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A Think Piece on the possible options for improving the performance and efficiency of sixth forms in Wales

Executive Summary

1. Research aims and objectives

- 1.1 The purpose of this research was to produce a paper which sets out the possible options available to the Welsh Government (WG) for improving the performance and efficiency of sixth forms in Wales, based on a review of the latest robust evidence. This included an appraisal of relevant literature and policy documentation, as well as feedback and opinion from a range of key stakeholders.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 The methodology had two main strands: a) a policy and evidence review based on the most relevant literature, policy documents and evaluation evidence; and b) key stakeholder interviews focussing on the issues impacting on Welsh sixth form provision and the efficacy of the options emanating from the policy and evidence review.

Policy and evidence review

- 2.2 The sources of this search for relevant documents were: a) two literature searches conducted by the Welsh Government's Knowledge and Analytical Services team; and b) a search of the academic literature. The review concentrated on the background and development of Welsh Government Education policy, especially within the post-16 arena.

Key stakeholder interviews

2.3 Face-to-face or telephone consultations were conducted with a total of 18 individuals from 14 key post-16 policy-making bodies and interest groups in Wales, in order to:

- build up a picture of views about post-16 provision in Wales
- understand the core issues relating to any proposed changes
- outline and discuss possible options for change.

3. Key findings

3.1 The desk research and key stakeholder interviews focused on six key themes with key findings set out below each:

1. What do we mean by 'efficiency' and 'performance'?

- Applying economics terms to education can mean achieving greater efficiency by reducing the average cost of provision (per student).
- Improving efficiency within an education context tends to ignore issues relating to the quality of, and access to, provision.
- Achieving increased cost-effectiveness, rather than efficiency, should be at the heart of the debate.
- There is all too often a mismatch between policies and responsibilities, in terms of incentives for local authorities (LAs), schools and further education (FE) providers to work together to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness.
- Within schools, VfM is defined as the 3 'e's - economy, efficiency and effectiveness, which, in effect, is translated as making the best use of available resources.
- There has been too little evaluation of the quality, outcomes, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of provision.
- There is a lack of comparability between schools and FE colleges, in terms of their performance data.
- The need for comparable qualification performance data between post-16 providers to underpin any decision-making about future post-16 provision in Wales was a widely held view.
- Challenges include high transport costs, the impact on learners of being moved between providers to access provision and, crucially, a lack of available evidence on how increased student dispersal between localities affects post-16 retention and achievement rates.

2. School size/class size debate

- Some evidence exists that the effect of school size matters mostly for disadvantaged students, in that they perform better in smaller schools (primary and secondary).
- There is a lack of an evidence base about the impact of changes in school size on cognitive and non-cognitive¹ outcomes.

¹ Non-cognitive skills are those attitudes, behaviours, and strategies which facilitate success in school and workplace, such as motivation, perseverance, and self-control. These factors are termed 'non-cognitive' as they are considered to be distinct from the cognitive and academic skills usually measured by tests or teacher assessments.

- For a school sixth form to be viable, it was widely reported in the literature that it should comprise a minimum of 150 students, although this figure is based on historic evidence.
- As is the case with school size, research relating to class size is dominated by evidence from primary and secondary rather than post-16 level learning.
- Overall, while there is considerable evidence about the optimum sizes for efficiency and performance for both schools and classes, it has largely proved inconclusive.

3. *Learner choice and the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure*

- It is a requirement that the local curriculum for learners aged 16 to 18 will contain a minimum of 30 courses of study, of which five must be eligible vocational courses.
- Innovative practice within local 14-19 partnerships includes establishing partnership boards comprised of representatives from the local authority and local schools and colleges, common timetabling and extensive transport facilities to ensure that students can access provision.
- Benefits had been derived from increased partnership working between schools and colleges, including increased learner choice, and sustained engagement in learning for some young people who may have become disengaged.
- Large schools with large sixth forms were able to meet the post-16 requirements of the Measure, whereas most schools could not provide vocational courses that required specialist facilities.
- The Measure has undoubtedly enhanced learner choice and achieved greater collaboration between providers.
- But, there has been a variation in the range of courses, duplication of courses, and too many untenable courses.
- There was a lack of impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG);
- Some schools were wary about collaboration.
- Insufficient evaluation of the quality and viability of provision was taking place;
- There is a lack of robust evidence about the impact of offering wider choice to learners through collaborative provision across Wales, in terms of its contribution to improving retention and attainment rates and reducing the propensity of absenteeism and exclusions.

