



# CONTENTS

<a href="#"><u>Joint Ministerial Foreword</u></a>	4
<a href="#"><u>Introduction</u></a>	6
<a href="#"><u>Background</u></a>	8
<a href="#"><u>National Priority One: Growing Our Economy</u></a>	11
<a href="#"><u>National Priority Two: Improved Visibility</u></a>	15
<a href="#"><u>National Priority Three: Participation and Progression</u></a>	19
<a href="#"><u>National Priority Four: Strong Partnerships</u></a>	24
<a href="#"><u>National Priority Five: Supporting Educators and Training Providers</u></a>	28
<a href="#"><u>Next Steps</u></a>	32



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## Joint Ministerial Foreword

We are pleased to publish this Strategic Direction for Vocational Education and Training (VET), which sets out the Welsh Government's ambitions for strengthening VET provision in Wales.

Vocational learning supports learners throughout life - including pre-16, Further Education, Higher Education, Work Based Learning and Adult Learning. We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to access and complete vocational pathways, gain new skills and contribute to a strong and sustainable economy. Our vision is for a system where vocational pathways are visible, understood, and valued. Too often, vocational and academic routes are seen as unequal; in reality, both offer clear progression into higher-level learning, upskilling, and employment.

This document sets out five interdependent national priorities for VET. Each priority outlines the key challenges, highlights the progress already made by the Welsh Government and partners - including Medr and Qualifications Wales - and sets out the future direction of travel to achieve our shared ambitions.

These national priorities also support the Cymraeg 2050 goal of reaching one million Welsh speakers by 2050. Embedding Welsh language provision across vocational pathways will enable learners to learn and work bilingually, helping to deliver an inclusive system that reflects our bilingual nation.

VET is an integral part of Wales wider tertiary sector. Alongside this work, we have identified five pressing challenges facing the sector and, in January 2026, published a detailed evidence paper and launched a call for submissions. The Strategic Direction for VET complements this process and will form a key component of this broader review of tertiary education. Together, this evidence will provide a clearer picture of the pressures and opportunities across the system and help guide future policy decisions.

Delivering on the strategic direction for VET has, and will, require close coordination across all four of our ministerial portfolios. Through our Ministerial Board for Vocational Education and Training, we have together considered the strategic and cross-cutting issues that underpin this document.

We have also worked closely with our stakeholder reference group, and more broadly with the sector, including employer- representative bodies and trade unions. They have played a crucial role in informing and shaping this strategy. We extend our sincere thanks to its members, and to all individuals and organisations whose expertise and insight have shaped this work. Their contributions have ensured our approach reflects the diverse needs and aspirations of learners, the sector, employers, and communities across Wales.

Together, we can build a skilled, confident and prosperous workforce, ready to meet the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing, global economy.



# A Strategic Direction for Vocational Education and Training in Wales

## Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) at all levels, including pre-16, Further Education, Higher Education, Work Based Learning and Adult Learning, serves as a catalyst for economic resilience and competitiveness. It equips individuals and communities with the skills required to thrive in an increasingly dynamic local, national, and global economy.

A Written Statement by the Minister for Further and Higher Education in June 2025 set out how the Welsh Government intends specifically to strengthen the provision of VET in Wales. It included objectives to support the wider participation agenda by creating more accessible and flexible pathways for all learners. It also said the Welsh Government will ensure that VET is more closely aligned with the broader skills agenda, directly supporting priority sectors of the Welsh economy, responding to employer needs, and contributing to the delivery of green jobs.

To inform this agenda, a Ministerial Board for VET has been established. It brings together the Cabinet Secretary for Education, the Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and Planning, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, and the Minister for Culture, Skills and Social Partnership, to take a system level approach considering strategic and cross-cutting issues, including the development of this Strategic Direction.

In addition, the VET Stakeholder Reference Group was established comprising representation from across the sector including Estyn, Medr, Qualifications Wales, Careers Wales, Universities Wales, ColegauCymru, the National Union of Students Wales, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and the National Training Federation Wales. Officials have also undertaken wide ranging engagements with other stakeholders, including the Welsh Local Government Association, the University and College Union (UCU) Cymru, the Association of Directors of Education in Wales, Adult Learning Wales, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) Wales, and the Federation of Small Businesses Wales.

In November the Minister for Further and Higher Education delivered an Oral Statement to the Senedd setting out five pressing challenges facing Wales' tertiary education sector. The Welsh Government has now published a detailed evidence paper and launched a Call for Submissions on 21 January 2026. In parallel, a Ministerial Advisory Group made up of stakeholders from across the sector has been established to focus on the strategic priorities for tertiary education for 2025-26 and beyond, including in relation to VET.

