



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

REPORT, DOCUMENT

Equity and excellence: further and higher education national mission report

This report provides an update on progress in post 16 education since 2016 and the steps we have taken in response to COVID-19.

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Introduction

The success of our education reforms since 2016 belongs to everyone involved in that shared national endeavour. Over the last year, it has also been a national effort against coronavirus (COVID-19). A team of 3.2 million, with the education family meeting this challenge together, stepping up to ensure that learners of all ages are supported with their wellbeing, and with their ability to learn and to grow.

It has been an expression of our shared national mission. Striving to raise standards for all, to reduce the attainment gap and to ensure that we have an education system that enjoys public confidence and is a source of national pride.

In the agreement that initially brought me into Government, we committed to:

“ Promoting and enhancing both academic and vocational routes into and through further and higher education, and the national, international and civic roles of our educational institutions.

“ This includes both full and part-time opportunities that will benefit learners of all ages, employers and communities. ”

In achieving those objectives, we have partnered equity with excellence, aiming at the highest standards and opportunity for all.

Alongside our work in the pre-16 sector, it has been the privilege of my life to work with our colleges and universities, researchers and lecturers, unions and employers, in building a stronger future for learners, our institutions and our nation.

Across the three themes of Raising Standards, Reducing the Attainment Gap, and National Pride, I am proud to present how we have moved forward together

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and to identify some of the next steps in those areas.

Raising standards

In the decade before 2016, the number of Welsh students entering postgraduate courses decreased significantly. This was not just a poor outcome for those individuals missing out; it was bad for economic well-being, bad for diversifying entry into the professions and bad for a more engaged democracy and society.

I set a target of a 10% increase during the Government's term. We have far exceeded this, and there has been a 51% increase in first year, full-time postgraduates from Wales and a 20% increase in first year, part-time postgraduates from Wales. We are seeing more students from non-traditional areas progress from undergraduate to post-graduate but we can do even more. Many of those post-graduates will be undertaking their study through the medium of Welsh, thanks to grant funding we have made available, and we are supporting bilingual education and training opportunities at all points.

Having committed to expand the remit of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, the Coleg is making significant progress in post-16 bilingual education and training. Prentis-iaith (the online Welsh language awareness module for apprentices) has proved successful way beyond expectation, with providers incorporating it within their induction for all learners. Since its establishment, the Coleg has increased provision in 14 areas, with Welsh-medium modules available in 26 main subject groups.

We have also invested record amounts in professional learning and training for our education professionals. We introduced the first ever made-in-Wales Professional Standards for FE Teachers and WBL practitioners, backed with a professional development fund and a Wales-specific toolkit of resources.

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We have also focused on the lecturers and the teachers of the future. Supported by Government funding, almost 200 undergraduates across the country have worked with schools to mentor pupils in subjects such as languages and physics, showcasing the opportunities of those subjects, increasing take up of these subjects and inspiring university students to take up teaching as a career.

Teacher training has also been reformed, changing how it's done, who provides it, what is studied and where it happens. No institution has a divine right to train the next generation of teachers. It's far too important for that. That meant some difficult decisions, but we are now in a better place and have set a high bar for the future.

As well as working more closely with schools, our universities are working with public and private sector in delivering degree apprenticeships. We are investing £20m in this, supporting over 200 employers and 600 learners. Focusing on the critical areas of digital, engineering and advanced manufacturing, these are bespoke, industry-focussed degrees with work experience.

We have delivered Wales' first ever More Able and Talented Strategy, supporting learners from all backgrounds in schools and colleges to reach their potential. Through our two Seren Programmes, more than 16,000 learners have been supported, with record levels of students from disadvantaged and non-traditional backgrounds now going on to higher education.

Through a new Commission, responsible for all tertiary education and training, we can raise the bar even higher through alignment and shared ambition. We should be prepared to use this opportunity to look even more closely at the relationship between outcomes, funding, differentiation of mission, national and regional economy, skills and citizenship challenges, and wider research and innovation support.

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Attainment gap

In tackling the attainment gap, we have focused on raising ambitions, addressing examples of lowered expectations, and widening access to academic and vocational opportunities.

