

**WALES
CYMRU**

**RESPONSE TO:
SKILLS THAT WORK FOR WALES
CONSULTATION**

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Skills that work for Wales

About UCU

The University and College Union (UCU) represents more than 120,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians and postgraduates in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK.

UCU is the largest post-school union in the world: a force working for educators and education that employers and the government cannot ignore.

It was formed on 1 June 2006 by the amalgamation of two strong partners - the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and NATFHE-the University & College Lecturers' Union - who shared a long history of defending and advancing educators' employment and professional interests.

1. Do you welcome the broad policy direction set out in Skills that work for Wales?

We support the vision outlined in section 1.4 of a post-compulsory education and training system which provides individuals with the knowledge and skills they need to achieve personal and career fulfilment and to contribute to community life.

The principles articulated in section 1.6 are key factors in delivering education and training which results in an inclusive, competitive Wales with healthier and more prosperous communities.

2. What should be the priority actions if we are to deliver in line with our ambitions for skills and employment?

Current Assembly policy in relation to higher education will end in 2010; UCU would like to have seen the Assembly use this consultation to consider what role Higher Education will have in the skills agenda in Wales. The Assembly has a stated policy of achieving a knowledge based economy, yet there is little in the current proposal to indicate how it sees the role of Higher Education in relation to higher level skills. We await the outcome of the feasibility study with interest.

At 3.22 emphases are placed on leadership, communication and team working, we would urge policy to recognise the centrality of people management skills. In order to encourage employees at all levels to develop their understanding and skills, it is crucial that the employee is engaged and recognises the value to themselves and the products and/or services they are employed to deliver. Our concerns are that these areas of skill development, which we believe are crucial for a healthy and prosperous community, will be overlooked in favour of the 'vocational skills' identified through the sector skills councils.

Suffice it to say we believe that in setting the skills agenda, Higher Education has a valuable part to play in providing the knowledge and expertise gained through research, in supporting the development of all skills that will work for Wales. Policy in Wales should recognise the value and benefit to the individual and organisation of engaging all employees, including UCU engagement in the new skills body being set up under the chair of Sir Adrian Webb.

Recognition is given within the document to the role of foundation degrees in meeting the needs of employers, however it is silent on the issue of 'awarding' such degrees in colleges of Further Education. Recommendation 85 from the Independent Review 'Promise and Performance' states that the Assembly should consider and consult upon the granting of Foundation degree awarding powers to the FEI sector. UCU are concerned that to do so would inject further competition into an already competitive market in Wales. We would urge that the Assembly give serious thought to allowing further nugatory competition.

We believe that the way forward is to strengthen the links between Further and Higher Education institutions and encourage them to co-operate through the franchise mechanisms already in place. In considering the wider educational implications it would be helpful if the Assembly Government would make it clear that any developments of foundation degree courses would not take place at the expense of HND provision which already exists and works well across the HE sector in Wales.

Our experience of working in the post 92 sector in Wales evidences the concerns faced by institutions that are not able to rely on research funding to provide appropriate resources for learners and staff. We are opposed to the separation of teaching and scholarly activity in delivering higher education. Foundation degree awarding powers for FE colleges will require the Assembly to ensure that the resources, including human resources are available to maintain the quality of HE provision wherever it is delivered in Wales.

Our experience of this matter and all of the studies conducted thus far in England suggest that there is a clear recognition that staff 'scholarly activity', 'staff engagement in updating their skills and subject knowledge', is central to high quality HE in FE teaching and learning.

FE contracts and a definition of 'scholarly activity' within the FE contract in Wales are issues which would need to be addressed prior to allowing foundation degree awarding powers to FE institutions.

3. Does the strategy strike the right balance between the needs and responsibilities of individuals, business and communities?

This policy document appears to place a significant emphasis on the needs of the employer. We would argue that the needs of the individual learner and the communities in which they live, have a vested and significant investment in getting the skills agenda right. The structures proposed within the document do not appear to enable individuals or communities to have their say in the 'Skills that work for Wales.'

Recent policy developments and restructuring within Initial Teacher Training recognises the demographic shifts predicted within the Welsh population in the coming years. Yet this policy focuses on a younger workforce who are starting out in their careers and we believe misses the opportunities to be gained from investing in an ageing, mature workforce. Clearly there is a need for increased provision for adults already in the workplace.

We argued elsewhere in our response that the Assembly must consider developing people skills in engaging the workforce. We believe that investing in these generic skills which develop the individual, would have an impact on the health of the individual, the family, the community and the economy.