## National Priorities for Vocational Education and Training in Wales

This strategic direction sets out the following interconnected national priorities, which articulate the ambition of this work. These priorities define a shared strategic direction for VET in Wales that should inform future policy. This shared approach aims to provide clarity and support alignment between partners across the VET system, including Medr, Qualifications Wales and Careers Wales. The strategic direction explains the importance of each priority, highlights progress made so far by partners in Wales and advocates future direction.

### The National Priorities are as follows:

#### **NATIONAL PRIORITY ONE**

Growing Our Economy

#### **NATIONAL PRIORITY TWO**

Improved Visibility

#### **NATIONAL PRIORITY THREE**

Participation and Progression

#### **NATIONAL PRIORITY FOUR**

Strong Partnerships

#### **NATIONAL PRIORITY FIVE**

Supporting Educators and Training Providers

## Background

These national priorities are underpinned by the Welsh Government's Economic Mission, and the ambitions of the Four Purposes of Education, both of which share the aspiration of a thriving, fair, and sustainable Wales. The Economic Mission outlines a vision for advancing Wales's economic landscape. In this vision, VET plays a key role in boosting productivity and innovation, while also helping individuals and communities prosper in a world that is changing quickly. The Economic Mission identifies four main priority areas:

- A just transition and green prosperity: Harnessing Wales' natural environment to support business growth and move towards net zero.
- A platform for young people, fair work, skills, and success: Supporting young people to achieve ambitious futures, prioritising skills and creativity, and targeting support for those furthest from the labour market.
- Stronger partnerships for stronger regions and the everyday economy: Collaborating regionally to boost investment, support fair, unionised jobs, and tackle poverty.
- Investing for growth: Focusing on Wales' comparative strengths to drive investment, innovation, and entrepreneurship in a post-EU context.

The Four Purposes of education in Wales are defined by the Curriculum for Wales and encapsulate the ambition that all learners in Wales should be supported to develop as:

- Ambitious, capable learners who enjoy learning, set high goals for themselves, and are ready to continue learning throughout their lives.
- Enterprising, creative contributors who use their imagination, solve problems, and actively participate in life and work.
- Ethical, informed citizens who understand their responsibilities, respect others, and engage thoughtfully with their communities and the wider world.
- Healthy, confident individuals who are resilient, make informed choices, and feel valued and prepared to lead fulfilling lives.

Together, they form the 'golden thread' that underpins the national priorities set out in this document, creating a system that equips learners not only for employment but for lifelong success, while supporting an economy that is innovative, inclusive, and sustainable. The national priorities are also reinforced by the Well-being of Future Generations Act, which places a legal duty on public bodies to work towards long-term well-being, sustainability, and equality.

The national priorities also support the Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 strategy, which aims to reach one million Welsh speakers by 2050. By embedding Welsh language provision across vocational pathways, we will create opportunities for learners to learn, work, and thrive in both languages - helping to deliver a truly inclusive system, reflecting the needs of a bilingual nation.

To ensure inclusivity is embedded in all aspects of delivery, the approach will be firmly grounded in rights-based principles, aligned with the Equality Act 2010, the Socio-economic Duty, the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan, the Disability Action Plan and the Additional Learning Needs framework.

The national priorities draw on the findings of two key reports - the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales, (September 2023) and Transitions to Employment, (June 2023) - and are designed to respond to their recommendations (a number of which were for Medr and Qualifications Wales). This document outlines the progress already made in addressing those recommendations across each of the national priorities.

September 2025 marked a pivotal moment for education in Wales, as the first cohort of learners entered Year 10 under the reformed Curriculum for Wales and began their journey towards the new Made for Wales qualifications. This milestone reflects our ongoing commitment to an education system in which learners feel supported, safe, and engaged, and are equipped with the skills and confidence needed to progress into further education and employment. Vocational learning plays a vital role within this system. Raising the profile of VET should begin in schools and for some learners VET will represent a natural next step, building on the Curriculum for Wales to provide inclusive pathways that enable learners of all ages to move confidently into further learning, skilled work, and lifelong development.



## National Priority One: Growing Our Economy

*To drive a future-ready VET system that equips learners with the knowledge and skills needed for a rapidly evolving labour market, directly strengthening productivity, competitiveness, and economic growth. Aligned with the Welsh Government's Economic Mission and Wales' priority sectors, we should aim to empower individuals to build a stronger, fairer, and greener Wales through inclusive growth, innovation, and resilience.*

### Why is 'Growing our Economy' a National Priority for VET in Wales?

VET at all levels, including pre-16, Further Education, Higher Education, Work Based Learning and Adult Learning, serves as a catalyst for economic resilience and competitiveness, equipping individuals and communities with the skills required to thrive in an increasingly dynamic local, national, and global economy. To maximise impact, VET must be fully aligned with Wales' economic priorities. The link between skills and qualifications and improved economic outcomes both for the learner and the wider economy are well established. An evidence-based approach, grounded in both employer and learner insight as well as labour-market intelligence, is essential for planning future skills needs and ensuring qualifications remain responsive to emerging job roles and industry demands, including the upskilling of the existing workforce.

