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Fostering High Quality Vocational Further Education in Wales

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Summary

- In recent years a 'Transformation' policy agenda has given Wales a Further Education Sector comprising 14 providers, of whom 13 are Further Education Colleges. Taken together with Community Learning (CL) and Work-based learning (WBL), there were over 223,000 learners participating in 2013-14. Recent years have seen a small decrease in the numbers of learners in FE colleges and in CL, and a moderate rise in those within WBL. Figures on learning activity suggest that less than 8% of it is clearly non-vocational.
- This report identifies seven themes or dimensions in high quality vocational education and training. These are: Connectivity and the nature of relationships between provision, workplaces, occupations and sectors; Dual professionalism and the backgrounds and dispositions of teachers; Moderate reliance on structures and vertical accountability; Vocational knowledge and the effectiveness and value of learning; Acknowledging the different legitimate meanings of learning; Maximising learner voice; The place of vocational options in a local ecology.
- The report illustrates the importance of the less-visible, 'dispositional' aspects of professional identity, arguing that these need to be acknowledged and worked with in any effort to maximize the quality of vocational education and training. Initial and Continuing Professional Development is also most likely to succeed if it gives full recognition to the 'dual professional', attending to both pedagogical and occupational expertise and to the teacher's distinctive position at the interface between them.
- The report makes ten recommendations, the 'headlines' of which are as follows:
 1. Both colleges and the Welsh Government should take action to further incentivise the building and maintenance of high connectivity between colleges and other stakeholders, especially employers.
 2. The particular challenges for teaching and learning at the boundary between occupational and educational expertise should become a more prominent feature of initial teacher training, continuing professional development and annual performance review.
 3. Colleges should compare, review and agree on what vocational programmes should always contain or address in addition to their vocationally-specific aims.
 4. Estyn's processes and reports should recognise in a more explicit way that learning itself has different meanings in different areas of provision.

5. Colleges should do more to directly involve elected or appointed student representatives in their negotiations and engagements with employers, community groups and other stakeholders.
6. The Welsh Government should work with local authorities to examine more closely the quality of school-based vocational provision, especially if this appears to duplicate that available in nearby FE colleges.
7. The Welsh Government should investigate the opportunities - and the current uptake of opportunities - for school pupils to attend college for part of their week to pursue selected vocational programmes, and identify whether current funding mechanisms encourage or discourage this practice.
8. In processes for accountability and quality there should be less reliance placed on aggregated success rates and on the use of 'quartiles' when comparing such a small number of providers.
9. The Education Workforce Council should be requested (and if necessary, supported) to communicate more clearly to colleges and registered staff its vision for its contribution to professionalism in the FE sector.
10. The Welsh Government should consider commissioning or engaging in research to understand more clearly the trajectories of FE vocational learners, especially those who have already participated in a vocational course whilst at school.

Introduction

In the Summer of 2015 Huw Lewis AM, the Minister for Education and Skills, requested independent expert advice about the quality of Further Education (FE) in Wales. The advice was to include what the evidence suggests in relation to ‘what works’ in FE with a particular focus on vocational education. The assignment would give an overview of the current state of FE in Wales, explore what constitutes quality in vocational FE, assess the professional development implications of these findings and identify areas in which more evidence is needed, also arriving at a series of recommendations. The assignment was conceived and commissioned through the Public Policy Institute for Wales.

To achieve this, we have drawn upon recent and relevant research, most of which comes from England and Europe. Whilst the research base is limited and more fragmented compared to other educational sectors, we have found it possible to outline aspects of vocational education and training (VET) that are widely held to represent, or lead to, high quality.

Alongside preparing the report we also interviewed eight senior personnel from five of the FE providers in Wales. It was not our intention that these interviews should enable us to say anything definitive about the sector as a whole, and their main purpose was one of ‘orientation’. For example, we used them to update our understanding of the meanings, systems and measurements of quality currently in circulation, to accelerate our familiarity with current examples of high quality vocational education and training in Wales, and to alert us to broad trends in provision. We were keen to enable those participating to speak freely, and our agreement with them was to preserve anonymity. Some brief connections are made with these data in the report, and we also include an Appendix with a short summary of them.

The pattern of FE provision in Wales

There is now a wealth of statistical information available on Further Education in Wales, including interactive tables produced by StatsWales. This section of the report does not attempt a comprehensive summary of such information, but draws on a small amount of it in order to provide a backdrop for its main purposes, addressed in the following sections. Here we give brief attention to (a) the composition of the sector in terms of institutions; (b) some

key trends in the sector, and (c) the proportion of learning activity that is VET and the subject areas into which learning activity may be divided.

The composition of the sector

Following several years of mergers and other developments aligned with the Welsh Government's transformation agenda, there are currently 14 designated further education providers in Wales, comprising 13 colleges and two community-based institutions. Some are best characterised as General FE Colleges, whilst others may be termed 'part-tertiary colleges', because they have at least one campus in an area with tertiary arrangements. The further education providers are:

- Cardiff and Vale College
- Coleg Cambria
- Coleg Ceredigion
- Coleg Gwent
- Coleg Sir Gâr
- Coleg y Cymoedd
- Gower College Swansea
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
- Grŵp NPTC Group
- Merthyr Tydfil College
- Pembrokeshire College
- St David's Sixth Form College
- YMCA Community College
- WEA Cymru

Amongst the senior personnel interviewed, almost all feel that the sector is now at its optimum size in terms of the number of institutions. There is strong wish for consolidation rather than further reformulation of the current arrangements. Some pointed to the geography of Wales, arguing that a further reduction in the number of institutions would jeopardise the capacity of colleges to serve their communities and main stakeholders. There were also concerns about increasing the travel demands on relatively disadvantaged

students and the impact of this on equality of opportunity. One of those interviewed saw some possible scope for further rationalization.

Key trends in the sector

The most recent statistical release of information on post-16 learning collected through the Welsh Government's Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) offers the following summary:

- There was a decline in overall learner numbers in post-16 education between 2012/13 and 2013/14, continuing the trend seen since its peak in 2005/06. Within this there were variations between the individual sectors and age groups, including an increase in work-based learning provision.
- In 2013/14 there were 223,140 distinct learners at FE Institutions, Community Learning (CL) or Work-based Learning (WBL) providers, 2.8 per cent fewer than in 2012/13.
- Total numbers at FE institutions fell by 4.1 per cent, with the reduction largely driven by falling numbers in part-time learning.
- There were 11 per cent fewer learners in local authority community learning than in 2012/13.
- WBL provision rose by 7.5 per cent, relative to 2012/13, to just under 65,900 unique learners which was higher than in any of the previous seven years (StatsWales, 2015a).