Thanks to our £15.5m investment in the new Personal Learning Accounts, over 2,000 individuals are benefiting from individualised programmes at their local colleges.

This partnership approach between Government and colleges is supporting individuals to gain higher-level skills and qualifications, opening up opportunities to switch careers or upskill in their chosen occupation. It provides support to employed people, furloughed workers or individuals affected by COVID-19.

Supporting all learners to overcome potential barriers has been one of the key principles of our approach. For example, we have maintained the Education Maintenance Allowance, supporting 16-18 year olds students who want to continue their education after school leaving age. This is supporting over 18,000 students across the country in 2020/21.

In 2018, we introduced a new progressive and equitable student support system that is unique in Europe for financing full and part time undergraduates and postgraduates.

We have been radical in taking a 'whole system' approach and not focusing solely on full-time undergraduates to the exclusion of other students. This has been crucial in supporting individuals to combine work and study, to upskill, and to increase education participation.

I am pleased that our part-time numbers continue to go up after introducing our reforms, and if you look at The Open University for example, the latest available

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official data for the 2019/20 academic year shows that Welsh part-time student numbers have gone up by 81%. In addition, according to their own figures, the OU claims a 150% increase in full-time equivalent undergraduate students for the current academic year. We can be proud of our approach and success, but there is still more to do on delivering a right to lifelong learning so that citizens can update or expand skills, knowledge and experiences.

Supporting staff and student mental health and well-being is essential if we are to tackle the attainment gap and widen access to education success. In the last two years, alone we have invested over £55.7m to support mental health and wellbeing in colleges and universities. Universities are working with Public Health Wales and the Welsh Government through the Healthy and Sustainable Colleges and Universities Framework, to ensure all aspects of university life are designed to provide the greatest level of support to students. This 'whole-university approach' to mental health means ensuring that good mental health and wellbeing is a core part of all university activities as part of their offer to students and staff.

We have commissioned Estyn to undertake a thematic review of FE learner wellbeing during the Covid pandemic. Funding will result in resources disseminated sector-wide during 2021, including commissioned toolkits to support whole-college approaches on substance misuse and adverse childhood experiences.

In raising our ambitions for each learner and for our education system, we have secured exciting new global opportunities. More partner students from Wales take part in the Yale Global Young Scholars Programme than any other region or nation outside the US; we are one of only two governments to have a Gilman International partnership with the US State Department, and we have mobility and academic agreements with partners such as Vietnam. We have also developed and funded Wales' first-ever national outward mobility scheme – Global Wales Discover – widening access to overseas mobilities through shorter-term opportunities.

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We were extremely disappointed by the UK Government's reckless approach to Erasmus+, and will continue our efforts to support more of our young people experience international opportunities, and to keep Wales open to international students.

Closer to home in the UK, we have seen a 55% increase in state school admissions from Wales to the University of Oxford, and a 33% increase in Welsh admissions to the University of Cambridge through our Seren programme. Our Seren students are also securing places at world leading universities here in Wales, Oxbridge and highly selective universities in the US including Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Chicago and Princeton.

National pride

The OECD has identified Wales' recent reform journey as a leading international example of successful system change. I am pleased that our system, and schools, colleges and universities are highlighted as an example to the rest of the world. Colleges and universities, rooted in their communities, but global in outlook and aspiration, are jewels in our national crown. Through their research and innovation, excellent teaching and sense of civic mission, our post-compulsory education sector is a calling card to the world.

We have invested in the re-establishment of research and innovation funding delivering on a recommendation of both the Diamond and Reid Reviews. This supports universities and researchers to work with industry and business, crucial to economic recovery and renewal in the period to come.