The Welsh Government's Economic Mission sets out a vision for transforming Wales' economic landscape. Echoed in the UK Industrial Strategy is the need for a skilled, adaptable workforce, including the development of higher level skills, which drives productivity and innovation. The landscape is complex and rapidly evolving. The skills required today may not be those needed tomorrow. VET must be agile, accessible, and responsive to all learners, spanning pre-16 provision, tertiary provision and through to lifelong learning.

### Challenges

- The current availability of consistently comprehensive, robust and responsive data sources which provide labour market intelligence makes efficient planning and forecasting of economic and employer needs challenging.
- VET in some sectors is not always agile enough to keep pace with a rapidly changing economy and employer skills needs.
- Updating 'Stronger, fairer, greener Wales: a plan for employability and skills', the Welsh Government's national plan for employability and skills published in 2022 will be key to supporting the design and delivery of VET that meets future workforce demands.
- The Employer Skills Survey, 2024 revealed that larger employers were generally more likely to plan for, and offer apprenticeships, compared to small enterprises. In addition, the proportion of employers in Wales planning to offer apprenticeships fell from 35% in 2022 to 24% in 2024, the largest decline among UK nations.

## Distance Travelled

- Qualifications Wales has completed a programme of qualification sector reviews. These have identified qualification gaps and updated qualification content to meet the needs of employers and learners within specific employment sectors. Through Apprenticeship Framework Reviews, Medr is working closely with employers and stakeholders to ensure their current programmes reflect current and emerging skills demands. Through these programmes of work, VET in Wales is becoming increasingly aligned with a changing industry needs and national economic priorities.
- The Welsh Government's Policy Statement on Apprenticeships sets out a clear focus on resilience, sustainability, reducing skills shortages, and promoting inclusivity. Since September 2024, Medr has taken responsibility for the operational policy, contract management and delivery performance of apprenticeships, translating this strategic direction into practical action for learners, employers, and the wider economy. The Welsh Government Apprenticeship Programme has delivered its target of over 100,000 fully funded apprenticeship opportunities since 2020/21 and has delivered over 200,000 since 2016.
- Medr promotes flexible, learner-centred approaches to build an integrated tertiary system that equips learners with the skills needed for a rapidly changing economy. This includes piloting innovative initiatives such as micro-credentials and short courses designed to support upskilling and reskilling. These pilots focus on priority sectors, including digital technologies, advanced manufacturing, and green industries aligned with Wales' Net Zero ambitions. These approaches are aiming to create pathways that allow learners to adapt quickly to emerging labour market demands.
- Careers Wales provides a picture of current and future skills needs through a suite of labour-market and learner-insight reports. These include; Labour Market Information (LMI) Bulletins, sector-specific LMI Feature Reports, regional reports that support Regional Skills Partnerships to understand young people's occupational interests and engagement, as well as individual school data reports. These are complemented by Future Jobs Wales tools, robust annual destinations data, and school Career Check survey insights.
- Bringing industry, education and training together to align regional skills priorities and help young people progress into rewarding, growth-supporting careers is already making a positive difference. Examples of this collaboration can be seen in the recent launch of the North Wales Skills Summit and the Swansea Pledge, amongst others.

## Future Direction

Growing our economy through a future-facing VET system is essential for Wales to thrive in an increasingly competitive and dynamic global landscape. Working with the tertiary sector and businesses, we can embed agility, collaboration, and innovation at the heart of VET, and we can ensure learners are equipped with the skills needed for emerging industries and sustainable growth.