4. *Bridging the academic and vocational divide*

- The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 has introduced and broadened access to vocational learning to sixth form students.
- Some schools limit their vocational offer in higher cost areas.
- Transition arrangements between schools and FE colleges are generally weak.
- 14-19 local and regional networks have made an important contribution to strengthening the links between academic and vocational learning.
- Academic learning delivered in a traditional sixth form environment is perceived to offer a higher standard and quality of provision than vocational learning offered in an FE setting;
- Parity of esteem per se has yet to be achieved.

5. *Welsh-medium provision*

- Examples of innovative collaborative working between Welsh-medium schools, in order to ensure that young people receive curriculum breadth, were cited. In some

cases this would not have happened without receipt of 14-19 ring-fenced funding.

- A lack of teachers in some subject areas and unviable class sizes mean that opportunities to continue to study through the medium of Welsh often diminish during Key Stage 4 and still further in sixth forms.
- The shortage of skilled teachers to deliver higher level vocational courses through the medium of Welsh within the FE sector is accompanied by a shortage of verifiers and resources available to support Welsh-medium delivery.
- Existing post-16 arrangements allow for Welsh-medium sixth form provision to flourish in some areas. Welsh-medium providers were reported as being more creative in meeting the 30 course requirement of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 (National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee, 2012).

6. *Locality - urban and rural factors*

- A 'mixed economy' exists within and between local authorities, with school sixth forms, federations and tertiary delivery co-existing;
- The separation in governance and management arrangements between school sixth forms and FE colleges creates competition;
- Institutional funding incentives and arrangements can work against the interests of individual learners, so that cooperation, reorganisation and rationalisation is required;
- There was a consensus that a 'one size fits all' model, such as tertiary arrangements, could not be operationalised across Wales, although it could be more cost-effective in urban areas;
- Transport continues to be regarded as a significant problem, with the cost, time-commitment and complexity of transporting learners to other providers, in particular in rural areas, being practical barriers to collaborative working and the rationalisation of provision;
- Distance learning, video conferencing and tutors travelling between sites are at early stages of development and implementation;
- Outreach provision could be developed to ensure coverage across localities;
- The mapping and tracking of post-16 learners would be easier if they were located with one provider;
- Overall, reorganisation has generally failed to keep pace with falling school numbers;
- Some local authorities are perceived to be inhibiting the development of regional consortia and duplicating their functions, while lack of clarity about governance and accountability arrangements have led to inadequate management.

4. Conclusions/Recommendations

4.1 This study has highlighted that:

- The number, performance and efficiency of sixth forms has lacked a strategic review at national level over a number of years.
- There is a lack of robust evidence within the literature to support the notion that a sixth form with less than 150 students (Year 11 and Year 12 students) is unviable.

This figure was derived from calculations drawn up in the 1990s and warrants reassessment.

