

Kirsty Williams AC/AM
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg
Cabinet Secretary for Education

Alun Davies AC / AM
Gweinidog y Gymraeg a Dysgu Gydol Oes
Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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To: All Principals and Chief Executives in Further Education

Dear Colleagues

Priorities for the Further Education Sector 2017/18

I am writing to confirm my priorities for the further education (FE) sector in Wales for the 2017/18 academic year, to provide a framework which will help shape your future strategies and operational plans.

The following priorities¹ set a framework for my objectives:

- **To meet and exceed International Standards**
- **To promote Equality and Equity**
- **To support Jobs and growth, and**
- **To maintain financial sustainability**

I expect Further Education Institutions to continue to provide individuals with the best foundation for their progression into work, further learning and higher skills. Learners should be encouraged to become proactive and productive members of their communities, and by increasing your engagement with employers, and forging closer bonds with the communities you serve, you will help them become well rounded citizens of society.

My aspirations may be ambitious; however, I firmly believe that by working in partnership we can achieve the best possible outcomes. My aim is for you to continue to work both strategically and collectively to maximise the available resources.

In setting out my priorities for FE, I recognise that the urgency to create a sustainable and competitive skills system in Wales has not changed and for that reason the 2014 Welsh Government Policy Statement on Skills remains a useful reference tool for all post-16 education and skills-related policies in Wales.

¹ Further detail is provided at Annex 1
Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1NA

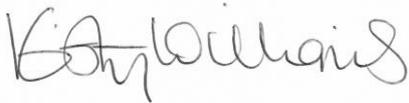
By working together we can ensure that learners have an equal opportunity to reach the highest standards, and in doing so be confident, ambitious and innovative. Our future success is firmly rooted in optimism about the potential of our students, teachers, and institutions. There are inevitably going to be challenges ahead, but they should be embraced, not avoided. We are all involved in making important choices about our collective ability to shape an education system that is modern, excellent and innovative for learners. To do so we must aspire to a sector that is committed to excellence, with world-leading schools, colleges and universities that can forge strong bonds with employers, communities and partners.

If we can get the basics right, we can raise standards and achieve our ambition of excellence for all. We must maintain a focus on closing the attainment gap, and deliver a sustainable education system that widens access, supports students, and promotes innovation and entrepreneurship.

In recent years, despite an ever challenging economic environment, the Welsh FE sector has gone from strength to strength. By addressing the priorities set out in this letter, I am confident that the further education sector can build on these successes and secure the very best opportunities for learners and employers. My priorities are supported by policy areas² which offer real opportunities to improve service and delivery; to build an FE sector that can better meet opportunities for the economic and social advancement of Wales.

Please direct any questions to Andrew Clark, Deputy Director, Further Education and Apprenticeships Division, at Andrew.Clark@wales.gsi.gov.uk or on 01443 663 913.

Yours sincerely,



Kirsty Williams AC/AM
Cabinet Secretary for Education



Alun Davies AC / AM
Minister for Lifelong Learning and
Welsh Language

² See Annex1

FE Priorities guidance for 2017/ 2018

Priority 1: Meeting and exceeding International Standards

In common with other nations, Wales is competing to develop a skill set that will define our future success and support our evolution into a highly-skilled country, raising productivity, reducing barriers into work and supporting people into employment. Wales requires a strong FE sector that can offer learners high quality provision, equipped to attract learners to courses including progression to higher skills programmes and internationally recognised training. We need a sector that is committed to excellence with world-leading colleges and universities that can forge strong bonds with communities, employers, and international partners. Improving progression of our learners to level 3 and above is essential to meet future requirements; level 3 being the point at which vocational qualifications can accrue real economic benefit to individuals.

The next few years will be crucial in achieving ambitions which we share –indeed demand - across Wales. Work has started on introducing a new curriculum, made in Wales but shaped by the best from around the world. By adopting the new framework we will ensure that our young people are able to lead fulfilling personal, civic and professional lives in our modern democracy.

The 2015/16 A Level results were published on 18 August. While the overall pass rate remained the same as in 2015, the A*-C pass rate declined by 0.5 percentage points to 73.8%, and the A*-A pass rate declined by 0.4 percentage points to 22.7%. Although attainment rates remain respectable, we cannot afford to let our guard slip; we must keep a close eye on standards.

That said, there is still a lack of comparability between schools and FE colleges, in terms of performance data. While there are more 16-19 year old learners in FE colleges than in sixth forms overall, there are approximately 3-4 times more A' Level learners in sixth forms than in colleges.