- VET should continue to strengthen its alignment with Wales' Economic Mission and regional growth programmes, including City and Growth Deals, Investment Zones, and Local Growth Deals. Achieving this requires strong collaboration between government, Medr, regional bodies, employers, and education providers to create a cohesive system.
- The Welsh Government will shortly be launching a National Skills Audit to assess the skills landscape in Wales. The audit will combine existing data with stakeholder insights to identify current and future skills priorities aligned to key occupations and industry sectors. This work will support strategic planning, improve the efficiency of public investment, reduce labour market mismatches, and enhance productivity.
- Medr is collaborating closely with Regional Skills Partnerships to pilot methodologies to further understand future workforce demand within key occupational sectors, such as construction, particularly in relation to skills shortages, gaps, and emerging challenges. This analysis will inform the identification and mapping of priority occupations at a regional level against tertiary provision plans.
- Employer voice is essential in designing a VET system that can respond to the changing needs of Wales' industries and economy. Whilst there is good practice across the sector in relation to linking with employers to drive curriculum design and delivery, there needs to be a system wide approach to including employers at every stage.
- Vocational pathways should become more agile to keep pace with changing labour market needs. Embedding labour market intelligence and forecasting tools into curriculum design will help anticipate emerging job roles.
- Expanding opportunities for part-time, flexible learning and modular qualifications will allow learners to upskill and reskill throughout their careers, and transfer skills across sectors. Short courses, modular provision and part time vocational learning are often the first step for adult learners.
- VET curriculum development should be informed by comprehensive, high-quality data to identify skills gaps and track learner outcomes. Wales should learn from international best practice and a stakeholder-led approach, ensuring provision is responsive to employer needs and learner aspirations.
- Building on the ambitions set out in the Welsh Government's AI Plan for Wales, VET will need to embed AI and digital skills across all programmes. This approach will prepare learners for future industry demands, support inclusive economic growth, and position Wales as a leader in responsible AI adoption.



## National Priority Two: Improved Visibility

*To improve the visibility of vocational pathways by removing barriers that limit learners' access to impartial advice and guidance, enabling confident and informed choices, and promoting parity between vocational and academic pathways.*

### Why is 'Improved Visibility' a Priority for VET in Wales?

All learners should have the opportunity to make informed choices about their future. These decisions can be daunting, especially for young people at points of transition and for adults returning to education or training. Too often there is limited awareness of the full range of vocational opportunities. Elevating the visibility of vocational pathways is not only about increasing awareness of available pathways but also about challenging long-standing perceptions that vocational routes are 'less prestigious' than academic ones.

All those who support learners during transitions, including parents, carers, teachers, and advisors must have access to high quality information that recognises the equal value, status and the flexibility of progression opportunities offered by both vocational and academic pathways. Visits to tertiary settings will help learners make informed choices in relation to progression, and to plan learning pathways in line with their aspirations.

Research shows that learners most often seek advice from school staff when considering post 16 options. Similarly, parents and carers remain key to shaping young people's decisions about their future; their understanding of the credibility and parity of vocational routes is essential to supporting learners in choosing pathways.

Careers Wales also supports adults by offering easily accessible, bilingual careers information, a dedicated Adult Learning Hub and a Course Search tool to help explore provision across Wales. Adult learning routes are most visible through community provision, employers, the voluntary sector, and digital information platforms.

### Challenges

- Learners and parents may see vocational and academic pathways as different in value, despite both offering strong routes into higher level learning, upskilling and employment. Perceptions of a lack of parity between pathways can limit informed choices and constrain learners' aspirations. This misconception also overlooks the reality that many pathways blend academic study with vocational elements.
- Learners, parents, carers, school staff, and advisors often lack understanding of growth sectors and the skills needed in the future economy. This can limit their ability to provide impartial, up-to-date and learner-focused guidance.
- Further education institutions and training providers can face barriers to accessing schools to inform learners about vocational pathways. This lack of visibility can result in learners making choices that are misaligned with their skills and aspirations.

- A small number of schools continue to apply restrictions on Careers Wales' access to learners, which Careers Wales is actively working to address to help ensure all learners receive timely and high-quality careers guidance.
- Proposals in the UK Government's Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper to replace the current range of Level 3 vocational qualifications in England with V Levels - a single pathway alongside A Levels and T Levels - could have implications for Wales. Many qualifications currently offered in Wales, such as BTEC Nationals and Cambridge Technicals, may be affected if awarding bodies withdraw them from the market.

## Distance Travelled

- Careers and Work-Related Experiences (CWRE) is a cross-cutting theme in our curriculum, which will be fully rolled out by September 2026. CWRE is embedded throughout a learner's education, age 3 to 16. This ensures learners build valuable experiences and can apply their knowledge and skills in inspiring, real-world contexts.
- The Welsh Government's 14 to 16 Learner Entitlement and accompanying guidance sets out an expectation that learners should be given the opportunity to consider their post-16 career options and plans with dedicated time to assess their own strengths and areas for improvement.
- Careers Wales ensures that every young person in Key Stage 4 is offered a careers guidance interview before leaving Year 11 and provides some targeted support including for learners with additional learning needs. This provides learners with access to impartial information on all post-16 routes.
- Qualifications Wales' Learner Journeys are clear, sector-specific maps showing available qualifications and progression routes within vocational areas. These resources have strengthened guidance by raising awareness among learners, parents/carers, and schools of the full range of VET options and how they link to future careers.
- Medr provides transition funding to encourage collaboration between tertiary education providers to increase awareness of all learner pathways available before learners make a decision about their post 16 destination.
- The Inspiring Skills Excellence in Wales project promotes vocational education and skills development through competitions and collaborative partnerships. The project facilitates development of technical and employability skills aligned with industry needs and raises the profile, quality and impact of vocational education and skills across Wales.

