

Teachers' pay and conditions: Feedback from September 2023 stakeholder workshop

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Introduction

Background

In September 2023, Alma Economics presented research findings on the international evidence on teachers' pay and conditions to six stakeholder organisations. This research included benchmarking, correlation analysis, and five country case studies. Following the presentation, participants were asked to provide feedback on the report and to comment on findings they found the most interesting or surprising, and the most relevant to Wales.

After the presentation, workshop participants took part in two topic-based breakout sessions. The first breakout session focused on evidence on salary structures from other countries with prompts such as:

- What lessons can we learn from other countries that would work well in Wales given the national reform agenda?
- Do you have views on whether there are other options for beneficial changes in Wales's salary structures and associated career pathways? If yes, what are they?

The second breakout session focused on wider evidence on factors affecting teachers' and leaders' conditions, including prompts such as:

- What solutions have you seen elsewhere that are relevant to Wales? Some areas to consider are (i) workload, (ii) school and teacher autonomy, (iii) rurality, (iv) bilingual teaching and Cymraeg 2050, and (v) permanent contracts.

Key findings

The themes that emerged across all three workshop activities are presented below.

Workload and working hours: Workload and working hours were a commonly mentioned topic, with participants noting findings in the report around the high self-reported workload of teachers in Wales, and the gap between reported working hours and statutory working hours. Participants commented on a perceived correlation between reduced workload and better learner outcomes and expressed support for the view that a reduction in workload and contactable working hours would result in more time for teachers to engage in continuous professional development (CPD), and more time for planning, preparation, and assessment. Participants also stressed the importance of conducting and using the findings from workload impact assessments when planning for new policies, as the adoption of new policies often results in increased workloads for teachers and leaders.

Professional status of teachers: The importance of teachers having a high professional status was mentioned across all workshop activities. Participants commented on the high status of teachers contributing to positive outcomes in the Singapore and Ireland case studies. In the first breakout session, ensuring that classroom teachers had equal prestige and career progression opportunities as those that pursue leadership positions was discussed by multiple tables. Across multiple workshop activities, the challenge of recruiting and retaining talented teachers was seen as correlated with the professional status of teachers and school leaders.

Supporting small, rural, and bilingual schools: The specific challenges that small, rural, or bilingual and Welsh-medium schools face was a frequently discussed subject. Case studies of countries that have successfully supported these types of schools within the report include Poland and Estonia, which have large rural populations, and the Basque Country due to strong support for the

Basque language both within and outside of the education system. Specific challenges faced by these schools that were highlighted by participants included recruitment, less access to CPD, and challenges with funding. In terms of recruitment, rural schools may struggle due to teachers having to relocate, and Welsh-medium schools may struggle to compete with other sectors for Welsh speakers. In terms of funding, it was noted by participants that it is more expensive to run small schools in many cases as these schools cannot take advantage of economies of scale. Solutions to address this included per-pupil funding (as is the case in Estonia), a small schools grant, and the creation of rural school clusters, which would also increase opportunities for collaboration and CPD.

The following sections present the findings from each workshop activity in more detail, alongside the views of representatives from participating organisations.

Mentimeter feedback

Following the presentation of findings, workshop participants were asked to provide their thoughts on the most surprising or interesting finding, and which of the research findings they saw as most relevant to Wales.

What finding was the most surprising or interesting?

A few comments noted that the findings of the presentation matched what is understood about teachers' pay and conditions, matched issues that have been raised in the past, and support what has previously been submitted to the IWPRB.

The research finding that people found most interesting or surprising was the high proportion of GDP spent on education in Wales, especially compared to other OECD countries. Participants noted that this high proportion of GDP spend is not reflected in the conditions in schools. Several comments questioned how much of the spending goes towards frontline delivery, given the high student-teacher ratios in classrooms and the budget shortfalls recorded at the school level.

A few comments focused on permanent contracts, with one comment highlighting their importance, and another expressing surprise about the number of teachers in Wales not on permanent contracts. Two comments mentioned that there was a lack of focus in the report on workload. Other individuals touched on their surprise about the difference between statutory pay and working hours and actual pay and working hours, and others touched on the role of prestige associated with teaching careers in the case studies.

What findings seem the most relevant to Wales?

Several comments highlighted that findings around pupil-teacher ratios were most relevant to Wales. A few comments stressed that Wales needs to increase focus on pupil-teacher ratios and highlighted their role in increasing learner attainment. Finally, a few comments brought up pupil-teacher ratios in combination with related issues such as starting pay and recruitment challenges.

