noted that foundation years may also be used as a conversion course to allow a student to reorient themselves toward another discipline before entering undergraduate study. On initial analysis, this seems less problematic than the other cases; if students are genuinely undertaking these types of conversion courses due to a desire to embark on a different academic and career path then the additional debt would seem to be a matter of informed personal choice. Presumably, students applying to these conversion courses have a level of academic achievement which would enable them to access HE in another discipline, and progression amongst this group will be very high.

Mature students

43. Respondents suggested that mature students are an important target group. It seems probable that mature students must fall into one of the above categories for foundation years to be genuinely useful and the considerations above apply. The Welsh Government also notes that the availability of maintenance support may be relatively important to this group.

Building on the positive attributes of foundation years

44. While concerns remain, the Welsh Government has noted what appear to be a range of positive attributes of foundation years which can inform future policy development and the development of provision in other settings.

Welsh Government actions

45. The Welsh Government accepts the view expressed by a number of respondents that there is insufficient evidence at this time to enable a clear decision to be made about support for foundation years. No changes will be made immediately.

46. However, as noted, the concerns of the Welsh Government have not been resolved by the responses to the consultation. The Welsh Government therefore intends to:

- monitor the number of students being supported on these courses;
- monitor the progression rate to the first year of undergraduate study⁴; and
- initiate research and evaluation as necessary, potentially including a study of value for money.

⁴ Relevant data is released toward the end of the calendar year. The Welsh Government has scheduled the first monitoring review for the end of 2016.