## Future Direction

Current initiatives demonstrate a clear, sector-wide commitment to ensuring learners, parents and providers have better access to advice about the value of vocational pathways. The Welsh Government and Medr will need to continue to consider opportunities to strengthen provision to enable all learners to make confident and informed decisions about their future.

- The Welsh Government should strengthen the 14-16 Learner Entitlement to include specific requirements that representatives of colleges, work-based providers and universities have access to learners to inform them of the opportunities available in work, further education or higher education post-16.
- From September 2027, the introduction of VCSEs will enhance awareness of vocational pathways and employment sectors for 14-16 learners. Whilst they are designed to be deliverable within school settings, their introduction provides an opportunity for schools and colleges to work collaboratively to deliver engaging vocational learning.
- The Welsh Government will need to work closely with Qualifications Wales and the sector to assess the UK Government's proposed introduction of V and T Levels and their potential impact on Welsh learners. Our priority must be to ensure Welsh learners are not disadvantaged. We will collaborate with Qualifications Wales and awarding bodies to safeguard choice and progression for learners in Wales, while continuing to secure a broad and high quality vocational offer in Wales.
- The Welsh Government should continue to explore lessons learned from the introduction of the Baker Clause in England. This legislation requires schools to allow colleges and training providers access to pupils in Years 8 to 13 to promote technical and vocational pathways alongside academic options.
- Publishing destination data for learners who progress onto post-16 vocational courses as well as strengthening direction to schools on supporting learners to progress onto suitable post-16 vocational courses would make these learner pathways more visible and help parents and learners make informed choices. To achieve these benefits, the Welsh Government should explore options to publish this data to raise awareness with learners and parents about vocational pathways.
- The Seren Academy is expanding its offer by exploring pathways into degree apprenticeships, helping to generate interest among Wales' brightest learners in higher education vocational routes, and providing them with the detailed insight needed to navigate their options confidently and competitively.
- The Welsh Government should clarify its expectations for Wales-wide 14-16 vocational pathways, including setting out how provision such as Junior Apprenticeships, other college-based pre-16 education, and VCSEs should be delivered to form a high-quality offer that has parity with academic pathways.



## National Priority Three: Participation and Progression

*To support learners of all ages—wherever they live and whatever their background—to develop the confidence they need to participate in, and progress through, the tertiary education sector and beyond.*

### Why is 'Participation and Progression' a priority for VET in Wales?

Improving post-16 participation is central to the Welsh Government's vision for a fairer, more prosperous Wales. Equality, diversity and inclusion are central to creating a VET system that supports all learners, regardless of background, to thrive.

Everyone should have the opportunity to participate in, progress through, and complete vocational pathways to gain higher-level skills, and contribute to a strong, sustainable economy. The Welsh Government's National Milestone is at least 90% of 16-24 year-olds will be in education, employment, or training by 2050.

It is important to raise the profile of VET whilst learners are at school so that every young person understands the full range of high-quality pathways available to them. Academic and vocational pathways are not separate or mutually exclusive. Many programmes combine academic and vocational learning, giving learners the flexibility to progress confidently between pathways, including into higher education.

Adult learner participation and progression is often non-linear and part time. Enabling individuals to reskill, upskill, or engage in learning for personal development generates significant social value, benefiting not only individuals but communities as a whole.

### Challenges

- Compared to the rest of the UK, Wales has a higher estimated share of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) than other UK nations, and lower qualification levels among younger adults in the workforce.
- Recent years' data shows a growth in enrolments on level 2 vocational courses in Wales. However, this growth in more expensive technical and vocational pathways, is accompanied by increased costs and accommodation issues. Lower-level learners are more likely to drop out, making retention and progression to Level 3 (and beyond) a key challenge.
- With an ageing population, providing part-time and flexible vocational learning opportunities will be even more critical to enable reskilling and upskilling in a changing economy.
- Socio-economic factors, including household income, parental education alongside additional learning needs continue to influence participation in education and training, particularly vocational pathways. While vocational routes attract a diverse range of learners, those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with ALN often face systemic barriers that can affect attainment and progression.