- The increased risk of cross-subsidisation from the rest of the school budget is strongly linked to the sustainment of small sixth forms. The impact of reductions in resources allocated to younger school pupils in these circumstances requires further assessment, as well as the long-term viability of this approach.
- The extensive academic literature on optimum class and school size largely ignores the post-16 setting and a consensus appears to be that resources produced more efficient returns in areas such as increasing teacher effectiveness.
- The terms 'performance' and 'efficiency', together with the operation of a post-16 education market, require careful definition and monitoring, to ensure that the needs and achievements of individual learners are not displaced by institutional target-setting and competition within and between different providers.
- While the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure (2009) has undeniably opened up choice to post-16 learners and, in many areas, engendered increased collaborative working between schools and colleges, there remains a lack of robust evidence to demonstrate that it has improved post-16 retention and achievement rates. Moreover, the high costs of sustaining the Measure must be questioned, in particular with regard to transport costs incurred in most localities, as well as evidence of course duplication and unsustainable class sizes.
- Factors which need to be taken into account to accommodate faith-based options are absent in the literature.
- There are skills and resource gaps in delivering higher level vocational courses through the medium of Welsh.
- Examples were cited of innovative collaborative working between Welsh-medium schools, in order to ensure that young people receive curriculum breadth. The effective use of peripatetic teachers, cross-boundary collaboration between schools and information sharing and good practice should be disseminated more widely.
- There are gaps in the evidence from the literature review about Welsh-medium provision in relation to: teacher and other resource shortages in vocational subjects and how this void may be filled, for example, through payment incentives, teacher education and on-the-job training; the expansion of work based learning and how employer engagement and apprenticeships can be sufficiently expanded and attractive to both young people and employers; improving the volume of students completing examinations (as opposed to undertaking courses) and how the currency and profile of Welsh-medium provision can be further enhanced within post-16 learning and beyond, including working more closely with parents.
- Cuts to guidance services provided by Careers Wales have generated growing disquiet about the ability of many students to access impartial IAG to assist them with their post-16 planning, as well as concern about the capacity and capability of many teachers to deliver this requirement.
- More direction is needed from the Welsh Government in terms of determining the future structure of post-16 education and training provision and, crucially, in assuming a strategic role in implementing future change.

Moving Forward

- 4.2 An assessment of the feasibility of the possible options for change to sixth form delivery suggests the following:

1. To retain the status quo

In a climate of reducing budgets and financial constraints, sustaining and developing existing arrangements is no longer an option. However, 'where' and 'what' change is needed and how this will be achieved is less straightforward.

2. Implement regional boundary proposals, in order to operationalise a 'harmonised' post-16 offer between localities

While a regional model would provide synergy with recent policy moves with regard to local government reorganisation and school improvement, their existing management structures, statutory powers and, crucially, their timetables for implementing effective change, have attracted notable criticism. Previous regional delivery models for 14-19 provision have lacked the necessary statutory entitlements to ensure that the requisite changes were implemented. This would need to underpin any regional approach.

3. Implement an adaptable tertiary model across Wales

Given the geography of Wales and the patterns of existing provision, a 'one-size fits all' approach would be extremely difficult to operationalise.

Although a tertiary model may be successful in urban areas, the capital and political costs required to introduce this model across Wales appear prohibitive.

4. Adopt a tailored approach to meet the differing needs of local authorities areas

In the short term, a local area approach appears to be the most feasible way forward for implementing any change. An appropriate policy strategy will need to determine whether the implementation of reviews and changes should be applied solely to sixth form provision or to post-16 provision as a whole.

An integrated approach, incorporating the whole of post-16 provision, presents itself as the most balanced way forward. It should be operationalised by 'local area' partnerships, which may or may not be led by the local authority, and should include key post-16 strategic partners, to achieve collaborative working and a harmonised local post-16 offer.

It would need to be further underpinned by: a review by the Welsh Government of the financial incentives paid to schools and colleges, and target-setting for removing surplus places, improving qualification outcomes, reducing duplication of provision and impact on the availability of Welsh-medium provision.

Future Research

- 4.3 The study has highlighted gaps in evidence and examples of good practice where valuable lessons can be learnt. These shortcomings include:

- Developing comparable data for schools and colleges on retention, completion and achievement rates, using common benchmarks.
- Collecting evidence on the extent to which cross-subsidisation between sixth forms

and the rest of the school budget is occurring in schools and its impact on learners and outcomes.

- Examining the potential for wider exploitation of e-learning and monitoring its impact on student retention and achievement rates.
- Collating evidence relating to the factors which need to be taken into account to accommodate faith-based options.
- Capturing good practice through conducting case studies of local authority areas where there has been harmonisation of the post-16 offer.
- Learning lessons from Welsh-medium schools which have been identified as embedding good practice through establishing cross-boundary collaborative links and harnessing the potential of e-learning and the use of peripatetic teachers.
- Gaps in the evidence from the literature review about Welsh-medium provision in relation to: teacher and other resource shortages in vocational subjects and how this void may be filled; and how the currency and profile of Welsh-medium provision can be further enhanced within post-16 learning and beyond, including working more closely with parents.

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Available at:

<http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/think-piece-possible-options-improving-performance-efficiency-sixth-forms/?lang=en>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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