Vocational education and training as a part of FE learning activity

Vocational education and training (VET) can be defined in a number of different ways, and this gives rise to difficulties with the generalisability and applicability of the outcomes of research, and to specific difficulties in the interpretation of official statistics. Learning activity is recorded in the LLWR by 'qualification type' and this provides a partial picture of the volume and proportion of VET. The following table is adapted from the relevant StatsWales report (2015b)

Qualification type	Number	Percentage
A Level/ A2	9,135	1.546
AS level	19,320	3.269
Access certificate/diploma	2,975	0.503
First certificate	20	0.003
First certificate/diploma units	45	0.007
First diploma	45	0.007
GCSE/VCE	7,710	1.304
HE (excluding NVQs)	6,600	1.116
Key skills and Essential Skills Wales	122,340	20.700
National Vocational Qualifications	22,940	3.881
National certificate	250	0.042
National certificate/diploma units	1,285	0.217
National diploma	480	0.081
OCN credits	114,510	19.375
QCF	123,155	20.838
Other	160,180	27.103
Total	590,990	100.000

Table 1: Learning activities at further education institutions by qualification type, 2013-14 (adapted from StatsWales 2015b)¹

The interpretation of this material is hampered by the large 'other' category, accounting for over 27%. However, we can say that it is likely that learning activity that is clearly non-vocational (A level and A2, AS level, Access certificate and diploma, HE and most GCSEs)

¹ Note that 'learning activity' is distinct from 'programme' and also from 'unique learners'.

adds up to around 7.7% of total learning activity, with A Level and AS Level forming the largest component. Learning activity is also recorded by subject area, and Table 2 below presents an overview.

Subject area	Number	Percentage
Agriculture, Horticulture and animal care	5	0.02
Arts and crafts	0	0
Business, management, office studies	3,555	15.49
Care/personal development (including basic skills)	2,755	12.00
Catering/food/leisure services/tourism	1,950	8.50
Construction & property (built environment)	2,760	12.03
Cultural studies/languages/literature	55	0.24
Education/training/teaching	90	0.39
Engineering	4,915	21.42
Environment protection/ energy/cleansing/security	20	0.08
Health care/ medicine/ health and safety	755	3.29
Humanities	0	0
Information technology & information	0	0
Logistics/ distribution/ transport/ driving	35	0.15
Manufacturing/ production work	855	3.73
Media/ communication/ publishing	20	0.08
Oil/mining/ plastics/ chemicals	10	0.04
Performing arts	0	0
Sales, marketing and retailing	2,300	10.02
Sciences and mathematics	50	0.21
Services to industry and commerce	865	3.77
Social Sciences	0	0
Sport, games and recreation	465	2.03
Not specified	1,480	6.45
Total	22,940	100*

Table 2: Learning activities at further education institutions by subject, 2013-14 (adapted from StatsWales 2015c). (*rounded)

As Table 2 shows, 'subject' areas are diverse, with the largest proportions being, in order of prevalence: Engineering; Business, Management and Office Studies; Construction and Property (Built Env.); Care, Personal Development (including basic skills); Sales, Marketing and Retail; Catering, Leisure services and Tourism.

High quality vocational education and training in Further Education Colleges

Although the research base is limited and more fragmented compared to other educational sectors, it is possible to outline aspects of vocational education and training (VET) that are widely held to represent, or lead to, high quality. The main difficulty in doing so is that even if we confine our attention to FE colleges, 'vocational' means so many different things, encompassing occupationally-specific programmes and qualifications at a range of levels, general vocational programmes and qualifications that are built around a broadly defined sector of employment, and pre-vocational programmes and qualifications aimed at building non-occupationally specific skills and capacities to enhance employability. In addition, vocational provision is often differentiated in terms of initial and continuing education and training, with the latter encompassing retraining and upskilling. This range means that one has to be very careful when trying to learn from research outputs, a problem noted by Wolf in her 2011 Review of 14-19 vocational education in England (Wolf, 2011).

The research project 'Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education'² (hereafter 'TLCFE') incorporated something of this range and provides some insight on the question of

²'Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education' (ESRC reference L139251025) is the only large-scale independent study to date of teaching and learning in English FE. There were specific extensions to the project in Wales (see inter alia Jephcote and Salisbury 2009) and Scotland. It took place between 2001 and 2005. The study was designed in collaboration with stakeholders and FE/HE partnerships were an important part of its infrastructure. It combined qualitative and quantitative methods in a nested case study design in which researchers and practitioners worked together at all stages through to analysis, publication and communication. The 'learning sites' studied in detail over an extended period were chosen in a process of negotiation with senior managers in the four participating colleges, and may have led to an over-representation of provision that senior managers regarded as amongst their best. For present purposes, this would represent a welcome bias in sampling. Around half of the provision studied was vocational, comprising a mixture of specific and general VET. The project's independence, scope, proximity to actual practice over time, and focus on quality make it a key source for the questions addressed in this report.

what constitutes high quality in vocational provision in FE and on factors that make it most likely to be manifested. The project encompassed a broad range of vocational, academic and other provision, and across this range, four 'drivers' were identified as routes for improvement in the quality of teaching and learning. These were 'maximising student agency', 'maximising tutor professionalism', 'improving pedagogy' and 'enhancing positive aspects of the learning culture'. A series of 'principles of procedure for improving learning in FE' was also set out, aimed at four constituencies, i.e. government and national bodies, college management, tutors, and students (see James and Biesta, 2007).

For the purposes of this report, we have focused on those outcomes of the TLCFE project with something to say about the quality of VET, and alongside these we have considered a range of other recent and relevant research. The results of this process are expressed under seven themes, though all are connected. These are the matters that research evidence and research-based analysis suggests are important in determining the quality of vocational provision in Further Education colleges. They are:

- Connectivity and the nature of relationships between provision, workplaces, occupations and sectors;
- Dual professionalism and the backgrounds and dispositions of teachers;
- Moderate reliance on structures and vertical accountability;
- Vocational knowledge and the effectiveness and value of learning;
- Acknowledging the different legitimate meanings of learning;
- Maximising learner voice; and
- The place of vocational options in a local ecology.

Theme 1: Connectivity and the nature of relationships between provision, workplaces, occupations and sectors.

Keep (2012) asserts that the relationship between the education and training system and the labour market can be examined at three levels of magnitude, namely micro, meso and macro. The TLCFE project attempted to focus on the first of these without losing sight of the other two. Relationships between provision and the world of work varied a great deal, but it

is helpful to see them as being on a continuum: at one end was frequent contact, physical movement of students and/or teachers between the two settings, and more or less continuous processes of influence that shaped curriculum and pedagogy; at the other end the relationship was weak, distant and/or in tension, even if it had at one time been strong and/or positive. Generally speaking, a 'close' relationship was more likely to maintain teaching and learning that was of high quality in the eyes of all parties, contributing to what the analysis termed 'synergy' in the learning culture³.

