



**HIGHER EDUCATION IN
FURTHER EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONS BRIEFING:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES
FOR RENEWAL IN DIFFICULT TIMES**

May 2020

BACKGROUND

Higher Education (HE) provision within Further Education Institutions (FEIs) – sometimes referred to as “college-based HE” or alternatively as “HE in FE” – has seen steady growth since the early 1990s. It has now become an important part of Further Education (FE) provision since the introduction of franchise arrangements and enabled by collaboration with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The number of adults achieving higher level skills qualifications (Level 4 or above) has seen a steady increase since 2008. The proportion holding higher education or equivalent level qualifications was 38.8% in 2019 compared with 37.8% in 2018¹. Improving skills is a long-term distinct ambition of the Welsh Government as a measure to improve the economic and social well-being of the country². This is underpinned by Welsh FEIs’ commitment to consistently providing higher level skill to learners through a range of initiatives. There is a growing infrastructure in place to provide HE in FE through

a range of qualifications, as well as some recent movement towards degree level apprenticeships within Work Based Learning. Additionally, many FEIs have become increasingly involved in delivering foundation degrees and other certified courses sometimes bilingually through collaborations with the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol.

The wider threats to higher education provision, due to student debt and the reliance on overseas income, have been addressed elsewhere. This briefing sets out the current basis upon which HE in FE is undertaken and highlights existing reviews that draw attention to the challenges and opportunities that were evident prior to the COVID19 pandemic. The briefing calls for those matters to be reviewed in light of the immediate and longer-term impact of the virus.

THE TABLE BELOW SHOWS HE IN FE ENROLMENT FIGURES FOR ALL COLLEGES IN WALES IN 2019/2020

Table 1

	Full Time Enrolment	Part Time Enrolment	Higher Apprenticeships	Total
Bridgend College	255	459	-	714
Coleg Cambria	242	205	54	501
Cardiff & Vale College	324	237	60	621
Coleg y Cymoedd	127	248	81	456
Gower College Swansea	180	140	60	380
Coleg Gwent	638	292	-	930
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai	557	679	29	1265
The College Merthyr Tydfil	253	67	-	320
NPTC Group	403	185	-	588
Pembrokeshire College	43	85	41	169
Coleg Sir Gâr	466	397	128	991
	3488	2994	453	6935

Source: Supplied by Colleges

¹ <https://gov.wales/levels-highest-qualification-held-working-age-adults-2019-html>

² <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/policy-statement-on-skills.pdf>

WHAT IS HE IN FE?

HE in FE provision begins at Level 4 and goes up to Level 6 qualifications, with a small amount of Level 7 provision at some colleges. Learners who have already achieved a Level 3 qualification in college and wish to continue their studies have the option of remaining in the college setting, instead of transferring to a HEI, therefore offering a seamless transition between education levels.

Diagram 1³:

The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) diagram below is a tool to help understand and compare qualifications in Wales. It shows that higher education begins at Level 4 and can be taught in both HEIs and FEIs across Wales. The framework is based on a European model adopted by countries worldwide⁴.



A 2015 review by Welsh Government found that HE in FE can support the local and regional HE skills offer, and can help meet the needs of specific skill sectors⁵. It found that FEIs' ability to deliver intermediate courses flexibly and locally, contributes to widening access to HE, and inspires learners in FEIs to continue with their education. Much of the HE in FE provision is vocational, meaning that there are

close ties to employability, with colleges working closely with employers. This strong relationship means that FEIs are able to offer bespoke courses that directly meet the needs of the community.

In July 2019⁶ College representatives gave evidence to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's (CYPE) evidence session on Post-legislative Scrutiny of the Higher Education (Wales) Act 2015. They noted that HE delivery through FE is particularly attractive to HEIs because colleges can develop and widen participation from those members of the community that would not otherwise study at a HE level. FE colleges also provide local access to higher education as the FEIs have many dispersed regional campuses in Wales, and often in areas of deprivation.

Following scrutiny of the sector, including oral evidence from ColegauCymru, the CYPE Committee published a report on the Post-legislative scrutiny of the Higher Education (Wales) Act, in December 2019⁷. It listed a series of nineteen recommendations and also pointed to the basis upon which scrutiny of any proposed legislations to establish a Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) could be undertaken. Should the proposed CTER bill be introduced during the period in which the effects of COVID19 are still being felt, it is imperative that full consideration is given to the report and its observations. Consideration should be given in light of the unprecedented challenges facing HE and FE institutions but above all to the disruption experienced by students as they seek the right path for their ongoing learning journey.

³ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-11/credit-and-qualifications-framework-for-wales-learner-guide.pdf>

⁴ <https://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/europass-support-centre/other-questions/what-european-qualification-framework-eqf>

⁵ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/review-of-higher-education-in-further-education-institutions.pdf>

⁶ <https://record.assembly.wales/Committee/5523>

⁷ <https://www.assembly.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld12906-r/cr-ld12906-r%20-e.pdf>

Delivery of HE in FE

In 2004, the Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW) ran a consultation on possible future arrangements for the delivery of HE in FE⁸. The consultation recommended that any future initiatives to develop HE in FE should focus on the franchise route; particularly on building local partnerships. Subsequently, most HE in FE courses in Wales are now mainly funded through franchise arrangements. Colleges like Coleg Sir Gâr and Coleg Ceredigion are part of a dual sector group structure comprising further education colleges and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD). Franchise arrangements mean the HEIs have control over the student numbers, which are franchised to the FEI. The HEI retains responsibility for student numbers, the curriculum, the quality of the provision and the student experience.