- Access to vocational education can be significantly hindered by transport challenges, particularly in rural and remote areas. Limited public transport options - especially unreliable or infrequent bus services - combined with high travel costs often prevent learners from attending courses. These barriers restrict participation and reduce opportunities for young people across Wales.
- The UK (including Wales) has a relatively low proportion of workers with sub-degree higher level qualifications at level 4 and 5 compared to similar economies. Increasing access to and attainment of non-degree higher level qualifications, both at further and higher education institutions, could be an additional and cost-effective means of improving overall education and skills levels.
- Opportunities to study through the medium of Welsh can be limited. Institutions have to cater for learners with different levels of ability and fluency across a very wide range of subjects, and this has resulted in differences in the offer, particularly across vocational pathways. A shortage of Welsh-language skills in tertiary education also impacts on provision, creating barriers for learners who wish to study through the medium of Welsh and for sectors where bilingual skills are increasingly in demand, such as health and social care, childcare, education and construction.

## Distance Travelled

- Junior Apprenticeships are for learners aged 14-16 who are at risk of disengaging and have an aptitude for vocational learning. They are now offered at seven colleges across Wales, helping learners build practical skills for the workplace and prepare for progression to higher-level vocational courses or apprenticeships. Estyn's May 2024 thematic review praised the programme for fostering enthusiasm and ambition and highlighted how many learners go on to succeed in their vocational studies.
- Wales already had a relatively high proportion of post-16 learners in college and participating in vocational or applied general pathways prior to Covid-19, and this is growing again significantly after a brief decline during the pandemic. The '16 to 18 local curricula guidance', undergoing a public consultation between February to March 2026, emphasises the importance of learners having access to an appropriate range of vocational courses both at, and below, level 3.
- The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework helps young people in Wales stay connected to education and training, including vocational pathways. By identifying those at risk of disengagement early and providing tailored support, it ensures learners can access practical options that match their interests and ambitions, boosting participation and progression.
- Pastoral care within the Further Education sector has been strengthened through a range of models shaped by Medr's funding and guidance, which set consistent expectations for learner support across providers. These include delivering wraparound support that enables learners to overcome barriers, remain engaged, and successfully progress through their studies. In 2024-25, £4 million was allocated to Mental Health and Well-being initiatives, further enhancing the support available to both learners and staff.

- The Personal Learning Account (PLA) programme helps people of all ages reskill, adapt, and rebuild their futures. This programme exemplifies how the Welsh Government, through Medr, works alongside partners to support learners across Wales to retrain or upskill, opening doors to careers people might never have thought possible. Nearly 50,000 PLA courses were delivered between 2021/22 and 2023/24, backed by £79m of Welsh Government expenditure.
- The Welsh Government's ALN reform aims to create a fair, inclusive, and unified education system that supports children and young people aged 0-25, specifically in ensuring continuity of support during key points of transition including onto vocational pathways.
- The Welsh Government has lowered the household income threshold for the Educational Maintenance Allowance, providing financial support to an anticipated additional 3,500 students which can assist eligible students with transport costs.
- The Welsh Government has identified £22m from 2024 to 2026 for a pilot bus fare scheme for young people under 21 years old which provides single tickets for £1 and day tickets for £3 when travelling with participating operators.
- Medr has a statutory duty to promote Welsh-medium tertiary education and has embedded this ambition within its Strategic Plan. Working closely with the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol and other stakeholders, Medr is developing a national plan for the Welsh language across tertiary education. This will build on current initiatives which support provider capacity, and encourage opportunities for learners to develop and use Welsh in both education and the workplace.

## Future Direction

Wales' commitment to increasing participation in VET should be grounded in a vision of inclusive economic growth, social mobility, and national wellbeing. Achieving this vision requires not only strong policy and investment but also tackling persistent barriers - transport, inequality, financial pressures, mental health, completion, institutional fragmentation, and data gaps.

- A Call for Submissions has been launched to address key challenges in tertiary education, beginning with participation and sustainability. The first challenge focuses on increasing participation across all post-16 pathways, including vocational routes, which is fundamental to building a higher-skilled workforce and driving productivity, economic growth, and social wellbeing.
- A forthcoming independent evaluation of the £1 maximum single fare/£3 maximum daily fare pilot will explicitly consider its impact on young people's access to post-16 education and training.
- Multiple strands of analysis are being brought together- including social research, data linkage, and systematic evidence reviews - to build a cumulative evidence base on the key determinants and trends shaping participation, progression, and non-progression in Wales. Medr is also working to better understand destinations of learners at post-16 and post-18, which will help identify specific issues relating to participation gaps.

- Work is underway with Medr and FE partners to expand Junior Apprenticeships, making them available to more learners across Wales. The 2026/27 budget includes £1 million for the programme - more than double its 2024/25 allocation.
- In keeping with our ambition that everyone in Wales should Never Stop Learning, the Welsh Government should continue to build a vocational system where learning is for everyone and returning to education is never a second chance, but a first step toward a brighter future. As part of this commitment to lifelong learning, the Welsh Government should also explore how VET can contribute to improving adult basic skills.