The relationship can differ in intensity according to the purpose of the programme and the occupational and sectoral context. Some vocational programmes have a strong relationship with the labour market because they provide the occupationally specific training and qualifications required for a 'licence to practise' (see Fuller and Unwin 2013). For example, dental technicians have to achieve a Level 3 BTEC Diploma in Dental Technology recognized by the General Dental Council in order to gain employment. Similarly, accountancy technicians have to gain the Level 3 AAT NVQ in Accounting. Teachers on these programmes are also required to maintain their professional standing and the related employment and professional bodies take an active interest in the curriculum. These strongly connected programmes tend also to have high educational currency (see Fuller and Unwin 2012a), hence, the dental and accountancy qualifications referred to above both provide access to higher education – in the dental example through a Foundation Degree, whilst the AAT NVQ is listed in the UCAS tariff.

Apprenticeship is the classic model of a partnership between vocational education and workplace training. However, even in the dual-system countries such as Austria, Germany and Switzerland, which are often held up as having the strongest apprenticeship provision, there is a constant struggle to maintain optimum levels of cooperation between employers and training providers (see Fuller and Unwin 2012b). FE colleges compete with private training providers and Group Training Associations (GTAs) to provide the off-the-job and assessment elements of apprenticeship, though some colleges also sub-contract provision to providers and there are some partnership arrangements. As a consequence, their teaching, managerial and administrative staff have to develop the skills to build relationships

³ Even in work-related learning in schools, linked to GCSE subjects, the authenticity of the connection of the provision with the workplace has been shown to matter greatly for the quality of learner engagement, and having inauthentic 'vocational' resources is probably worse than having none at all (James et al, 2010). This finding is echoed in recent work in Finland which showed that periods of workplace learning differed greatly in how close students could get to the 'real' activity of the workplace, and that this fundamentally altered how much they could learn from it (Virtanen et al, 2014).

with employers. In Wales (as in England) the majority of apprentices are aged 19 and over when they start and it is probable that a significant number are also already employed. Much of the assessment will be carried out in the workplace and will involve accrediting existing skills and knowledge (See Fuller et al 2015). There is considerable potential here for college staff to use this access to employers to co-design better quality apprenticeships (what Fuller and Unwin have termed 'expansive' apprenticeships) and also to spot opportunities for wider workforce development provision (Fuller and Unwin 2014b).

Strong connectivity can be developed at local and regional level through relationships between employers and colleges that have been built up over time or emerge because an employer has a particular skill gap they want to fix. Many colleges have deep roots in the social and economic fabric of towns and communities (see Bailey and Unwin 2014). Some are better than others at capitalizing on this as a 2011 NIACE enquiry found:

Colleges are not just skills providers and planners; they are also a major part of the local economic infrastructure. They are large employers, and purchasers of goods and services. Their experience of working across the public–private sector interface means they are well-placed to advise other businesses on how to operate more efficiently and innovatively. (NIACE 2011: 28)

A further important benefit of encouraging and maintaining strong relationships between colleges and employers relates to the need to continually bolster the status of vocational education. One manifestation of the vocational-academic divide in Britain is the lack of knowledge that some school teachers have about contemporary workplaces and the changing nature of many occupations. In the field of engineering, a National Grid report noted widespread negative public perceptions of engineering and a lack of familiarity with engineering amongst secondary school teachers (National Grid, 2009). By contrast, FE colleges contained teachers who had often worked as engineers and saw it positively. The report argues that:

Both young people and teachers felt that the most effective measures to counter misconceptions and publicise engineering effectively would be meaningful work experience, visiting workplaces and meeting practising engineers (Haight, 2012:384)

Providing opportunities for young people in schools and colleges to gain experience of contemporary workplaces and to have access to up-to-date knowledge about the differences between occupational areas in terms of pay and progression prospects are also central to challenging gender stereotypes (see Fuller and Unwin 2014b; Beck et al 2006). Areas of the UK's labour market, as in all other countries in Europe, remain highly segregated and this is reflected in work-based programmes, including apprenticeship.

It is important to understand the issue of negative perceptions in a relational way. Vocational provision is 'positioned' and given a status by the widespread relative cultural valuation and celebration of academic provision in the UK, a tendency with its roots in historic associations between occupations and social classes. This positioning cannot simply be wished away or erased by policy declarations of 'parity of esteem', and nor is it just a small matter of context. Recognising the issue forces us to consider how high quality vocational provision can define itself other than by some sort of equivalence to academic qualifications and levels. Arguably, it must maximize the connection and interchange with relevant industries and workplaces, and do so in an ongoing relationship. A similar conclusion was reached recently by the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL):

What we have consistently found is that the best provision is collaborative in nature, what we are calling the **two-way street** between providers and employers, and has a **clear line of sight to work**. It is about relationships not structures, joint responsibility not just vertical accountability (LSIS, 2013, p. 4, original emphasis).

There is some research evidence on the motivations that employers may have for participating in educational programmes. These typically include: raising the company's profile; general potential enhancement of public image; a supply of short-term labour at virtually no cost; and positive effects on long-term recruitment strategy (see Hughes, 1998; Mann et al, 2010; Haynes et al, 2013). Recent work on the 14-19 Diplomas in England, which were set up with a high level of employer engagement in design and delivery, endorses the point about the net gains to be had from a 'reciprocal' relationship between the educational institution and employers. As well as seeing costs, employers find benefits to them in such close working relationships – benefits such as ticking their corporate social responsibility box, the raising of awareness of the organisation amongst young people, or even that the engagement represents a form of professional development for their own staff. One company suggested that as their products were aimed at young people, a new

opportunity to work closely with this group had high potential value to the business (Haynes et al, 2013).

Finally under this theme, the research suggests that a set of pedagogical considerations are also important, and that specific and continued effort is required if the institution/employer relationship is to produce high quality learning. An interesting example of an attempt to secure this can be seen in Switzerland, where around two-thirds of young people transfer from lower secondary education to 'dual' VET apprenticeship programmes in which they spend time each week in both college and workplace settings. It is often mistakenly assumed that apprentices will make their own connections between what they do and learn in the two contexts. Schwendimann and colleagues examine this problem and show how an 'Erfahrraum'⁴ model, using a range of digital tools to serve as bridges, can facilitate students' boundary-crossing and promote 'expansive, integrative and connective learning in VET'. Importantly, however, this 'requires ongoing joint work at the boundaries and continuous negotiation of meanings' (Schwendimann et al, 2015: 371 and 390; see also Fuller and Unwin 2012b for research from 11 countries on the pedagogical and policy challenges related to contemporary apprenticeships; and Pilz 2012).

Theme 2: Dual professionalism and the backgrounds and dispositions of teachers.

