



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION

# A review of the current 16-19 curriculum in Wales: government response

Our response to Estyn's report and recommendations.

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## Report details

This report has been written in response to a request for advice in the Minister for Education's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2021-2022 which commissioned Estyn to consider the accessibility and effectiveness of the current curriculum offer available to learners aged 16 - 19.

The report provides an overview of the current curriculum offer for 16 to 19-year-olds and considers how effectively impartial information, advice and guidance enables young people in post-16 education and training to improve their career planning.

The report is wide ranging, building on the findings of several previous thematic reviews that has focused on related aspects of education for 16 to 19-year-olds, or advice and guidance for young people. It also references and draws comment on the impact of several related policies and programmes that support young learners including some applicable to pre-16 learners, for example, the Seren programme and the availability of impartial careers information advice and guidance.

The report recognises fully the Welsh Government's ambition for the reform of the post-16 sector in Wales and the planned creation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER). It draws on evidence from online visits to a range of post-16 providers in eight different local authority areas, reflecting the geographical, linguistic, and socio-economic context across Wales. Views were sought from staff and learners in schools, further education colleges, apprenticeship, and traineeship providers. The report authors also talked to leaders in local authorities and to other key stakeholders.

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## Summary of main findings

Estyn found that a learner's options to continue learning at age 16 vary considerably depending on where they live in Wales, what language they wish to learn through and what their educational attainment was at age 16. That overall, the national, regional, and local structures to bring coherence and support improvements in the curriculum for 16 to 19-year-olds in Wales are not working well enough. Schools, colleges, work-based learning providers along with local authorities, are influenced by different departments within the Welsh Government, currently have different funding arrangements and are not subject to the same statutory duties or guidance.

Estyn recognises that the Welsh Government's PCET reform programme and the planned creation of CTER will help address these issues. It found that 16-19 provision across Wales is variable. Providers and local authorities in a few local areas work well strategically to overcome some of the barriers and provide a broad and relevant curriculum offer that meets the needs of learners at all levels and responds to employers' skills needs.

Although nearly all learners make an initial transition to education, employment, or training at age 16, a considerable number of learners do not sustain this initial destination. Around 11% of young people (around 11,300 young people) aged 16-18 in Wales were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) in 2020 (Welsh Government, 2022e).

The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 positively influenced the range of learning programmes and subject choices available locally to young people aged 16 to 19 in Wales. However, the breadth of choices that developed because of the Measure has reduced in some parts of Wales in recent years, particularly where collaboration has declined. While the number of subjects available in the local curriculum offer meets the requirements of the Measure, this would not be case if subject options that do not run were excluded. The impact of this is that

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learners in these providers effectively have a more restricted range of options than the Measure requires.

The impact of the Measure is most positive for those learners who attain at least 5 GCSEs at grade C or above. The impact of the Measure is much less evident for other learners because the Measure is overly focused on level 3 qualifications.

The Curriculum for Wales and changes to qualifications for 14 to 16-year-olds will have implications for the curriculum and qualifications post-16. Providers at both phases are keen for certainty about qualifications to support their curriculum planning.

Worthwhile opportunities are available for learners when the Welsh Baccalaureate is successfully planned, integrated, and delivered providing an additional package of learning to enhance their post 16 experience. Many providers require their learners to undertake the Welsh Baccalaureate alongside their other option choices. However, in other cases it is optional and learners are not always clear about the rationale for these differences.

The Seren provision for high-attaining learners provides learners with interesting enrichment activities that may support their studies and future prospects of higher education. However, drawing conclusions on the overall impact Seren has nationally on future destinations of learners is difficult as higher education destinations for those participating in Seren activities are not evaluated systematically. The Seren programme does not focus well enough on supporting high attaining learners studying vocational qualifications.

Learners across Wales have access to a wide range of A level courses through the medium of Welsh, but opportunities to learn through the medium of Welsh on vocational courses and work-based learning are far more limited.