However, a small number of FEIs (for example Grŵp Llandrillo Menai and NPTC Group) are currently granted funds directly by HEFCW through the complex process of Designation. These FEIs are responsible for managing programme delivery, student numbers and the quality of the provision. With these direct funding arrangements, there is an expectation for colleges to have strong relationships with their university to provide quality assurance and support. These colleges are also required to provide their own fee and access plans.

Whilst franchising and designation are the current basis upon which a significant proportion of HE in FE provision is provided, the current crisis and the likely impact on the economy and society of COVID19 should prompt consideration of whether a policy set sixteen years ago is still best suited for the challenges ahead.

Foundation degrees, certified courses and degree apprenticeships

HE has remained an important part of the FE offer, particularly in the delivery of Higher National Certificates (HNCs) Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) and Foundation

Degrees, which offer the chance for learners to have practical work experience linked to future employment as part of their study programme.

Higher apprenticeships are also increasingly a key feature of the HE in FE offer, reflecting the Welsh Government's priority to expand higher level skills. Higher apprenticeships at FEIs are provided through work-based learning (WBL) contracts. According to a 2018 Estyn report there has been an increase in the number of learners undertaking higher apprenticeship programmes in work-based learning (from 2013 – 2018)⁹. Colleges in Wales are working with universities to develop more effective progression routes for health and social care learners, as this is continually one of the most popular learning programmes.

HE in FE qualifications are not only degrees, but also certified courses on Levels 4 and 5. These are particularly popular with the health and social care sector, where employers may not be seeking to employ learners with degrees, but are interested in those learners who have the practical work experience alongside a higher qualification. As we enter a post-COVID19 world, these practical skills along with the academic education could prove invaluable in sectors like care, where there has been a significant increase in demand for services.

More recently, Welsh Government committed £20 million to a three-year degree apprenticeship pilot study covering IT/ Computing, Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing. In 2019/20, HEFCW allocated 585 funded placements¹⁰. This funding has been welcomed by employers as they seek higher level skills whilst young people are looking at apprenticeships as a 'credible and recognised' alternative to a traditional undergraduate degree.

We anticipate the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee will publish its review into Degree Apprenticeships shortly and we advocate further scrutiny of this policy to ensure that it is achieving its stated aims and objectives.

⁸ <https://www.assembly.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld12906-r/cr-ld12906-r%20-e.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/www.estyn.gov.wales/files/documents/Higher%20apprenticeships%20in%20work-based%20learning%20-%20en.pdf> p.4

¹⁰ National Assembly for Wales, Degree Apprenticeships, (2018), <https://business.senedd.wales/mglIssueHistoryHome.aspx?lId=27015&Opt=0>

Regulated institutions

By applying for and being awarded the status of a “regulated institution”, a provider based in Wales enters the Welsh regulatory system. A provider becomes a regulated institution by submitting an application to HEFCW, with HEFCW then approving a Fee and Access Plan. These plans unlock higher levels of student financial support, while committing providers to investing a proportion of that additional income into widening access activity. All colleges in Wales are either regulated institutions or provide education on behalf of a regulated institution¹¹. When providers make applications for fee and access plans, they must demonstrate how they will invest income strategically into activities and interventions to meet the college’s strategic objectives, and to encourage participation in higher education from under-represented groups.

Colleges in Wales who successfully complete a gateway quality review¹² from the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) are able to offer and award more HE courses. QAA approval means that those colleges can offer and award their own vocational Higher Education courses at Levels 4 and 5. The intention is that these courses will be more affordable for learners, will be flexible to meet the needs of local communities, and will give staff the opportunity to teach higher level courses at the college. An increasing number of colleges are seeking regulation under the current statutory provisions. Consultation with these colleges will be imperative when the proposals to change the regulatory framework are published. As institutions seek to adapt and respond to life after COVID19, one key question is the extent to which complex, but necessary regulation helps or hinders their ability to respond to evident challenges.

Future of HE in FE

The two major challenges facing future HE in FE provision are the impact of the COVID19 pandemic and the impending reforms to the post-16 sector.

The proposed Tertiary Education and Research Bill will establish the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research¹³ as the regulator for both the HE and FE sector. If the bill is passed, it will create an opportunity to look at how the HE in FE sector is funded in future, and could offer more flexibility for FEIs and their degree awarding powers. However, COVID19 has made the timescale for passing this complex piece of legislation extremely tight, with the Welsh Government opting to prioritise bills on the New Curriculum for Wales and Local Government¹⁴.

FEIs across Wales will face challenges in the future with regard to their HE provision. Enrolment figures may be affected as potential learners defer their learning as a result of the pandemic. However, colleges could potentially see additional enrolments as learners decide to stay closer to home, making less use of public transport and adhering to possible future social distancing rules. In a time of great uncertainty, FEIs may have an even more important part to play in delivering HE.

Conclusion

Flexible and responsive provision of learning is likely to increase as individuals choose from a variety of routes towards higher level skills. The future of both FE and HE provision is uncertain and subject to both global as well as local influence. In these turbulent times, and with change already on the agenda, it is imperative that the specific needs of students who choose an FE route are understood and addressed. Their choice is of equal importance to those choosing the traditional undergraduate route and should not be overlooked.

¹¹ https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/working_with_he_providers/he_wales_act_2015/regulated_institutions.aspx

¹² https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/gateway-quality-review-wales-handbookb901a0be03dc611ba4caff1e0043ed24.pdf?sfvrsn=d731ff81_8

¹³ <https://gov.wales/tertiary-education-and-research-commission>

¹⁴ <https://gov.wales/written-statement-governments-approach-legislation-light-covid-19>



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