Generally, those teaching VET in FE colleges have a more complex professional identity compared to school teachers, and even compared to their academic-subject teaching FE colleagues. This identity is rooted in both specific occupational experience and in pedagogical expertise. The TLCFE project showed that whilst occupational backgrounds were seen as an important prerequisite when FE colleges employed VET teachers, these backgrounds were not always acknowledged subsequently by managers or used effectively as a resource for maximizing the connections between college courses and workplaces or industry practices. The TLCFE project also found that in many cases the 'educational' side of professional identity was surprisingly deep-rooted and 'dispositional'. FE teachers were often motivated by having themselves benefited from 'second chance' educational

⁴ Erfahrraum merges Erfahrung ('experience') and Raum ('space'), and here refers to a model to capture real professional experiences at the workplace through technologies, which are in turn used to design learning activities and to foster reflection in the college setting.

opportunities or having responded well as learners to specific teachers in a post-compulsory environment. Such experiences usually fed a strong identity of professionalism as an educator and were woven into a set of values about how to support learners and teach well. The TLCFE project found that there were frequent and serious tensions between this professional identity and college- or sector-level conceptions of professionalism, which – by contrast - emphasized doing a job well to a specification and being flexible in the face of systemic change. Tutors sometimes felt that their professional experience was not appropriately valued, and managers sometimes felt that tutors were unreasonably resistant to change. Conflicts and frustrations of this nature produced stress and contributed to high staff turnover, which very clearly detracted from the student learning experience. The recent CAVTL report highlights the importance, in high quality VET, of “dual professional” teachers and trainers who combine occupational and pedagogical expertise, and are trusted and given the time to develop partnerships and curricula with employers’ (LSIS, 2013, p. 15).

The TLCFE project showed that good FE teachers were still the single most important element in the learning culture and clearly central to high quality VET. However, this point is regularly confused with the idea that teachers generally or always have a great deal of autonomy and agency. Teachers were usually highly constrained, or had learnt to see themselves as highly constrained, in what they could do to maintain quality or improve teaching and learning, especially through innovation in pedagogy and curriculum. Some felt that how they were managed and measured compelled them to avoid any risk, whilst others had become cynical in respect of the volume and frequency of new policies and systems around their work. Many deliberate interventions by teachers were attempts to mitigate perceived negative effects of system-level change, clearly motivated by either a strong view of relevant industrial practices, expectations or standards, or by a strong view of what was pedagogically appropriate for their learners.

Theme 3: Moderate reliance on structures and vertical accountability.

The TLCFE project also reflected the importance of the second point in the quote from the CAVTL report, demonstrating that high reliance on structures and vertical accountability could and did undermine the quality of VET. This point is reiterated in a range of other research in schools and colleges. At the institutional level, Boocock revisits research from the early 2000s and argues that the continued use of national benchmarks functions as a ‘perverse incentive’, bringing about ‘gaming’ behaviour which has serious and deleterious consequences for the quality of learning, particularly for the most disadvantaged vocational

learners (Boocock, 2014). Most of our sample of senior college personnel highlighted frustrations with the current usage of benchmarking data to compare colleges, pointing out that it took no account of where many FE learners began their learning journeys, and that the division of the 13 colleges into 'quartiles' would only make sense with much larger numbers of colleges and could be interpreted as a gross oversimplification which easily lends itself to over-interpretation.

The expression of national targets as qualifications and the use of qualifications to measure provider performance both resulted from the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the late 1980s. Whilst NVQs were meant to rationalise the existing so-called jungle of vocational qualifications and involve employers directly in the specification of occupational standards, they have been strongly criticized. From the start, employers were less eager to get involved than had been hoped and the use of functional task analysis to develop lists of job-specific competencies was regarded as narrowing down the content of vocational programmes. This strongly centralized performance-focused conception of competence⁵ led to many 'quality' difficulties, especially in respect of the place of underpinning knowledge and in terms of the separation of teaching and learning from assessment (e.g. Eraut, 1994; James & Diment, 2003; Wheelahan & Moodie, 2011; Young, 2011). It also exacerbated the more perennial problem in policy of regarding employers as homogeneous in respect of their training needs and demand for skills (Ertl & Stasz, 2010).

The TLCFE project revealed many examples of where 'vertical accountability' (specifically, aspects of inspection, audit and funding rules) thwarted teacher's attempts to improve the quality of provision or damaged the quality of existing provision, either because the accountability lacked flexibility or was perceived at college level as lacking flexibility. However it is important to note that at college level, there have been important differences between England, Scotland and Wales – not only in the nature of systems for funding, audit and inspection but also in the extent to which college leaders have had a 'voice' in the shaping and interpretation of these systems. Welsh college leaders have historically enjoyed a more active engagement with policymaking than their English counterparts (see James, 2011).

⁵ For some critics, this performance focus arose from behaviourist assumptions (e.g. Tarrant, 2000).

Theme 4: Vocational knowledge and the effectiveness and value of learning.

The analysis of the TLCFE project showed that a distinction between effectiveness and value of learning is vital in any judgement of the quality of provision. High synergy between a college-based programme and the needs, expectations and culture of the workplace (see theme 1 above) appeared to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for high quality vocational programmes. There were cases where workplace connection and relevance was high, but some of what was being learnt very effectively gave cause for serious concern. A pertinent example would be a childcare course which, whilst successful from the employer viewpoint and in terms of college systems, also contributed to maintaining gender inequalities and expectations of low pay. In contrast, and as also mentioned under Theme 1, some vocational programmes and qualifications have sufficient knowledge content to attract UCAS points and provide an individual with a licence to practise.

There are fundamental questions about knowledge in vocational programmes and which interests are in a position to define it. The area of vocational provision where this is most in need of attention is what is termed 'general vocational'. Recent research in England by Bathmaker (2013) focused on general vocational courses at levels 2 and 3 in applied science, performing arts and business administration. This showed a continuing lack of agreement across various stakeholders about the purposes of general vocational qualifications, and a lack of certainty about the role they can and should play in preparing people for work or further study. Bathmaker suggests that these problems are likely to have been exacerbated by the rise in emphasis on skills and the breadth of meanings that this term now carries (see for example Confederation of British Industry, 2011).

In practical terms, a different kind of breadth may be equally important, and a core question is whether it is possible to have high quality vocational education and training if it only conforms to immediate employer needs, expectations and practices; or whether, conversely, it should always have an educational element which is more expansive. As well as focusing on the occupationally-specific knowledge, understanding and skills of the learner and on wider industry practices, this might pay equal attention to how the workplace sits in a wider economic, social and historical 'map', to comparisons across sectors and over time, and to civic and ethical matters. Particular employers working closely with a college may or may not see a need for something like critical thinking to be in the curriculum, and how a college handles this will depend on its collective values, what communities it seeks to serve in

addition to those employers, the qualifications being used or adapted, and the confidence with which the college negotiates. The TLCFE project showed that different interests in a partnership could have different legitimate definitions of high quality learning which may contradict each other, and other research has gone on to confirm this.

The OECD (2010: 59-60) highlight the importance of finding the right balance between 'providing students with a set of very practical occupational skills that will make them immediately employable and productive' and the generic skills '(that) build into an individual's skill-set the capacity to adapt to changed circumstances'. They add, however, that the 'hard evidence' about the importance and impact of generic skills actually relates to literacy and numeracy, hence, in the countries with strong VET systems we find a core of general education within vocational programmes.