There are substantial differences in the extent to which local authorities engage

with the full range of education and training providers within their locality. In a few cases, local authorities provide effective strategic co-ordination for the local curriculum and monitor provision delivery appropriately. However, in a few cases strategic options for collaborative or consolidated provision are not given sufficient consideration.

Where there is transparent, effective, and strategic planning in the relationships and collaboration between schools and other providers, learners have a broad and balanced post-16 curriculum offer. For example, the Post-16 Education Consortium for Gwynedd and Anglesey provides a coherent set of collaborative post-16 options across all providers.

Secondary schools and further education colleges provide learners with access to a range of support services, these include coaching for learning, personal support, and careers information and guidance. These services are intended to support learners to overcome barriers to their learning, make informed and realistic choices, and realise their potential and ambitions, but the availability and quality of services is variable.

Under the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, work-based learning providers do not have a statutory duty to provide learners with access to coaching for learning, personal support, and careers information and guidance. Learners in work-based learning may miss out on similar opportunities for support as learners who are at school or college.

All schools and colleges provide tutorial support. These sessions tend to be used for the Welsh Baccalaureate programme, UCAS applications and career support, as well as sessions that support learners' personal and social development. Where individuals have particular needs, this personal support is often tailored and more specialist support, such as counselling, is available.

What learners choose to learn at age 16, and with what provider, is influenced by the quality and impartiality of information, advice and guidance they receive

about the options in their local area and the pathways these provide for future education, training or employment.

There remains too much variation in the quality of careers and work-related education (CWRE) and impartial advice and guidance to support all learners in schools fully in making choices about their education and training options post-16. A minority of learners that responded to Estyn's survey and who studied at schools with their sixth forms do not feel that the advice and guidance they received about post-16 options was comprehensive enough or sufficiently impartial.

Most learners also feel that they are not given enough information about work-based learning pathways, including apprenticeships. Although online advice and guidance succeeded to an extent during the pandemic, learners did not have access the same range of work-related experiences, taster sessions or guest speakers to help them understand the full range of post-16 options.

There is too much variation between local authorities in information sharing arrangements to support transition between schools and other providers. In a few providers, the Welsh Government has funded work to improve transitional work from schools to post-16 providers, which is starting to have a positive impact in these pilot areas. Learners transitioning to other providers would benefit from a much wider range of information being shared, not just their academic attainment, to inform and provide effective future provision.

Information sharing arrangements to support the transition of learners with ALN between schools and other providers is strong. Suitable support and guidance ensure that ALN learners have a beneficial understanding of the options and pathways 14-19. The ALNCo, pastoral staff and specialist careers advisers work well together to help learners transition smoothly.

Data is not readily available to support comprehensive analysis of learner destinations and progress post-16, including analysis by characteristics of

learners. The data that is currently available is not collected or used well enough at provider, local, regional, or national level to evaluate provision and plan for improvements and future needs.

## Recommendations

A total of eleven recommendations are presented in the report, of which eight are for the Welsh Government working with CTER once established and key stakeholders including Qualifications Wales and Careers Wales, and three are for post 16 education and training providers.

### **The Welsh Government should work with the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and other bodies such as Qualifications Wales and Careers Wales to:**

R1. Review the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, taking account of issues raised in this and other recent Estyn reports on 14-19 learning, and provide coherent, strategic support for improvements in the curriculum offer for all post-16 learners in Wales.

R2. Ensure that learning area domains and learning programme directory build on the Curriculum for Wales.

R3. Ensure that every local curriculum offer includes a suitable number and variety of vocational and general courses and that the review of vocational qualifications identifies a clear vision and shared understanding about vocational qualification routes.

R4. Make better use of the available data to plan and fund provision based on

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emerging needs

R5. Ensure that providers collaborate more to offer learners access to a wider range of courses that individual providers either do not offer, or offer but do not run due to low numbers (including Welsh-medium provision)

R6. Develop a cohesive suite of qualifications to support progression for 14 to 19-year-olds that takes sufficient account of the need for progression opportunities from entry level to beyond level 3

R7. Reduce the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training aged 16-25 in Wales

R8. Improve the quality of data collected and shared to enable full analysis of learners' destinations at 16 and beyond and their outcomes, including by a learner's protected characteristics, additional learning needs, preferred language of learning and engagement in key initiatives such as the Seren programme

## **Welsh Government Response to recommendations 1-8:**

Accept recommendations 1-7. These include recommendations for the Welsh Government to take forward and some for CTER once established. This includes policy development to be undertaken by Welsh Government to enable CTER to carry out its statutory functions.