## National Priority Four: Strong Partnerships

*To support strong partnerships between local authorities, educational providers, and employers. Collaboration and strategic partnership should place learner needs at the heart of planning and delivery.*

### Why are 'Strong Partnerships' a Priority for VET in Wales?

One Welsh Public Service reflects our shared values in delivering public services that result in the best possible outcomes for the people of Wales. This is based on citizens being at the heart of our collective efforts, not the interests of our own individual organisations.

Effective multi-level collaboration between the Welsh Government, education providers, and employers is essential to delivery of high-quality VET in Wales. Strong partnerships between local schools, the tertiary sector and employers, support the delivery of high-quality vocational courses and apprenticeship pathways. Regional partnerships help align courses with labour market needs and promote vocational and apprenticeship pathways as valued options.

Adult and community learning, supported by effective local partnerships, including the third sector, can be transformative - improving individuals' skills and wellbeing. These local partnerships can play a key coordinating role across education, employability, health, and community services.

A social partnership approach within institutions, enabling trade union representatives to consult and negotiate meaningfully, fosters mutual respect and cooperation between management and staff.

### Challenges

- Current post-16 funding arrangements can create challenges for collaboration between schools and the tertiary sector. Addressing the effects of competition for funding is key to ensuring that joint efforts focus on delivering the best learner-centered opportunities.
- Despite significant effort in many areas, partnership working within VET in Wales remains uneven across regions. Collaboration between schools, the tertiary sector, and employers varies considerably, creating a fragmented landscape.
- Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) provide a statutory framework for regional collaboration, but ongoing implementation remains a challenge. Aligning CJCs with Regional Skills Partnerships and the tertiary sector will ensure joined-up decision-making on economic development and skills investment.

## Distance Travelled

- The Welsh Government established Medr in August 2024 with a key priority to tackle fragmentation and strengthen partnership working in the tertiary sector. As a single, integrated body, Medr oversees schools' sixth forms, further education, higher education, apprenticeships, and adult learning under one body. Its remit includes reducing duplication and competition, aligning funding more closely with the needs of Wales, and fostering collaboration between schools, colleges, universities and employers. This unified approach provides a platform for more coherent vocational learning across Wales.
- Medr has a statutory duty to promote collaboration between providers of tertiary education and trade unions. Medr's Strategic Plan includes a commitment to actively promote social partnership in recognition that collaboration between providers and trade unions is mutually beneficial.
- Medr's Strategic Development Fund is providing £5million to new projects that will strengthen collaboration between organisations across the tertiary education sector. This will enable Medr to gather intelligence from the sector about the types of projects that could be possible with strategic investment.
- Employer engagement and work experience have emerged as areas of innovation. Many further education institutions work collaboratively with local employers to provide a range of opportunities for learners. Targeted programmes such as Careers Wales' Tailored Work Experience (TWE) have also demonstrated success in connecting learners with real-world opportunities.

## Future Direction

Effective partnerships are essential to ensure vocational education keeps pace with Wales' evolving economy. By building deep, flexible collaboration between schools, colleges, universities and employers, Wales can create a system that is agile, responsive to labour market needs, and focused on delivering meaningful opportunities for learners and communities.

- The Welsh Government will need to work with partners to explore opportunities to support and incentivise strengthened local and regional collaboration between schools, colleges, universities, adult community learning partnerships and employers.
- As set out earlier in this Strategic Direction for VET, the Welsh Government will need to explore amending the 14-16 Learner Entitlement and Guidance to encourage and clarify expectations for greater collaboration between schools and the tertiary sector.
- There is a need to clarify expectations for how regional arrangements - such as Corporate Joint Committees and Regional Skills Partnerships - will align with the tertiary sector to deliver a strategic and aligned approach to regional economic development and skills planning.

- There is an opportunity to do more to share best practice from the powerful examples of what can be achieved when organisations work together. Examples include the Cardiff Commitment which has united over 400 organisations in a shared mission to improve educational and employment outcomes for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and Pembrokeshire's Blue-Green energy project which involves collaboration between the college, schools and industry.
- A review of internal governance arrangements across the Welsh Government would ensure policy coherence and alignment with wider education, skills, and economic priorities.