From a comparative perspective, the European countries with strong VET systems all include a substantial component of general and civic education in their full-time vocational programmes for young people (see Cedefop 2015). This is possible because 'full-time' equates to at least 30 hours per week, whereas in the UK, 'full-time' in FE colleges usually means 15 hours per week. How much general education to include in VET programmes is, however, a difficult question. Those who advocate maximizing the general education content tend to privilege disciplinary knowledge over the knowledge that forms part of the embodied and tacit practices involved in occupations. Canning (2012:46) argues that this requires us to 'engage with a much more complex and broader notion of knowledge'. Writing from the perspective of developments in Scottish colleges and universities, Canning (ibid) cautions against using a narrow definition of vocational education, particularly in post- industrial and service-sector dominated economies where occupations once assigned to an intermediate level (e.g. nurses) have migrated to professional level (with training in universities).

There is, then, a sense in which colleges should continue to take a 'long view' whilst they engage with employers, groups of employers or other stakeholders: they should, perhaps, always know more than these other parties do about the capacities and capabilities that young people should develop during vocational programmes. A recent comparative study of VET across OECD countries stressed that:

'More complex careers, with more options in both work and learning, are opening up new opportunities for many people. But they are also making decisions harder as young people face a sequence of complex choices over a lifetime of learning and work.' (OECD 2010: 16)⁶

To this we might add a general proposition, that high quality VET should develop a breadth of understanding, well beyond the immediate needs of the workplace, because this will help new employees to prepare for, and continue to remain flexible within, a rapidly changing job market.

Theme 5: Acknowledging the different legitimate meanings of learning.

The variety and range of provision, in terms of level and subject or type and intensity of occupational focus, is a defining and positive feature of the FE sector. However, and less expectedly, the TLCFE project showed that with this variety and range comes a great deal of diversity in what is meant by learning. This is a logically separate question from those concerning knowledge (see theme 4). The distinction between 'acquisition' and 'participation' metaphors (Sfard 1998) is a useful starting point, in that many programmes do have a clear emphasis, either on acquiring a body of knowledge or on learning to operate successfully in a community of practice. Many of course combine both these elements. Practically, this translates into a range of conceptions and practices of learning and a range of activities in which these are manifest. Students might engage in some or all of the following: listening, talking, reading, discussing, debating, problem-solving individually and in groups, filling in worksheets, designing and/or making artefacts, taking photographs, watching videos, making audio or video recordings, writing assignments, drawing diagrams or graphical representations, making presentations, writing blogs, using dedicated e-learning and other web-based resources, general internet searching or online games. They may or may not also make choices and decisions about what to learn and when, and how it is approached.

⁶ The same report found, however, that careers guidance was inadequate in many countries because: a) it was delivered by non-guidance professionals often working in contexts with a pro-academic bias; b) it was under resourced and fragmented; and c) there was a lack of relevant and comprehensible labour market information.

In FE learning cultures, it is often assumed that it is desirable to maximize the variety of teaching and learning methods and that high quality provision should be characterized by such variety. In the FE sector and elsewhere this is sometimes justified with reference to the idea that all students have a distinctive 'learning style' that can be measured and explicitly catered for, and so greater variety of teaching and learning methods is more likely to meet the diverse needs of a group (see Coffield et al, 2004, for a balanced critique of the conception and use of learning styles). The TLCFE project suggests that advocating maximal variety is too simplistic because there is a prior question about purposes or goals, which differ markedly across programmes. In some programmes the memorization of a large amount of material may be the dominant conception, whilst in others it might be the constant engagement with relevant problems and materials to build capacity, familiarity and confidence in the application of knowledge to practice. The former might give rise to a lot of student listening, whilst the latter may drive ongoing tailored tutor assistance in the completion of a continuous series of tasks (all of which may be part of a summative assessment process - see Torrance et al, 2005). Conceptions of purpose can be strongly held by teachers and workplaces but not explicitly acknowledged, or not effectively communicated in lists of learning outcomes. They may derive from occupationally- or subject- specific factors, or they may sometimes be drawn more broadly, driven for example by a general diagnosis of the changing world of work (see for example Cole & Donohue, 2014).

Whilst there are different views about what constitutes 'best practice' in teaching, the point to stress here is that what is actually done in the name of learning varies greatly across programmes. The TLCFE project showed that this can become highly problematic when single mechanisms and common indicators are used to describe and measure levels, achievements and progression. These indicators can 'miss', and occasionally 'misrepresent' the valued quality and qualities of specific provision, and at worst their high significance could and did produce threats to quality such as teacher cynicism or forms of 'gaming the system' (e.g. learners being recruited to inappropriate courses, or being shown what to write in tasks that contributed directly to a summative assessment for a qualification).

Theme 6: Maximising learner voice.

The Webb Review noted that employers and learners were being consulted more, and that this would help with making provision more accountable and responsive to citizen and employer need. However, the Review also said that there was a need for much greater

involvement of both employers and learners in assessing the quality of both processes and outcomes. To this end, it recommended that learner panels be convened 'at course, institution, consortia, area and national level' (Webb, 2007, pp. 98-102). In the event, the 'consortium' proposals of the Review were not pursued in policy, and the (then) Welsh Assembly Government responded to underline the importance of learners being consulted on all appropriate occasions when decisions were being taken that would affect them (WAG, undated). The Welsh Government now runs a Learner Voice Wales Survey each year, covering FE colleges as well as work-based providers and adult community learning. This has achieved a response rate of 68% in both of its first two years, and is a helpful source of information to providers, the Government and the wider community (Welsh Government Social Research 2014).

A wide variety of educational research supports the general principle of 'maximizing learner voice' (see for example Lyle et al, 2010; Fielding and Rudduck, 2002). Many teachers see this as a foundational pedagogic principle, and it will form an important part their relationship with learners and groups of learners and will run through their everyday practices. Additionally, in some provision and in some colleges, there are arrangements for student representatives to periodically engage with managers and even governors. All such initiatives are to be applauded.

However, there is another perhaps deeper sense in which colleges may involve current and former students in respect of VET, and it may contribute to maximizing the quality of provision. It connects to the 'relationships' point made under Theme 1. There may be considerable gains from the direct involvement of elected or appointed student representatives in processes of curriculum development, liaison with employers, community groups or other stakeholders, or processes of accountability. In other words, the direct involvement of learners in those processes that create and maintain provision, and with those measuring or claiming to measure quality, is itself a potential source of 'quality' provision. Some programmes would provide mechanisms for learners to reflect upon this involvement in ways that attract credit, becoming part of a student's attainment. In others, such involvement could become visible in job applications, cvs and the self-presentation of learners. This is an avenue that is open to vocational provision much more than it is to more 'academic' provision.

Theme 7: The place of vocational options in a local ecology.

Like all educational provision, VET programmes cannot be solely regarded as free-standing entities with certain intrinsic qualities. They will be generated, offered, considered, chosen, experienced and completed alongside many other options and possibilities, and these comparisons are an important element in the nature of the provision itself (technically speaking, its 'learning culture'). A widely-recognised illustration of this point is the 'parity of esteem' issue, already touched upon under theme 1, whereby in some eyes, the holder of a level 3 vocational qualification might be assumed not to have been capable of achieving a level 3 academic qualification whilst the latter is 'automatically' assumed to have higher status, regardless of its actual content. This perception is likely to enter the consciousness of learners on both routes, becoming part of what is being learnt.