The findings around social status were also seen by a few participants as being relevant to Wales. One participant highlighted the importance of teachers' professional status and asked how this could be improved in Wales. Another commented more generally on ensuring that teachers are aptly valued, both in terms of pay and sufficient training opportunities.

Findings regarding issues faced by small and rural schools were also seen as important to Wales. Two participants mentioned the importance of findings around funding and expenditure for rural pupils and schools. Ensuring that the specific needs of local communities are met was also found to be relevant to Wales by one participant.

Several elements of the country case studies were seen as relevant to Wales. Participants mentioned the Basque Country, with one touching on the connection between the success of the Basque education system and families speaking Basque at home. The strong performance of Estonia was mentioned by several participants, with the per pupil funding model being highlighted. Two participants also noted that the Irish case study had findings that were the most relevant to Wales. Finally, one participant mentioned the relevance of Singapore's three track model of teacher

specialisation, noting that it would allow teachers to progress in their career, while remaining in a classroom-based role.

Other comments touched on findings around high teacher workload in Wales, as well as the relationship between language differences and performance gaps in the research.

Breakout session one: salary structures

Key themes

Several key themes emerged from breakout session one, coming up across multiple organisations' discussions. These include:

Progression within classroom teaching: Across nearly all tables, it was discussed that teachers in Wales are required to assume leadership or management positions to obtain higher pay and progress their career. This leads to talented teachers being incentivised to leave the classroom, and teachers having a lower social standing as compared to school leaders or managers. It was discussed that adopting something like the Singapore model could be a way to keep talented teachers in classroom positions. Within this model, teachers could choose a career track within either teaching, leadership, or specialist; and could progress within these strands. Thus, teachers would not be penalised for remaining in classroom positions. However, some tables cautioned that there should still be flexibility to move between career tracks. While most tables agreed about this, one table stated that teachers and school leaders should be rewarded for assuming greater responsibility through leadership positions.

Use of Teaching and Learning Responsibilities (TLRs) and other allowances: Related to adequately rewarding classroom teaching, many tables touched on the use of Teaching and Learning Responsibilities (TLRs). A handful of tables noted that the discrepancy between statutory pay and actual pay identified in the report could be explained through the use of TLRs and other allowances as "salary top-ups". Several tables questioned whether this is the most appropriate pay structure going forward.

Workload and CPD: Several tables discussed the heavy workloads that teachers and leaders are faced with, with near consensus that workloads should be reduced. One table noted that the report presented a clear correlation between decreased workloads and better outcomes. Several tables discussed that a decrease in workload allows teachers more time to pursue CPD and allows them more time for planning, preparation, and assessment (PPA). CPD was also discussed more broadly, with several tables noting its importance, and highlighting the need for CPD to be of high quality and funded adequately.

Teachers' autonomy: A few tables touched on the autonomy of teachers and schools with regard to curriculum and pay structures. It was noted that in some case study countries, different levels of autonomy may make them more or less comparable to the Welsh context. For example, in the Basque Country teachers set their own exams giving them a higher level of autonomy, while in Wales exam papers are set by exam boards. Additionally, in Singapore the education system is controlled centrally, while in Wales both the Welsh Government and local authorities have a role in education. Further, one table specifically mentioned that less school autonomy and more central guidance could be beneficial.

Breakout session two: teachers' and leaders' conditions

Key themes

The second breakout session focused on solutions from the international evidence on teachers' and leaders' conditions, and what may be relevant to Wales. The following key themes emerged in the discussions at each table.

Workload: There was a consensus that teachers and leaders have high workloads, with teachers working a high number of hours. The importance of conducting workload impact assessments alongside the introduction of new policies was mentioned by several tables. Some groups emphasised that if a workload impact assessment does find that a policy will result in more work, these findings need to be taken into consideration. Several different solutions were presented to remedy the issue of large workloads, including restructuring exams, increasing recruitment efforts to spread workloads amongst more staff, and involving practitioners more heavily in policymaking. While not included as a case study in the report, Scotland was mentioned as a model where there is a limit on the number of hours that teachers work. However, there was disagreement as to whether limiting hours is an effective method to reduce workload.

