



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

**Response to the Estyn thematic report on
standards and provision for A levels
in 6th forms and colleges**

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.



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Report title: A levels in sixth forms and further education colleges

Report details

The report was commissioned in response to a request for advice in the Cabinet Secretary's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2017-2018. It reports on standards, provision and leadership of GCE Advanced Levels (A levels) in school sixth forms and further education colleges. It considers a range of factors, such as standards at A level and how these are measured, the quality of teaching and assessment, the nature of the A level curriculum offer and strategic leadership, including partnership working.

Summary of main findings

Standards

- Many A level learners make strong progress in their knowledge and understanding. A few learners make insufficient progress. In some cases, this is because they do not have the background knowledge, depth of understanding or the level of skill required to study at advanced level. In other cases, learners lack the perseverance and motivation to do well and do not have sufficient interest in their studies.
- Most learners enjoy their A level studies, although finding them much more difficult than GCSEs. They appreciate the level of intellectual challenge and the opportunity to study a limited range of subjects of their choice.
- Well-developed independent learning skills are crucial to success at A level. Many learners develop these skills well during their A level studies, but a majority lack strong enough independent learning skills when they start their A level courses and a minority remain too dependent on others for support.
- Most learners find studying A levels stressful because they feel that A levels are 'high tariff' qualifications that have serious implications for the rest of their lives. The demands of studying three or four subjects as well as an additional qualification such as the Welsh Baccalaureate adds to this stress, especially as around half of learners have additional responsibilities such as part-time jobs or caring responsibilities.
- Studying A levels is not the most suitable option for all learners who study these qualifications. Around 20% of Year 12 learners fail to progress from AS to A levels. Learners with low attainment at GCSE are more likely to not complete Year 12 or not progress to Year 13 than other learners. In most cases, A level courses were not the best option for these learners.
- Between 2014 and 2016 there was a flat lining in performance at A level in Wales. During this time, Wales was the poorest performing region in the UK in terms of A levels. In 2017, A level results in Wales showed strong improvements and these were, on the whole, sustained

in 2018.

- There is a notable difference between outcomes at A and AS level, with A level performance being markedly stronger. In particular, a high number of U grades are awarded at AS level. There are many more entries for AS levels than A levels.
- Girls in Wales generally outperform boys at both A and AS level. The poor performance of boys at AS level is a concern. At AS level nearly 92% of all subject entries by girls in 2018 gained A-E grades while the equivalent figure for boys is around 88%. In each of the past five years, there are around 4000 more entries for A levels by girls than boys.
- Differences in approach to collecting, analysing and publishing post-16 data in schools and colleges has meant that it has not been possible to make straightforward comparisons across these sectors or between providers, although they deliver the same A level qualifications.
- Many A level learners successfully progress to university. A few secure places at highly competitive universities such as Oxford or Cambridge and a minority gain places at Russell Group universities. However, the collection of data regarding the destinations of A level learners is inconsistent and does not give a clear picture.

Provision

- A passion for the subject, secure subject knowledge, and a thorough understanding of examination requirements are features of effective A level teaching. Successful A level teachers also facilitate independent learning particularly well.
- Over recent years there has been considerable reform to A levels in Wales. This has also been a time of great change at key stages 3 and 4, including changes to GCSEs. The pace and degree of change means that there is a concern that curriculum reform and planning for progression from key stage 3 and across GCSE and A levels is not always planned in a cohesive manner to provide learners with the breadth and depth of knowledge required for A level study.
- There are considerable differences across the country in the choice of A level subjects available to learners. The range of subjects offered at A level varies according to geographical location, staff expertise, language medium, provider size, whether or not there are partnerships with other centres, and between schools and colleges.
- While most learners are offered an apparently 'free choice' in terms of A level subjects, their choices are restricted by a number of factors. These include centres often appropriately setting minimum grades for study or requiring learners to study more subjects than they wish.
- While many learners and their parents are happy with the quality of advice and guidance they have received, in reality they do not have access to clear information about which are the best A level providers

in their locality.