Quality is always partly about how something sits in relation to something else. It must be acknowledged that perceptions of the character of a course or a qualification are not simply 'right' or 'wrong', and neither are they just 'noise' in an otherwise purely rational process based on information and choice. Perceptions are rather a way of talking about something much more fundamental, namely collective and individually-held evaluations of worth. These evaluations may determine awareness and demand, so that some groups of learners in some situations see a course/qualification as possible or worthwhile, whilst others do not.

We make this point because perceptions of worth are a logically separate issue from the intrinsic quality of provision, but still affect overall quality. A common-sense view might be that a college can take measures to improve the intrinsic quality of provision, but that perceptions of worth are simply beyond its control. A more sophisticated (if also ambitious) view might be that because courses and qualifications are 'positional goods', it is part of the business of the college to act strategically to enhance wider perceptions of what it offers. In part this is familiar territory, covered by marketing and public relations activities as currently conceived, but there are bigger questions here for any college wanting to offer or maintain the highest quality VET. For example, how can the college challenge or intervene in the patterns of choices and assumptions that have built up in the local 'ecology' of educational provision?

Recent work by Hodgson and Spours suggests that the 'local learning ecology' is an important device in trying to understand how the various providers, routes and programmes

in a particular locality come to operate as a system, giving rise to a 'low opportunity progression equilibrium' or a 'high opportunity progression eco-system' and thereby constraining or boosting the life-chances of young people (e.g. Hodgson & Spours, 2013). There is a strong parallel with some of the findings of the Webb Review, which pointed to efficiencies that could be secured through a Welsh regional consortium model (Webb, 2007). Our recent interviews with a cross section of senior college personnel suggest that it is often the case that whatever their individual qualities, the assemblage of school and college components in some areas operates to maintain great inefficiencies, duplication and waste, and that these arrangements also reinforce the idea that vocational provision is second-best and not expected to foster progression (see Appendix).

Whilst the concept of 'local learning ecologies' relates mainly to better co-ordination of education and training provision (and hence the supply side), the concept of a 'skill ecosystem' addresses the demand side. Originally developed by Finegold (1999), who analysed the characteristics that had contributed to the successful growth of Silicon Valley in the US, the ecosystem concept was further developed by Buchanan et al 2001: 21) who defined it as: 'clusters of high, intermediate or low level competencies in a particular region or industry shaped by interlocking networks of firms, markets or institutions'. The argument is that in order for the supply side to meet the skill needs of employers and also have some influence over employers' training behaviour, education and training providers and policymakers have to understand and have the capacity to analyse the contextual factors within a particular ecosystem. These include: product market and competitive strategies; business networks; recruitment strategies (for all levels of job); developments in work organization and job design; and the way employers use both public and private sources of skill formation. Felstead et al (2009) also stressed the importance of understanding the pressures of the productive system in which all organisations (public and private sector) sit in order to analyse why different workplaces adopt such different approaches to training, including apprenticeships and other forms of VET.

Recent analysis in England has attempted to understand the apparently contradictory policy thrusts of centralisation (e.g. schools leaving local authority control) and 'localism' (e.g. the increasing role of Local Enterprise Partnerships and others in terms of skills, FE governance and accountability). The same report reminds us that the 'supply' side is only ever one part of the picture, and that skills demand and skills utilisation are just as important in any attempt to cultivate economic development and business improvement in an area (Keep, 2015).

Serious attention to the 'ecosystem' therefore involves a great deal more than simply asking employers what they want and trying to meet their demands. It would seem that by virtue of its size and history, the FE sector in Wales is well-placed to continue to share intelligence and to develop analysis of this kind, not least via Colegau Cymru. There may however be scope for a more specific use to be made of economic and social analytical expertise, within and outside of the Welsh government, to enhance appreciation of the 'ecosystem' as it changes and develops.

Dual professionalism and professional development for high quality vocational provision

In this section we build on the previous section and consider what recent and contemporary research suggests about professionalism and professional development in respect of the achievement of high quality VET.

Meanings of professionalism in FE

Professionalism is commonly and historically understood to refer to such things as specialist training and occupational knowledge, high standards, ethical codes, high relative occupational status and relatively high rewards. It may also be viewed as a 'logic' or an 'ideology' pertaining to the partial control of work by specialist workers, where the alternatives are the market (consumer control) or bureaucracy (manager control) (Friedson, 2001). As we saw in section 2, the TLCFE research demonstrated that whilst elements of these 'grand' conceptions were always relevant, there were also narrower and powerful 'everyday' meanings of professionals and professionalism in circulation in colleges. One of these was that professionalism is simply (or 'really') about doing a job to a high and pre-specified standard, as instructed, unsupervised, and without complaint. Many teachers felt that this was how their managers judged whether or not they were 'professional' and it was also how they felt they were positioned by the systems surrounding their work. However, the research also revealed another, vitally important sense of professionalism which was in tension with the one just mentioned. This was professionalism as a sense of identity or sense of self.

Research increasingly acknowledges that professionalism must be understood dispositionally, and is about identity and identifications as much as it is about those other more widely acknowledged elements. The TLCFE project provided many illustrations of this point. For example, a common reason for FE teachers 'going the extra mile' for their students was what I might call 'embodied standards': that their own yardstick for a 'professional' response, derived from their experience as teachers and/or in other occupations, was different to what they felt was expected by the college, their managers, inspection arrangements or relevant examining or accrediting bodies. By researching alongside teachers over an extended period, the project was able to see the significance of strong pre-existing sets of shared ideas amongst staff about worthwhile learning, appropriate standards, attitudes, capabilities, achievements and behaviours – both for their students and for themselves. These ideas and beliefs are intimately bound up with a teacher's identity. Whilst they are mutable, they cannot be simply 'overwritten' with new expectations, a point we return to below.

Initial and continuing development for the 'dual professional'

The concept of the 'dual professional' (combining both occupational and pedagogical expertise) has long been associated with vocational teachers in FE both in the UK and other countries. In the UK, where it only became a mandatory requirement for FE teachers to have gained a recognized teacher training qualification in 2001, FE teachers' identity has been regarded as being more rooted in their subject or occupational expertise. This has been cited as contributing to the 'diverse and fragmented practices and professional cultures' found in colleges (Lucas and Unwin 2009:426; see also Robson 1996). Whilst it is accepted that there are pedagogical principles and practices that are generic to all teaching contexts, it is also true that teaching styles vary within and across subject areas (e.g. teaching history will afford different opportunities to teaching mathematics). In the UK, whilst these differences are part of teacher training, the main model of teacher training is generic, for both general and vocational teachers (for FE as well as schools). In contrast, some (though not all) countries with strong vocational systems (e.g. Denmark, Finland and Germany) have specialised vocational teacher training programmes run by corresponding specialist centres in universities and/or higher education colleges (Parsons et al 2009).