The new Curriculum for Wales was rolled out in primary schools in September 2022 and will be progressively rolled out to older years, with the first new qualifications being taught in 2025 with first certification in 2027. The emphasis within the new curriculum is on learners achieving the four purposes, and supporting them to move confidently to employment, education or training through the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum which provides them with knowledge, skills and experiences. There are six Areas of Learning

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Experience within the new curriculum and there is a positive opportunity to align our support for learners pre- and post-16 with a consistent set of expectations and approach, underpinned by a coherent set of general and vocational qualifications from 14-16 in particular. The wider offer being developed to support qualifications at 14-16 will enable learners to retain a wider set of skills and experiences even as they focus on qualifications.

The Covid pandemic has required schools, colleges, universities and other partners, and supported by the Welsh Government, to work closely together to support learners transitioning from mandatory education to post 16 and beyond. The disruption experienced by learners and the differential experience of some cohorts, as well as the 2020 and 2021 qualifications approaches, has focused these conversations and provides a strong platform to build further engagement as envisaged by the report.

The creation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) is based on a recognition of many of the issues and challenges raised in the report and the need to address them. The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 received Royal Assent on 8<sup>th</sup> September 2022. This primary legislation brings together a range of currently disparate functions and funding arrangements to deliver a collaborative post-16 sector, focused on learners, and aligned to the needs of the economy, business, and Welsh communities.

CTER will be well positioned to take a coherent and system-wide approach, supporting learners with the knowledge and skills to succeed regardless of their social background, or language of learning. It will secure independent, resilient, and diverse providers working collaboratively to make significant contributions to national wellbeing and prosperity.

CTER will have a legal responsibility for the funding, oversight, regulation, and quality of tertiary education in Wales, along with the registration of providers. It will be well placed to ensure that Welsh apprenticeships, via work-based learning and training providers, effectively meet the future needs of the

economy, improve opportunities for learners to study bilingually and to meet its statutory duty to secure proper facilities for the education and training of learners aged 16 – 19. [Tertiary Education & Research \(Wales\) Act | GOV.WALE](#).

It is our intention to undertake a more detailed review of the current local curriculum offer available to learners aged 16-19 and to review the legislative requirements which underpin it as set out in Part 2 of the Learning and Skills Measure (Wales) 2009 and supporting guidance. The introduction of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 saw Part 1 of the Measure revoked and replaced with our Curriculum for Wales (CfW) from September 2022. The introduction of CTER, and its statutory and strategic role in forming the 16-19 curriculum offer and monitoring the planning and quality of the offer provides a real and timely opportunity to take a coherent and strategic approach to curriculum design and delivery, building on the centrality of purpose-led learning, and the four purposes of CfW ensuring that the overarching vision for CfW is aligned and embedded in post 16 education and training.

This approach will support the seamless transition and foster a continuum of learning for the first cohort of young people entering further education and training at age 16 from 2027 onwards having completed secondary education under the CfW.

We recognise the points raised in Estyn's report and are working closely with Qualifications Wales and other stakeholders to align our approach to a review of general and vocational qualifications for pre and post 16. We will consider carefully the issues raised in the report about facilitating and developing core qualifications to ensure a smooth transition for learners entering post 16 education and training.

CTER will also have a role in the collection, analysis and sharing of statistical data to aid planning and delivery across the Tertiary Education and Research sector working with post 16 providers and other stakeholders including local authorities, Regional Skills Partnerships, Careers Wales, and Qualifications

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Wales to recognise and support emerging needs, and to promote availability of general and vocational qualifications and transition pathways ensuring that these are reflected in impartial, careers information, advice and guidance that learners receive.