Learner outcomes in sixth forms and FE colleges are currently measured separately using different methodologies, neither of which has sufficient focus on grades. Work on the development of a new, consistent set of measures across both sectors is already well advanced. The introduction of the new measures, which will be applied uniformly to both FE colleges and sixth forms, will give a more rounded picture of learner outcomes at all levels. The new measures will inevitably require a change of focus for both colleges and schools, with a greater emphasis placed on learners' achievement of their overall learning goals, value added, and on monitoring their readiness to progress to higher level learning or employment. They are scheduled to be in place for the start of the 2017/18 academic year, although we envisage a period of 'parallel running' with the existing measures.

I also want to see FE colleges develop a co-ordinated and sustainable approach to the delivery of HE provision, firmly embedding it in regional strategic planning, focusing on creating stronger more effective regional partnerships between institutions in the delivery of higher education - partnerships that meet the skills needs of employers. Ease of access to level 4 and 5 programmes is vital for our aspiration to increase higher level skills in Wales.

Similarly, I would like the FE sector to be proactive in maintaining the development of strategic and coherent planning and delivery of higher level apprenticeships to support the skills needs of businesses and the progression of learners. The 2014 Skills Priorities Programme was established to respond to the needs of local employers with industry-led skills and training solutions to help learners gain the right skills for the job. It continues to

support the sector in building capacity to deliver higher level skills and develop innovative approaches.

We must provide all our learners with the skills and knowledge, ambition, confidence and qualifications they need for individual and national success. PISA may divide opinion, but it is the recognised international benchmark for skills. Our priority must be to have an education system that enables our citizens to compete with the best in the world.

Our FE colleges are critical to this vision. I would want you to be open and outward-looking, making the connections between social and economic opportunities. Academic and vocational routes through further and on to higher education should be open to all to achieve their education potential. We still have progress to make on this.

The UK's withdrawal from the European Union brings significant challenges, but also new opportunities and responsibilities. Collectively, as a sector, I would want you to lead, innovate and develop provision to suit need; to support a culture of ambition, excellence and entrepreneurship.

Working together, the FE and HE sectors are in a position to encourage community minded active citizenship, helping individuals access and contribute to a knowledge-based society. The focus needs to be on skills acquisition and development, and world-class research which maximises knowledge exchange. In partnership, we will promote this approach. The process of preparing for the unknown, transformed future workplace involves learners of all ages, a united teaching profession committed to excellence, and world-leading colleges and universities forging the strongest bonds with employers, communities and international partners. By working together we can ensure that all benefit from an equal opportunity to reach the highest standards.

Priority 2: Promoting Equality and Equity

The FE sector plays a crucial role in building the economic capacity of people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. I would encourage you to continue to work with both local authority and community based partners to raise aspirations and attainment levels, by providing meaningful information, advice and guidance.

Narrowing the attainment gap between learners from our most deprived communities and those from more prosperous areas is core to this priority. I would like all efforts to be directed to help raise standards and address this enduring injustice. If we are to meet the aim of tackling poverty in our society, the FE sector should endeavour to target Adult Community Learning (ACL) provision to provide learning opportunities which help people enter and sustain employment, widen adult participation, and increase the number of adults drawn from disadvantaged backgrounds, helping to build their confidence and capacity no matter who they are or where they live.

The Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) has been developed in order to provide a consistent and standardised assessment tool across Wales for learners. Welsh Government policy is that all post-16 learners undertaking WG funded Essential Skills provision must have their essential skills levels assessed via the WEST full Initial and Diagnostic Assessments. We must continue to work together to ensure that WEST is utilised by all providers of post-16 education in Wales if we are to realise our end goal of providing a consistent and standardised Essential Skills assessment tool across Wales.

Our education system must be open, inclusive and flexible, which is why resources will be targeted in a number of specific areas relating to the Welsh Language. I am pleased to see that most of the sector is committed to increasing their Welsh-medium and bilingual

provision. However, very few have set targets to increase their provision for specific courses, which contribute to the national target set out in the Welsh Government's Welsh-medium Education Strategy. It is important that FE colleges provide a range of opportunities for learners to continue their linguistic development as they progress with their education.

In your 2017/18 delivery plans I hope to see ambitious targets for increasing this provision, working with my officials to help identify your focus. I would like all colleges to aim to provide full Welsh-medium or bilingual programmes at Levels 2 and 3 with clear timescales. To assist you with this I would encourage you to take advantage of the support available through our agreement with Sgiliaith³ and the Sabbatical Scheme⁴.

Welsh-medium and bilingual provision does not stand alone, and should be closely associated with your plans for employer engagement and enterprise. Employers are increasingly identifying the need for Welsh language skills in the workplace and the inability to appoint to some posts contributes towards skills shortage vacancies. Welsh language skills allow a young person a competitive edge that some of their peers may not have, and it is vitally important that young people recognise the value of their language skills and continue to use and develop them as they undertake their post-16 education.