There are arguments for and against specialist vocational teacher training, but whatever the outcome of these, it is clear that vocational teachers do need to base their pedagogical approaches on social theories of learning so they can (re)contextualize (situate) the content

of their programmes for students. In Switzerland, this expectation also applies to general education teachers who work with vocational students (e.g. physics teachers teaching electricians) so they are required to take an additional training course to enable them to do this (see OECD 2010). Evans et al (2011: 156) explain that there are four modes of 'recontextualisation':

1. Content recontextualisation: codified knowledge is selected and adapted for the content of a vocational programme;
2. Pedagogic recontextualisation: combines disciplinary (codified) knowledge with practice-based knowledge and workplace knowledge to create learning activities;
3. Workplace recontextualisation: applying knowledge and skills and developing them further through workplace practice;
4. Learner recontextualisation: how the learner (student, apprentice etc.) brings their own prior knowledge and experience into play and through working with others, forges and develops their vocational identity.

Both professional development and ongoing systems for monitoring and enhancing the quality of provision in FE include various kinds of observation of practice. In her study of the role of observation in the initial teacher training of vocational teachers in FE colleges in England, Lahiff (2015) found that observation was central to the effectiveness of the vocational teachers' initial and continuing practice. She argues, however, that observation in a vocational context must itself be contextualized so that the observer can evaluate with the teacher how well the pedagogical expertise is being suited to the vocational setting. This brings us back to the point that high quality vocational provision is likely to have features that are field-specific, and that professional development needs to support this. As CAVTL (LSIS, 2013) argued, 'What is clear is that the best vocational teaching and learning is a sophisticated process'.

Challenges in the development of the dual professional

Today, the concept of 'dual professionalism' has become ever more multifaceted due to the demands being placed on VET programmes and the substantial effort required to work with employers. In their study of VET teachers across Europe, Cort et al (2004) found they were required to demonstrate proficiency in:

- learner-centred pedagogical skills;

- on-the-job learning techniques;
- modern technologies and work practices;
- awareness of the needs of business and employers;
- team working and networking; and
- managerial, organisational and communications skills .

Cort and colleagues make two further important points about the challenge facing VET teachers, particularly those who have been teaching for some years (ibid: 24): first, 'The need to adopt a collegial style of working requires teachers to acquire communication, social and management skills, which were not previously included in teacher and trainer training'; and second, 'It is not enough for teachers to acquire new skills and perform new functions. Effective motivation of teachers requires that they should understand the reasons for the change – making them their own'. Whilst vocational teachers will develop some of these skills during their initial teacher training, it will be through gaining experience and continuing professional development (CPD) that they will broaden their expertise.

Whilst it may seem counter-intuitive, one study suggests that colleges have some way to go before they are good learning environments for in-service trainee teachers. Lucas and Unwin (2009: 428) found that 'the demands and pressures that shape the everyday FE workplace heavily restrict the capacity of trainee teachers to both learn at work and also build on their off-the-job learning'. Using Fuller and Unwin's Expansive-Restrictive Framework, they identified four key themes that colleges need to consider and where necessary address in relation to both initial teacher training and CPD:

- the problem of the dominant identity of trainee teacher as productive worker;
- the considerable reliance on the goodwill and determination of teachers;
- the importance of informal learning and sharing expertise as part of everyday practice; and
- the artificial separation of ITE from workforce development and organisational strategy.

The relationship between professional development and professional practice

As the study reported above suggests, it is very difficult to find a balance between opportunities for appropriate professional development and the demands of the job. In this

context it is interesting that the TLCFE project found many examples of teachers 'doing their own thing' in regard to their continuing professional development, especially through informal and semi-formal networks with their colleagues in other colleges, and usually resourced by them personally. Much of this activity was 'under the radar', unknown to their managers. A more recent study has looked specifically at how vocational teachers in English FE colleges created their own opportunities for CPD. Broad (2013) found they did this through: attending external courses and workshops; attending exhibitions; reading specialist journals; doing part-time work back in their professional field in their holidays and/or weekends; membership of professional organisations aligned to their original occupation (e.g. the Association of Painting Craft Teachers (APCT) and the Association of Hairdressers and Therapists (AHT)); and entering their students into skills competitions where they could see the latest techniques and products.

Whatever the means by which it is pursued and achieved, there can be little doubt as to the value of having vocational teachers whose understanding of the relevant occupational field is both current and enthusiastic. There are examples of research evidence on the effective exploitation of this resource. In one Canadian School Board area, systems for generating new vocational provision relied directly on teachers' hybridized identities, harnessing the dual industrial and educational expertise of teachers to set up courses and shape the curriculum (Farnsworth & Higham, 2012). The example shows how a particular policy context enabled, entitled and expected teachers to be part of two different communities of practice. It goes on to utilize Wenger's insight about how any community of practice embodies a 'regime of competence', and this in turn provides a 'regime of accountability' (see Wenger, 2010) through which relevant industrial practices can remain a touchstone and benchmark for the quality of the provision. Perhaps most important of all, the study shows the centrality of an education-industry dialogue and how this is what made the courses truly 'vocational' (Higham & Farnsworth, 2012). Further confirmation can be seen in a Swedish study that shows the importance of 'boundary crossing' for vocational teachers: although some teachers did 'stop struggling', the research shows that 'teachers who manage to balance their teacher identities with their occupational identities by maintaining their participation in the different communities seem to be the best prepared to teach their vocational subjects' (Fejes & Kupsen, 2014 :265). These are good examples of the 'two-way street' recommendation of the CAVTL report mentioned earlier, suggesting that practical gains can follow from taking 'professional identity' seriously at programme, college and sector level.

Structures for professionalism?

The discussion above signals the vital importance of both initial teacher education and continuing professional development in any effort to maximize the quality of VET. It also suggests that successful ongoing CPD is likely to be driven by high shared expectations but must be a differentiated and individually tailored matter that recognizes the fundamental nature of professional identity and the potential gains to be had from its nurturance.

What structures beyond the college might do most to support and foster such an approach?

Whilst there were many factors in the demise of the Institute for Learning, it is at least partially attributable to a failure to understand the subtleties of professional identity in FE (BIS, 2012) and it overestimated the extent to which professionalism – in any meaningful sense with legitimacy amongst and across practitioners – is something that can be ‘legislated’ into existence. In Wales, the new Education Workforce Council (EWC) supersedes the General Teaching Council for Wales and incorporates registration for those teaching in FE as well as those in schools. Its website states ‘(W)e regulate education practitioners in Wales in the interests of learners and the general public. We enhance the status of the workforce by promoting high standards of professional conduct and competence and by ensuring these standards are maintained.’⁷.