School and teacher autonomy: There were mixed opinions on how much autonomy teachers and schools should be given. Groups in favour of more autonomy highlighted that each school has different needs, and curriculums should be able to be adjusted to account for this. Additionally, some tables noted that increased autonomy is related to a higher professional status for teachers. However, it was noted that options to be flexible are limited when funding is scarce. Those who cautioned against increased autonomy highlighted that it could lead to inconsistencies across schools and local authorities. Most groups agreed that there needs to be a balance between autonomy and consistency. Countries that came up in the discussion as having innovative or successful practices included Canada, where the education system is run largely independently by practitioners, and the Basque Country, where teachers set their own exams.

Rurality: All tables agreed that rural schools face unique challenges in terms of funding, sustained recruitment of teachers, and having to serve large geographic areas. One table mentioned the importance of rural schools in the community. While there was consensus on the issues that rural schools face, there was disagreement on the best way to support them. Several tables mentioned the possibility of a small schools grant or additional government support to alleviate funding issues. Some tables also mentioned the possibility of rural schools forming clusters to give them better opportunities for CPD and training, but one table highlighted that federations may undermine local communities.

Bilingual education and Cymraeg 2050: When discussing bilingual education, the most frequently discussed issue was the challenge of recruiting teachers. One table mentioned that recruitment was particularly challenging in secondary subjects, and specifically STEM. Another table highlighted that more competitive salaries were needed to attract Welsh speakers to teaching. A few tables mentioned the Basque Country case study, noting that the success of the bilingual education system in the Basque Country was partly based on the language being widely used outside of education, and noted that wider adoption of the Welsh language could ease recruitment issues. Finally, it was discussed that the bilingual teaching model in Wales needs to be specifically designed for the Welsh context, limiting the comparability of some of the case studies.

Permanent contracts: All tables that discussed permanent contracts agreed that fixed-term contracts should only be used sparingly, for example, to provide cover for staff on maternity leave, or in instances of long-term illness or secondment. A few tables mentioned the relationship between sustainable funding and permanent contracts. It was also mentioned that additional research is necessary to reveal more quantitative information about permanent contracts in Wales, for example, whether men are awarded permanent contracts more frequently than women.

Conclusion

Several themes emerged across each workshop activity, and within the discussions amongst participating organisations. Key discussion points that cut across all workshop activities included challenges around teachers' and leaders' workloads and working hours, ensuring a high professional status of teachers, and the best ways to support small, rural, and bilingual schools which all face unique challenges.

Despite many participants commenting that the findings of the report were in line with their previous understanding of teachers' pay and conditions, several findings from the presentation were highlighted as being surprising or interesting through the Mentimeter activity. Multiple participants remarked on the high proportion of GDP being spent on education in Wales in comparison with other OECD countries. Additional comments touched on permanent contracts, workload, and the gap in statutory and actual pay and working hours in Wales.


When participants were asked which findings from the report were most relevant to Wales via Mentimeter, multiple themes emerged. Several participants commented on findings around the student-teacher ratio, noting its importance and that it should be given more consideration in Wales. The status of teachers was mentioned in multiple comments, with participants citing the high professional status of teachers in Singapore and Ireland. The challenges faced by small and rural schools were noted as relevant to Wales, and in particular findings about different models of funding for small schools. Finally, a handful of participants highlighted the relevance of the findings around bilingual education from the Basque Country.

Key themes from the first breakout session around salary structures included adequately rewarding classroom teachers, the use of TLRs, teachers' and leaders' autonomy, workload, and CPD. Regarding rewarding classroom teachers, it was discussed that in order to progress in their careers, many teachers are expected to take on additional leadership responsibilities, taking them away from the classroom. Several tables discussed the model in Singapore, where teachers can choose between career tracks, as a way to remedy this. Several tables discussed the use of TLRs as salary top-ups and whether this pay structure is something that the system should move away from. There were mixed opinions about the benefits of teacher autonomy, with some participants noting that structural factors (e.g., exam structures) make some case studies less relevant. Finally, several participants noted that the high workload of teachers in Wales means they have fewer opportunities to pursue CPD and have inadequate PPA time.

In the second breakout session around factors impacting teachers' and leaders' wider conditions, all topics within the prompt were touched on. In terms of workload, all tables agreed that teachers and leaders in Wales have high workloads but had differing opinions on how best to remedy this. There were mixed opinions across different organisations about how much autonomy teachers and school leaders should be given, and how best to balance autonomy with consistency. All tables that discussed rurality noted the unique challenges that rural schools face, with different suggestions for how best to support them. When discussing bilingual education and Cymraeg 2050, the most discussed theme was around the recruitment of Welsh-speaking teachers. Finally, there was consensus that fixed-term contracts should be used sparingly, and only in specific situations.

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