Similarly the Seren Project aims to provide stretch and challenge opportunities for Wales' brightest students to increase the proportion of Welsh students making successful applications to top UK universities. The Welsh Government's 'widening access' agenda is underpinned by an emphasis on increasing HE participation amongst learners from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds and living in particular geographical areas in Wales, namely Communities First (CF) areas and those traditionally under-represented in HE.

Nine of the eleven Seren Network proposed partnership hubs have been formally established and have started to strengthen collaborative working between schools and colleges to support academically able students. Each hub comprises a cluster of schools and Further Education colleges in a local area, working together alongside local authorities and education consortia to deliver super-curricular (stretch and challenge) activities for Year 12 students, also providing guidance and support for university preparation. There is scope to build on and consolidate this progress so that all learners benefit. Activities could include improved information sharing, mentoring, peer review, and enrichment (e.g. alumni links, summer schools, HE visits, mentoring), based on current best practice. Officials are currently preparing More Able & Talented guidance for the sector which could provide a useful starting point.

Therefore I urge you to actively engage with and facilitate the roll-out of the Seren Networks to promote equality of opportunity.

Priority 3: Supporting Jobs and growth

Enhancing employability skills must be a key theme that underpins post-16 delivery, to raise the employment ambitions and earning aspirations of our learners, and should be clearly identifiable within your provision plans.

Young people emerging from compulsory education must be equipped with the basic skills they need for life and work. Through the delivery of the Skills Implementation Plan, my expectation is that all learners are supported to improve their literacy and numeracy skills needed for the world of work or progression into further learning.

³ sgiliaith.llandrillo.ac.uk/

⁴ www.cynllunsabothol.org.uk/

The most recent National Survey of Adult Skills revealed that 16-19 year olds were the age group most likely to have Entry Level literacy skills or below, with 20 per cent assessed at this level. Consequently, there is a continued need to invest in the skills of this cohort, a need that is likely to persist. FEIs play a critical role in delivering to this group and it is essential that this provision is continuously developed and strengthened.

I acknowledge the sector specialisms developed by a number of you which offer valuable opportunities to learners. I am of the view that these activities need to become part of a coherent strategy for employer engagement which has to be underpinned with robust labour market intelligence (LMI). Estyn's annual report 2014/15 identified that, whilst there has been a significant increase in the number of courses on offer, not enough attention is being paid overall to LMI, and in providing opportunities for learners to develop a good understanding of the labour market and their employment prospects⁵. It follows therefore that I would encourage you to use LMI to support annual planning and prioritisation of provision when submitting your delivery plans under the Planning and Funding framework, to meet sector priority/ local labour market needs evidenced within Regional Employment and Skills Plans.

In July 2016, each Regional Skills Partnership⁶ developed the second iteration of their Regional Employment and Skills plan for submission to the Welsh Government. As they continue to evolve there will be further work on skills demand, supply and application in each of the regions. A range of LMI is available via the Skills Gateway, and StatsWales, alongside the three Regional Learning and Skills Observatories⁷. You might also wish to note that the recently published review of FE Progression Planning makes some specific recommendations for FEIs, including the use of LMI.⁸

Most colleges by now have a dedicated commercial arm or business unit – a model recognised by Estyn as the most effective way of engaging with employers. Nonetheless, colleges need to consider how they can promote their services to an even wider range of employers, in particular small businesses. I would encourage FEIs to capitalise on the value of social media by sharing details of the support available to employers, including transparent information on fees, and case studies which demonstrate how training can benefit businesses and their employees.

Priority 4: Maintaining financial sustainability

As a sector you have ably demonstrated that responding to ongoing cuts in funding requires flexibility and creativity to react sympathetically to the needs of local communities and

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https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/default/files/documents/ESTYN_Annual%20Report%202016%20FINAL_ENGLISH_Accessible_WEB.pdf

⁶ Further information on each RSP can be found at:

South East Wales: <http://sewso.infobasecymru.net/IAS/>

South West and Central Wales: <http://rlp.infobasecymru.net/IAS/>

North Wales: <http://nweo.infobasecymru.net/IAS/>

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- Skills Gateway <https://business.wales.gov.uk/skillsgateway/>
- Stats Wales <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/>
- South West and Central Wales Regional Learning and Skills Observatory <http://rlp.infobasecymru.net/IAS/eng>

- North Wales Economic Observatory <http://nwef.infobasecymru.net/IAS/launch>

- South East Wales Skills Observatory <http://sewso.infobasecymru.net/IAS/>

⁸ <http://learning.gov.wales/resources/browse-all/review-of-progression-planning-in-further-education/?skip=1&lang=en>

employers. There is also a real opportunity to collaborate and share plans for future development at an early stage to avoid unnecessary duplication and maximise cost efficiencies.