- Advice and guidance for a few learners, mainly those with low attainment at GCSE, are unsuitable. These learners are more likely not to complete Year 12 or not to progress to Year 13 than other learners. In general, advice and guidance is too focused on academic routes such as A levels and university, at the expense of other career paths. In schools with sixth forms, advice and guidance is often focused on keeping learners in their sixth form.
- Many leaders and teachers have expressed concerns over the lateness of the availability of courses and materials to support their teaching such as examination specifications and specimen papers.

Leadership

- The limitations of current A level data has meant that it has been difficult for schools and colleges to know how well they are performing, for learners and their parents to compare providers, and for centres to be held to account for their A level outcomes.
- The Welsh Government has recognised that the current performance indicators at post-16, in schools and colleges, are not fit for purpose and do not give a clear picture of performance. The new set of 'consistent measures', designed to address these shortcomings, are in the final stages of development.
- In a majority of schools, self-evaluation and improvement planning processes do not focus sufficiently on provision and leadership or on the impact on outcomes. In many colleges, self-assessment and improvement planning processes focus too heavily on success rates and not on the grades learners attain.
- Schools and colleges do not collaborate enough in terms of sharing good practice and improving teachers' subject expertise. There is a lack of professional learning opportunities for A level teaching and subject specialisms.
- A level funding drives certain behaviours in schools and colleges that have negative unintended consequences. For example, where funding is allocated per A level, centres may encourage learners to study more A levels or relax entry requirements for learners with low attainment at GCSE, although this may not be the most suitable option for these learners. This contributes to weaker attainment and a higher 'drop out' rate.

Recommendations for Schools and colleges:

Recommendation 1

Improve A level outcomes, particularly at AS level and especially those of boys

Recommendation 2

Improve the advice and guidance given to learners by:

- a. considering carefully learners' levels of educational attainment at GCSE when giving advice and guidance
- b. providing learners with accurate and up-to-date information about the full range of sixth form, further education and apprenticeship opportunities open to them
- c. giving advice on the best combinations of subjects for them
- d. developing a clear policy on progression from AS to A level
- e. considering carefully the number of qualifications taken by each learner, taking into consideration the likely progression route of each learner.

Recommendation 3

Improve the independent learning skills of pre-16 learners in order to prepare them for A level studies

Recommendation 4

Work together to improve professional learning opportunities linked to A level teaching

Recommendation 5

Give due attention to outcomes and provision at A and AS level in self-evaluation and improvement planning processes

Recommendations for local authorities and regional consortia:

Recommendation 6

Facilitate networks of professional learning related to A level across schools and colleges

Recommendation 7

Help schools to evaluate the effectiveness of their A level provision

Welsh Government response to Recommendations 1-7:

The Welsh Government supports the above recommendations set out in the Estyn report.

The 2018 provisional A level results for Wales show an improvement overall with 8.7% of grades awarded at A*, the best outcome in Wales since this grade was introduced, in 2010. 76.3% of learners gained A* to C, the highest since 2009 and the second highest recorded with 26.3% achieving A*-A, a historic high.

At A level, the gender gap in Wales for all subjects at A* - C is 5.4 percentage

points, the same as 2017, with girls outperforming boys. Whilst the gender gap has remained stable this year, it is encouraging to see that the performance of both girls and boys has improved across most grades.

The Welsh Government has provided funding to regional consortia until end of 2018-19 financial year to provide challenge and support function to Post-16 education in schools. This will be embedded in revised National Model in the future.

The Education Directorate's Pedagogy, Leadership and Professional Learning Division will write to colleges, local authorities, and regional consortia to draw their attention to the recommendations placed on them by this report and publicise the report in the Dysg newsletter.

Recommendations for Welsh Government

Recommendation 8:

Monitor the success of the new consistent measures data sets across the schools and colleges.

Welsh Government response:

The Welsh Government is developing its approach to measuring the outcomes of post-16 learning programmes delivered in school sixth forms and further education (FE) institutions. The new set of measures aims to give a more rounded picture of learner outcomes in the post-16 sector, and will replace the existing measures. The new measures are:

- **Learner achievement** (which shows whether learners stayed until the end of their courses and achieved their qualification aims)
- **Value added** (which shows the progress learners made based on their previous attainment)
- **Destinations** (which shows whether, after leaving learning, learners successfully progressed into further learning or employment)

The general learner achievement measure specifically provides data on:

- Completion rates for learners completing AS, A2 and the full two year A level programme.
- Retention of learners from AS to A2.
- The numbers of learners achieving 3 (or more) A2s at grades A*- A, A*- C and A*- E.