## National Priority Five: Supporting Educators and Training Providers

*To ensure that educators and training providers have the opportunity to upskill in line with evolving workforce demands and future skills needs to enable vocational learners to develop up-to-date theoretical knowledge and practical skills.*

### Why is 'Supporting Educators and Training Providers' a priority for VET in Wales?

To support the delivery of high-quality VET and ensure the best outcomes for learners, educators and training providers must have opportunities to upskill and reskill in line with evolving workforce demands and future skills needs. This is essential for ensuring they remain at the forefront of sectoral and pedagogical developments, enabling learners to gain up-to-date theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

To achieve this, vocational educators themselves must be respected within the sector and have opportunities to upskill and reskill, ensuring they remain at the forefront of sectoral and pedagogical developments.

Medr's Strategic Plan 2025–2030 and the Cymraeg 2050 Welsh-medium Action Plan, highlight the importance of a bilingual, inclusive, and diverse workforce. The ambition to reach one million Welsh speakers by 2050, and to embed Welsh language skills across the workforce, further underscores the need for targeted professional development and support for educators.

### Challenges

- Attracting and retaining educators in high-demand fields such as engineering, digital, construction, and advanced manufacturing is challenging, as these industries often offer more competitive pay and greater flexibility. This shortage reduces specialist teaching capacity and can impact the quality of provision.
- Challenging budgets and a fast-changing landscape, including qualification reform and an increasing number of learners needing support, adds significant pressure to the workforce.
- Vocational teachers often come from industry rather than academic backgrounds and can find it challenging adapting to educational environments or to access professional training requirements. While initiatives such as the Professional Learning Fund help remove cost barriers, finding time for professional development remains a significant difficulty.
- The introduction of new Made-for-Wales National Qualifications, including the roll-out of VCSEs and the Skills Suite from September 2027, will require educators to be confident in delivering new courses.

- Educators, including those in the vocational sector, need strong Welsh language skills to support a truly bilingual VET system in Wales. As expectations around bi-lingual delivery grow, and Made-for-Wales qualifications expand, staff must have access to high-quality professional development that builds both fluency and confidence. This should include practical strategies for using Welsh in teaching, alongside sector-specific resources that help educators embed the language naturally into vocational contexts.

## **Distance Travelled**

- The creation of the Initial Teacher Education Post Compulsory Education and Training Expert Advisory Group in May 2025 marked a significant step forward in strengthening collaboration across the sector. Bringing together key stakeholders – including trade unions, Medr, Estyn, the Education Workforce Council, the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers, the National Training Federation for Wales, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, and Colegau Cymru - the group is actively reviewing the operational landscape and identifying solutions for the future delivery of Initial Teacher Training.
- Work is underway to strengthen recruitment and retention across the sector. This includes reviewing incentives for post-compulsory education and training, aligning teacher training curricula nationally, and developing robust induction and mentoring models to support newly qualified staff.
- Careers Wales offers support to practitioners, including a Level 6 Careers Leadership course, to embed impartial careers education across their curriculum. They also offer a Quality Award to institutions to drive improvement in careers provision, and provide up to date labour market insight to inform planning. Their Education Business Partnership, connects educators with employers, aligning learning with current and future skills needs.
- In 2024/25 an additional £2.8m was provided to Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. This funding supports a programme of development grants for further education colleges and apprenticeship providers to develop Welsh language education capacity in priority areas, including childcare, health and social care, sport and leisure and land-based studies.
- The Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025 established the National Institute for Learning Welsh, which will plan the development of the education workforce and provide opportunities for practitioners to improve levels of ability in Welsh. This will be a significant change to the support available to schools and the wider education system.

## **Future Direction**

- Embedding industry expertise within vocational education will be a priority to ensure learners gain practical, job-ready skills. This means strengthening partnerships with employers and industry professionals so that teaching and assessment reflect current workplace practices and prepare learners for modern careers.
- Continuous Personal Development (CPD) should be flexible, to recognise the challenges within the workforce, including time pressures and wider ongoing changes in the education landscape. Flexible CPD should include opportunities in relation to digital upskilling and Welsh-language skills.

- The rapid advancement of digital technologies offers significant opportunities for vocational education but also brings challenges. Exploring how innovation and emerging tools can enhance teaching and learning will be important, alongside considering what investment in infrastructure, staff development, and curriculum adaptation may be needed to prepare learners for future digital developments.



## Next Steps

This Strategic Direction for VET is designed to complement the Call for Submissions on tertiary education participation and sustainability, representing sector views and forming a key subset of the wider review of tertiary education. Together they will provide robust evidence to inform future policy decisions.

In November 2025, the Children, Young People and Education Committee published the findings of its inquiry into routes into post-16 education and training. The Committee recommended that the Welsh Government publish an overarching strategy for post-16 education covering both academic and vocational pathways.

The decision whether to produce a broad tertiary strategy or a specific VET strategy will be shaped by the outcomes of the call for submissions, but this Strategic Direction for VET provides a strong foundation for that work.