The aim remains to balance the responsibility for skills investment with a greater emphasis being placed on the employer, and the individual where able, to invest in learning. I would like to see the sector continuing to play a proactive role in seeking to increase the contribution of co-investment in post-16 education.

The recently announced FE Resilience programme aims to build on our successful Leading Wales programme and will offer dedicated support to each FEI to review and strengthen leadership, financial sustainability and employer responsiveness. It will also incorporate all-Wales guidance, training and events, including pilot training for senior leaders on change management and commercial awareness. My officials will be working with FEIs over the next few months to ensure that tailored support is available to meet any specific needs. I would encourage your institutions to engage proactively with this opportunity.

I would like to see an increase in your work with employers to ensure the skills that are available across the workforce are fully utilised and are put to productive use. This includes working with the Skills Gateway for business and individuals in providing up to date information, advice and guidance to employers and learners on their skills training needs and identifying opportunities which will best meet their requirements and aspirations. It is crucial that you as FEIs continue in your efforts to effectively engage with employers and representative bodies at both national and regional level, in the development of new and existing provision.

Whilst my intention is to provide a steer for the sector, there are other initiatives which align with my aspirations and will have some influence on the future shape and direction of FE in Wales:

Welsh Baccaureate

The Welsh Government has listened to concerns raised about the implementation of the Welsh Baccaureate Qualification. It remains our goal for all centres to work towards 100% adoption by applicable learners by 2020, recognising that it may not be appropriate for all; however some slight changes have been made to clarify our expectations and respond to feedback from the sector⁹. I would like to see the Welsh Baccaureate Qualification included in the programme of learning for all 16-19 full time learners according to their individual learning pathway, rather than repeating levels of qualification that have already been achieved. Welsh Government will continue to work with all partners to ensure that the significant benefits of the Welsh Baccaureate are communicated effectively.

Higher Apprenticeship provision

The new Government has pledged to create a minimum 100,000 high quality apprenticeships over the current Assembly term. The apprenticeships will have an all age focus with targeted interventions, to encourage more young people aged between 16-18 to go on to high quality apprenticeships.

FEIs have an important part to play in raising the awareness of learners to the opportunities presented by apprenticeships. I would want your focus to be on working in partnership with schools and employers to harness the benefits that apprenticeships can bring to learners and businesses. In conjunction with the regional skills partnerships, the Welsh Government will support the creation of apprenticeships in areas of greatest need to the regional economies of Wales. Making sure Wales has the skills to meet the demand of major

⁹ <http://qualificationswales.org/news/welsh-bacc-report/?lang=en>

infrastructure projects such as Wylfa2, the Wrexham prison project, or the South Wales Metro.

Hazelkorn review

The Hazelkorn review into the oversight and regulation of post-compulsory education and training in Wales was undertaken in response to the growing diversification and complexity of delivery and in the associated oversight arrangements within the post-16 education sector. *Towards 2030: A Framework for Building a World-Class Post-Compulsory Education System for Wales*¹⁰ proposes an agenda with a set of objectives and initiatives for post-16 education. The document sets out a framework for the future, and makes recommendations around optimum governance arrangements to meet the needs of Wales in the 21st century. My officials are working on a response to the review recommendations and we will share the outcome of that work with you over coming months. I have no doubt you will embrace and foster the changes that may come about as a result of the report recommendations.

Valleys Taskforce

The Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh language recently launched the Ministerial Valleys Taskforce to increase prosperity across the South Wales Valleys; those of you based in South East Wales will be aware of the aims of the initiative. It will support change in the South Wales Valleys, maximise opportunities for local populations and improve outcomes across a range of measures. Over the next five years, the taskforce will ensure a sharper focus on the regeneration and sustainable growth of valleys communities, with a specific emphasis on jobs and skills; generating inward investment and delivering integrated public services, which respond to the needs of local communities.

The aims of the Valleys Taskforce are fairly clear around improving public services and access to work. The strategic plan includes a “Valleys action plan” illustrating the interventions needed within the short, medium and longer term, identifying the partners needed to deliver each component and at what stage. A cohesive approach to employment and skills in the Valleys is needed, and I trust you will engage proactively with the Taskforce in helping to shape the agenda for the future. In all of this, engagement with those people living in the valleys is crucial.

¹⁰ <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/160310-hazelkorn-report-en.pdf>