Whilst it is as yet ‘early days’, there was scepticism amongst the senior personnel interviewed about whether the EWC could enhance the status of FE teachers, and some questioned how the EWC’s role and remit is compatible with, or could add value to, the employer/employee relationship in colleges. The efficiency and effectiveness of systems and arrangements for professional development is a conceptual as much as a practical matter, and the concepts deployed have strong implications for how professional development is ‘done’. Its success will depend not only on how well opportunities are described, communicated, incentivized or given a sense of urgency or compulsion; also, and crucially, it depends on how professional development takes up and engages with the current and pre-existing shape of professional identities ‘on the ground’.

⁷ Individuals must pay a registration fee, though the Welsh Government is subsidising the fees in the first year. See <http://www.ewc.wales/site/index.php/en/> (accessed 20th September 2012)

Recommendations

Our consideration of the research evidence on high quality vocational provision and on professional development that is likely to support it leads us to make the following recommendations:

1. Both colleges and the Welsh Government should take action to further incentivise the building and maintenance of high connectivity between colleges and other stakeholders, especially employers. Whilst there are plenty of good current examples, this facet is not yet a thoroughgoing expectation across all vocational provision. Consideration should be given to the identification of ‘champions’ from amongst those who have been particularly successful in this regard, who could work across more than one college. It should also be possible for a wider group of staff to use the available labour market and FE performance data to inform the way they manage, teach and develop their vocational programmes. Many other mechanisms would also be possible.
2. The particular challenges for teaching and learning at the boundary between occupational and educational expertise should become a more prominent feature of initial teacher training, continuing professional development and annual performance review. We recognise that there is already a considerable amount of industry updating, but this recommendation pertains to a further step towards taking seriously, and being seen to take seriously, what is distinctive about VET pedagogy.
3. Colleges should compare, review and agree on what vocational programmes should always contain or address in addition to their vocationally-specific aims. This process should include other stakeholders. Once accomplished, it is likely to assist colleges as they continue to negotiate new vocational provision. Colegau Cymru may be well placed to assist with this process.
4. Estyn’s processes and reports should recognise in a more explicit way that learning itself has different meanings in different areas of provision. In particular, this would acknowledge that the quality of VET is in part a function of how well recontextualisation and boundary-crossing in learner activity is facilitated.
5. Colleges should do more to directly involve elected or appointed student representatives in their negotiations and engagements with employers, community groups and other stakeholders.
6. The Welsh Government should work with local authorities to examine more closely the quality of school-based vocational provision, especially if this appears to duplicate that

available in nearby FE colleges. If the quality of this provision is poor, it should be discouraged or prevented from continuing.

7. The Welsh Government should investigate the opportunities - and the current uptake of opportunities - for school pupils to attend college for part of their week to pursue selected vocational programmes, and identify whether current funding mechanisms encourage or discourage this practice.
8. In processes for accountability and quality there should be less reliance placed on aggregated success rates and on the use of 'quartiles' when comparing such a small number of providers. Aggregated success rates often do not compare 'like with like'. Consideration should also be given to how more account could be taken of relative social disadvantage and value-added in the statistical comparison of providers.
9. The Education Workforce Council should be requested (and if necessary, supported) to communicate more clearly to colleges and registered staff its vision for its contribution to professionalism in the FE sector. This should happen quickly, preferably within the next six months.
10. The Welsh Government should consider engaging in research, or commissioning research, to understand more clearly the trajectories of FE vocational learners, especially those who have already participated in a vocational course whilst at school. Part of such research might also ascertain and clarify the purposes of the main varieties VET in Wales.

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Appendix

Key points from interviews with a sample of senior college personnel in Wales:

1. There is a consensus that the vocational provision offered in secondary schools is of variable quality, with some provision being of poor quality, due to teacher inexperience, lack of relevant workplace linkage, below-standard vocational facilities and the use of vocational courses as attempts to manage behavioural or other issues. It is feared that at worst, some of this provision puts young learners off pursuing something that interests them, and that at best it under-utilises a valuable opportunity to motivate learners in a setting that could and should be quite distinct from mainstream schooling and academic subjects.
2. In several of the interviews we heard about examples of students arriving at college having completed a level 1 or 2 vocational course in school, but who could not progress as they expected to because on closer examination, their skills were underdeveloped relative to the declared level achieved. Students in this position are likely to suffer a further de-motivating 'blow' and are likely to blame themselves rather than the institutions that have let them down. They become 'repeating' or 'held back' students, underlining a waste of their own time as well as of resources across the system. (From a 'learning cultures' perspective, this could be expected to affect both their prospects and those of their peers: if these learners are put into a position in which their enthusiasm is dampened, their presence in a group is likely to exert downward pressure on some aspects of quality).
3. Related to the above point, several senior personnel argue for new structural arrangements to enable colleges to be closely involved with some learners from age 14, even if those learners remain in school for the whole of their education.
4. Amongst the senior personnel interviewed, most feel that the sector is now at its optimum size in terms of the number of institutions. Several said that the larger colleges of the current arrangements made it easier to work with large employers than had been the case before and that major functions like marketing were more effective. There were many 'economies of scale', including the effective use of contract managers or commercial development teams, and as further reductions in public money were likely, colleges needed to have the capacity to negotiate effectively. There is strong wish for consolidation rather than further reformulation of the current arrangements. Some pointed to the geography of Wales, arguing that a further reduction in the number of institutions would jeopardise the capacity of colleges to serve their communities and main stakeholders. There were also concerns about increasing the travel demands on relatively disadvantaged students and

the impact of this on equality of opportunity. One of those interviewed saw some possible scope for further rationalization.

5. The use of the 'live brief' and similar vocationally-focused arrangements were a particularly productive and celebrated form of college/workplace connection.
6. In several colleges senior personnel noted the strength and large scale of their academic A-level operations compare to those of schools.
7. There was widespread desire for more autonomy at college level with regards to accreditation, especially at levels 1 and 2, so as to speed up responsiveness to employers' needs.
8. Most highlighted frustrations with the current usage of benchmarking data to compare colleges, pointing out that it took no account of where many FE learners began their learning journeys and did not take account of social deprivation in the way that schools data did. Furthermore, the division of the colleges into 'quartiles' would only make sense with much larger numbers of colleges and could be interpreted as a gross oversimplification which easily lends itself to over-interpretation.
9. In various ways, the interviews suggest that the current assemblage of school and college offerings in some areas operates to maintain great inefficiencies, duplication and waste which in turn reinforces the idea that vocational provision is second-best and not expected to foster progression. As one Principal put it, some young people are learning that vocational is second-best in school, and then learning that 'school vocational' is second best to 'college vocational'. Another Principal pointed out that some young people are wasting several years in which they could have become qualified and begun to earn money.
10. There is widespread high value placed upon the subject specific networks under the auspices of Colegau Cymru. Many colleges facilitate regular sharing of good practice internally as well.
11. There were many examples of energetic and innovative staff development, and the willingness and capacity to share between colleges.
12. Whilst it is as yet 'early days', there was scepticism amongst the senior personnel interviewed about whether the EWC could enhance the status of FE teachers, and some bemusement on the question of how the EWC's role and remit is compatible with, or could add value to, the employer/employee relationship in colleges.

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