4. What are your views on our proposed financial contributions policy?

The 'right intelligence' is key to making the 'right' decisions. UCU would question the ability of employers be able to identify 'accurately' their own skills needs for the future development of their companies, especially in SMEs.

To focus funding on current requirements is in our view short term and misguided. We would urge the Welsh Assembly government to consider future skills of new and emerging technologies, especially in relation to higher skills. There is a need to develop a skills strategy which is capable of recognising the significant role that parts of the HE sector in Wales will need to play to deliver on the vision of a Learning Country. Our comments in two above apply.

Quality assurance needs to be less onerous-but ONLY for those who have a track record in delivering quality. We support the views about reshaping the network, but with a clear caveat that UCU will oppose any compulsory redundancies. Appropriate planning and consultation will help to negate the need for damaging disputes in this regard.

Flexibility required by this policy signals to UCU the need for a Welsh contract of employment for all academic staff in Further Education. In our view, any proposals must contain a commitment to:

- Maintain Welsh pay scales
- Common terms and conditions
- Commitment to avoid compulsory redundancies
- Properly funded CPD for all staff

Without these, there can be no guarantee of the quality of the provision as different institutions will have different unit costs, and the fear is that price, rather than quality, will determine the process of learning.

This can only be achieved when teaching professionals and support staff operate under a common contract, with terms and conditions which are recognised in every institution. We

firmly believe these conditions are necessary to the achievement of transformation and improvement agenda in post 14 education training and skills.

The issue of demand led skills articulated through the SSC structures does cause us concern. We are of the view that the current structure and resources allocated to these bodies are not sufficient to deliver a robust 'intelligence' to help frame the planning of post 16 education and training.

A contributions policy for further education which supports free learning to achieve a basic skills level is to be welcomed. Will the Assembly consider applying the part time waiver scheme for learners beyond the age of 19 which operates in higher education? Fees for part time further education can act as a barrier to potential learners. It also must be factored into the planning that many part time students in FE who may wish to return to learn are on low incomes and we would urge the Assembly to consider a sliding scale of contributions which reflects a learners' disposable income- not just their salary/wage. We would urge that the Assembly continue to operate the recommendations of the Graham Review and fully recognise the that 'Reaching Wider' funding contributes to this area.

In relation to Quality, UCU are supportive of the measures outlined in the report to ensure that quality is a central theme of the changes being made to the provision of the 14-19 agenda in Wales. We fully support the view that effective management and governance are key drivers in ensuring a quality experience for the learner and that a minimum of grade two in management and governance should be achieved by 2009, as a first step towards achieving the minimum standard of grade two across all provision by 2010 (R116).

However this standard if it is applied to colleges of further education it must also apply to schools both in and outside any future consortia. It cannot continue to be the case that schools are treated more favourably within the 14-19 agenda.

We would urge the Assembly to give due consideration to the need to move towards a 'lighter touch' approach to the audit of quality and performance.

UCU are keen to ensure that the workloads of teaching staff are not increased further by any future measures, that good practice is recognised within institutions and future consortia and that Estyn will be able to deliver an inspection regime which is structured so as to drive forward the transformation and improvement agenda (R114).

Delivering the improvement agenda is predicated on the existence of professionals working in their relevant fields, support by management and governance within the institution or consortia. As the review indicated (recommendations 123-127), staff are a critical element in the transformation and improvement agenda. When the Assembly government first produced a 'Learning Country' we argued strongly that Investing in Learning de facto required an equal Investment in Staff. The recommendations clearly support our view and

we would urge all political parties to ensure, that within future budgets, sufficient NEW monies are made available to deliver on these recommendations.

The network proposals at sections 2.24-2.28 appear to fit with the notion of collaboration. However it is also the case that traditionally learners in further education have not tended to travel far for the education and training. Grants for travel would need to be improved, especially from low income families.

5. Do the proposals go far enough in giving employers, as customers of the skills system, influence on the content and delivery of skills programmes?

We have already covered in some detail our response to the issue of flexibility of

delivery. However it is crucial that we recognise that there are other demanding and important calls on the time of staff who deliver education and training, such as family life and the work life balance. Further evidence if it is required that a contract that allows flexibility but provides safeguards in relation to workload is essential to deliver this agenda.

We would reiterate our concerns about the overreliance on business in setting the skills agenda for the future benefit of Wales as a whole. The individual and community cohesion are in our view just as important as the needs of business.