The Welsh Government has a clear record of investing in our research base as demonstrated by the internationally recognised Sêr Cymru programme. To date, this funding has supported more than 450 research posts (from PhD students to Research Chairs) and has brought researchers to Wales from 29 countries to

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work in our universities. In 2019 alone, we invested an extra £8.4m in this programme to support international academic and industrial partnerships focused on research excellence.. One of the most recent tranches of funding from Sêr Cymru included Strategic Partnership Awards. These have enabled collaborations between Welsh universities and those in the US, China and Malaysia. In 2020, an additional £2.9m was invested to pump prime and support coronavirus research activity at Welsh universities

As well as supporting all students to deal with their main issue of upfront living costs, we have delivered the 'Diamond Dividend' to our higher education sector, increasing funding to and through HEFCW by 80% since 2016.

I am pleased that we have delivered on my assurance to HEFCW that their income would continue to increase in each year of this Government, as we phased in the reforms to higher education and student support. We are maintaining HEFCW core funding in recognition of the impact of the pandemic on the higher education sector and their role in growing the future economy, through increasing high skills levels, research and innovation and civic mission.

I am proud that our universities, HEFCW, and Student Finance Wales have worked together to make Wales the first higher education accredited Real Living Wage sector in the UK, delivering this before much of the Welsh public sector. All colleges and designated institutions are committed to the principles of a real living wage for all of their direct employees, and is clearly the next step in securing a responsible and progressive sector.

Acting as stewards of community and country, our colleges and universities are working with us to support learners through the transition to university in these complex times. This builds on our collaborative efforts to ensure that Wales is the top performer for very best A-Level results. Of all A level learners in Wales in 2019, 27 per cent achieved A*–A grades, the highest in the UK. This is up from 23 per cent in 2016, when we were significantly behind England and Northern Ireland and I insisted on a dedicated improvement plan. Strong performance

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continued last year with centre assessment grades.

Responding to my challenge back in 2016, Welsh universities now lead the way in fulfilling their civic mission. Brought together through a unique national Civic Mission Network and Civic Mission Framework, 35 distinct projects have been funded supporting over 50 activities. We can go even further, and continue to be an example to the rest of the world. The specific civic mission duty, up front and centre, in the draft Tertiary Education and Research Bill is crucial to our future approach across the post-compulsory sector. By formalising the role and promotion of civic mission, in line with Wales' well-being goals, we are on the verge of something very exciting.

Our new national school curriculum focuses on the development of ethical, informed young people ready to contribute and be citizens. Over the next period, this will mean that our education system – including the post-compulsory sector – must also be focused on shared citizenship, common culture and empowering all with the knowledge and skills to change society for the better. In reviewing the future of qualifications and exams, these must be at the forefront of our thinking.

One of the priorities within my civic mission challenge was social enterprise and entrepreneurship. Wales now outperforms other UK nations in successful graduate start-ups and our Youth Entrepreneurship Programme will help create 900 new businesses by the end of the year.

I remain committed to widening opportunities and horizons for our students, colleges and universities. That is why we have prioritised working with the world's best universities such as Yale, MIT and Oxford on student pathways, teaching support for schools and research relationships. Harnessing our own talent, particularly post-graduate talent is instrumental for the growth of high-tech industries, the wider economy and an engaged democracy.

We have introduced a Master's bursary for STEMM subjects and for those who wish to study through the medium of Welsh, incentivising students to remain, or

return to, Wales to undertake post-graduate study. This scheme has supported Wales' higher education institutions to incentivise the recruitment of the most talented Welsh students, in line with our Economic Action Plan and my response to the Diamond Review. The bursaries represent additional support on top of the main support package for Welsh postgraduate students.

Conclusion

We are succeeding in raising standards and delivering on a system enjoys public confidence and is a source of pride to citizens, communities and the whole country. Our colleges and universities must be seen as institutions of and for communities across Wales – owned, rooted and responsible to their regions and their nation. There has been huge progress in recent years, but challenges remain. Our institutions – which represent the best of Wales' commitment to advancement and community action - must continue to help address issues of social cohesion, active citizenship and informed debate.

We know that our education system thrives when everyone has a shared stake. When we set high standards for all, when we refuse to accept lowered expectations, when we speak to the world with confidence, we are fulfilling our national mission. Together we can continue to deliver true public service education, combining equity and excellence, delivering for all citizens.

Kirsty Williams MS
Minister for Education



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