The value added measure looks at the additional progress that learners make over and above what would normally be expected, given their prior attainment and gender. This takes into account the starting point of the learner and their progress compared with similar learners.

Schools and local authorities have been issued with baseline data on the new achievement measure using 2015/16 and 2016/17 data, and with value added reports for the 2016/17 academic year. We have been meeting with schools, local authorities and regional consortia to explain the new measures in more

detail.

Recommendation 9:

Ensure that the changes to the curriculum and qualifications secure continuity and progression.

Welsh Government response:

The work on progression is being supported through the CAMAU Project, the University of Glasgow and the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David are supporting pioneers and bring a Higher Education perspective on developing and describing progression within each AoLE. This will ensure that the detail of the curriculum and the Achievement Outcomes **are** informed by an evidenced based approach to progression in learning.

Progression steps refer to the five points on the learning continuum that relate broadly to expectations at ages 5, 8, 11, 14 and 16. Successful Futures sets out that Progression Steps will take the form of a range of Achievement Outcomes for each Area of Learning and Experience.

Progression steps therefore refer to specific points on the continuum of learners' development. Achievement outcomes are the worded outcomes which are being developed by pioneers and form part of the curriculum architecture.

These will help learners, teachers, parents and carers to understand if appropriate progress is being made. Achievement outcomes will be described from the learner's point of view, using terms like 'I can' and 'I have' statements.

Recommendation 10:

Review the funding formula for A levels in schools and colleges, and its unintended consequences, such as encouraging learners who are not best suited to study A levels to do so.

Welsh Government response:

The Welsh Government rejects this recommendation as the funding model aims to reflect costs of delivery and offers no incentive for learners to undertake particular type of provision. This recommendation is also in direct opposition to a recent WAO recommendation which recommended that we moved FE funding to align with the Local Authority Sixth Form approach of reflecting demographic change.

With the recent introduction of the planning framework to accompany the funding, Welsh Government officials are playing an active role in monitoring that learners are being considered for the correct course. This coupled with the introduction for consistent performance measures will challenge schools into making decisions with the learner in mind.

Recommendation 11:

Develop a way to communicate to learners and their parents clear information about A level attainment and provision in individual centres.

Welsh Government response:

There is provision in legislation that requires the publication of A level attainment in schools. In accordance with The School Information (Wales) Regulations 2011, governing bodies are legally required to publish certain information about their school in the school's prospectus. This includes the most recent school comparative information in relation to the schools performance in end of key stage assessments published by the Welsh Ministers on DEWi.

In accordance with The School Governors' Annual Reports (Wales) Regulations 2011, every governors' report must contain the most recent school comparative information in relation to the school's performance in end of key stage assessments published by the Welsh Ministers on DEWi. The governing body must also ensure that the parents of all registered pupils at the school and all persons employed at the school, are given (free of charge) a copy of the governors' reports.

We are in the process of developing an online portal similar to [My Local School](#) (MLS), so that learners, parents and carers, employers and other interested parties can have access to learner outcomes information at provider and course levels, to inform decision-making regarding post-compulsory education.

The new set of measures aims to give a more rounded picture of learner outcomes in the post-16 sector, and will replace the existing measures. The public availability of this data will enable learners, parents and carers, employers and other interested parties to have access to concise, clear, understandable information to inform decision-making on post-compulsory education.

The portal will reflect the performance of all learners in a post-16 setting so that the approach is inclusive and consistently applied:

- Parents/carers will be better informed, which should support better educational outcomes
- Schools and FE Institutions will be more accountable for their performance
- Performance data will be transparent which will support wider Welsh Government and UK government openness agendas

We are aiming to have a pilot version available around spring 2019 for consultation and testing.

Publication details.

The report will be published on Estyn's website on or after 7 November 2018 and can be found at the following link:

www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-reports