Working with unions in delivering on this agenda is crucial. We fully support the expansion of WULF and would urge the Assembly to make learning reps a centre piece of their engagement with workers, to ensure that individual needs are met, not just those of the employer. Promoting the role of the learning representative in all businesses in Wales would allow the Assembly, through appropriate agreements with the Wales TUC, to monitor and record individual training needs, resulting in the 'right intelligence.' The Assembly Government should give serious consideration to funding a Wales TUC to initiate the establishment of a learning representative infrastructure across Wales.

Additional comments

Consortia

It is clear that the pilot consortia need to reflect the uniqueness of Wales, with both its fairly densely populated urban areas and large, sparsely populated rural areas. Whilst the Wolverhampton model might be seen as successful, it should be remembered that Wolverhampton 14-19 Partnership (page 67) is situated in the greater Birmingham area with a catchment area that is vast compared to any one area within Wales.

At least one of the pilots should be based in the more rural areas of Wales, and, as the report points out, take into consideration, not just the provision of travel, but travel time itself.

UCU would not want to prejudge the outcome of any pilots which the sector are encouraged to undertake, however we do expect to be part of all the review processes, both interim and final, and to be assured that its views have been listened to, considered and acted upon.

UCU does not oppose FE college mergers on principle, but believes they must be based on educationally sound criteria leading to demonstrable improvements for learners and communities. One of the strengths of Further Education has been the delivery of local provision to learners who would not otherwise access education, and we would not favour centralisation of delivery based on financial expediency.

The process of merger can entail considerable financial costs, especially in the short term, and UCU would advocate an expansion of the fund already in existence to promote collaboration, which could operate on the same basis as the Reconfiguration and Collaboration fund in HE. This must be additional funding, not top sliced from existing FE allocations.

UCU would also call on The Welsh Assembly Government, through the first minister, to give a commitment to no compulsory redundancies in implementing Making Connections agenda or within the context of consortia within 14-19 agenda. Genuine social partnership should encourage and promote a constructive dialogue, in which employers and trade unions can drive the improvement agenda without forcing staff out of jobs. The age profile of the Further Education sector suggests to UCU that this can be achieved through natural wastage, voluntary severance deals and age retirements.

This would create a non-threatening atmosphere in which constructive consultation/negotiations could take place.

Learning providers

The experience of UCU is that the management and governance of FEIs is, at best, inconsistent, in that it varies from institution to institution. In our view FE do not, for instance, have a good track record in the areas of equality and conforming to the requirements of the Race Relations Amendment Act, or in carrying out the requirements of the gender duties.

In our evidence to the review we argued that the governing bodies do not, as a whole, reflect the stakeholders, particularly when it comes to the representation of staff members, learners, local authority members and the TUC. Indeed, it could be argued that there is an over-representation of 'business' interests.

UCU is in favour of elected governors, and we would like to see the periodic election, by the stakeholders, including learners, of all governors. However, we do have a problem with appointments, and, in particular, an appointments committee. We see no value in a committee which oversees the appointment of itself or other like-minded individuals. We propose, therefore, that all the institutional governing bodies include learners and staff. Also, it is vital that the cultural and racial diversity of the area is represented.

If the Assembly decides it requires appointment committee(s) then it/they should be independent. Indeed, if this was the case, then we could envisage the appointment procedure being run by the WAG. We would strongly urge that WAG commission independent research into the analysis (recommendation 99).

Cardiff Metropolitan College

The formation of a Cardiff Metropolitan College involving Barry, Glan Hafren and St David's adds weight to UCU's view that their needs to be common pay and conditions across Wales to ensure equity and quality throughout the sector. Significant progress has been achieved under the All-Wales Pay Initiative in creating a pay structure in all FE colleges for academic staff which reflects the pay structure of the school sector in relation to the main grade and upper grade.

UCU are urging fforwm to engage in discussion about a common contract for all lecturing staff. Having common terms and conditions of employment would resolve potential problems with the transfer of staff within a consortia or indeed the transfer of staff as a result of merger.

UCU remains sceptical about the benefits of involving HE institutions in the delivery of Further Education (page 82) and endorses the view that FE is about much more than acting as a feeder for HE. We are particularly concerned that such arrangements would not be a partnership of equals given the considerable experience of both sectors in Wales.

UCU is of the opinion that any such proposals put the learner first, and have the accent on quality. However, as a trade union, we are also concerned about the protection of our members' jobs.