Promoting collaboration across the tertiary education and research sector is one of several strategic duties placed on CTER as set out in the TER Act. The aim of the post-16 reforms, and creation of CTER, is to support and initiate greater collaboration between schools, and with schools and colleges to ensure the curriculum offer for learners aged 16-19 is adequately planned, sustainable and meets the needs and entitlements of the learner.

Collaboration in this area will also support measures for partnership working between schools and colleges to support pre 16 learning and teaching particularly in low interest subjects where there are a small number of teachers available to teach across certain subjects. We welcome the focus on encouraging and building a flexible, collaborative whole system approach to curriculum delivery extending and building on the four key purposes. The approach also reflects the existing Direction under CfW which requires schools to collaborate to support learners to progress.

Recommendation 7 links closely to our **national milestone** of at least 90% of 16-24 year olds in education, employment or training by 2050. This is being driven forward by undertaking work to strengthen the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) (for 11- to 18-year-olds). The YEPF is built around the early identification of vulnerable young people, understanding their needs, putting appropriate support and/or provision in place and monitoring their progression. Updated guidance on the YEPF was published on 21 September.

The introduction of the Young Person's Guarantee (YPG) to protect a generation from the impacts of lost learning and delayed labour market entry arising from the Covid pandemic. The YPG offers enhanced opportunities for 16- to 24-year-olds who are NEET to move into education, employment, or training. For

16–18-year-olds the Framework and the YPG overlap; this provides a safety net for young people at a key transition point in their lives. The focus on the four purposes in CfW and the aim of ensuring young people are equipped and ready to move to education and employment together with making CWRE mandatory helps to build an understanding of work from an early age.

Partially accept Recommendation 8. The Welsh Government has established an extensive matched dataset which provides information on learners' education and employment destinations and publishes annual statistics on the destinations of post-16 learners as part of the consistent measures suite. There is potential for more detailed analysis of this data by a range of variables, and this is being actively explored, for example through publication of destinations by ethnicity, free school meals eligibility and special educational needs status in 2022. We consider that this is more of an issue around fully exploring the data, which is already available, rather than the quality of the data.

The Welsh Government has commissioned a research study to define a new education data and information ecosystem for Wales to support School Evaluation and Improvement, accountability, and transparency. As part of this, the researchers engaged with FE and Regional Skills Partnership representatives to seek their views on how schools could use data to aid learners in readiness to progress at the end of KS4. The final report is expected to be published this autumn.

Post-16 education and training providers should work together to:

R9. Ensure that that all learners have equitable access to vocational options, and that these options are valued as equally as general education options.

R10. Ensure that all learners have equitable access to Welsh-medium provision.

R11. Ensure that all learners in key stage 4 receive impartial information, advice and guidance that covers all post-16 options available in their local area.

## Welsh Government Response to recommendations 9-11

These recommendations are for post-16 education and training providers, and we fully endorse the principles behind them as they reflect our Vision for a reformed Tertiary Education and Research sector and support the statutory functions and strategic duties placed on CTER as set out in the TER Act 2022.

The recommendations support many of our strategic and Programme for Government commitments. This includes strengthening and increasing our Welsh language education provision; ensuring we offer both pre- and post-16 learners a wide range of qualifications and qualification pathways of equal quality, value, and esteem; and expanding the range of 'made in Wales' vocational qualifications to meet the needs of all learners. The review of vocational qualifications underway will ensure a wide range of qualification routes are available to all young people and that post 16 education and training providers are enabled to attract a wider more diverse group of learners and that impartial careers advice is readily accessible. This sits alongside the reform of general qualifications at 14-16 to align with the new curriculum.

Partnership and collaboration between and across post 16 education and training providers is central to the success of the PCET reforms and the effective and cohesive delivery of functions transferred to CTER once established.

We are working with providers to address recommendations contained in Estyn's report into post-16 partnerships: shared planning and provision between schools, and between schools and colleges (Estyn, 2021) ([include link](#)). This will be further enhanced via on-going discussions and engagement with stakeholders, CTER and post-16 providers as we implement and deliver the legislative requirements in the TER Act.

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