

Supporting the Welsh Lifelong Learning System

Introduction

The Welsh Government has recently introduced the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill. This builds on existing commitments to lifelong learning.

We conducted an evidence review to support further development of policy and the work of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER).

We consider lifelong learning to cover learning at all ages, concentrating on post-16 adult education and training; and to cover all types of adult learning, including vocational, higher education, and community and informal learning. It includes universities, colleges, local authority adult education services, and other adult education institutions.

The context

Many working-age adults in Wales are under-qualified and lacking essential skills. The challenge for Wales is that:

- 24% of adults are without a level 2 qualification;
- 14% of adults are without a level 1 qualification and have poor essential skills;
- 53% of adults do not have the essential digital skills they need for work;
- 20% of the current labour market could be under-skilled for their job; and
- 66% of the whole workforce is under-skilled to some extent (Nomis/Office for National Statistics, 2021; Centre of Social Justice, 2021).

In Wales the proportion with a level 4 qualification and above is 4% below the UK average, and the proportion with a level 3 qualification is 1% higher (Nomis, 2021).

Rights and entitlements

Building on the schools' Curriculum for Wales, and working on the premise that the definition of lifelong learning includes all ages, the Welsh Government should consider:

- Confirming and restating the existing right to education;
- Expanding the offer to cover 16-18 year-olds and low-skilled adults;
- Recognising informal learning and using learning to promote a preventative approach to health; and
- Underpinning the offer with a set of entitlements.

It is recommended that the Welsh Government develop expanded rights and entitlements. This new set of rights should cover all ages, provide appropriate progression routes and place Wales in a good position to meet the skills and life challenges of the future.

Targeting those who would most benefit from lifelong learning

Institutions and government should aim to provide a comprehensive offer that meets the needs of learners. However, recognising that government funding is often limited, a mixture of different funding routes should be provided, taking into account the expansion of rights and

entitlements, the needs of citizens, and the capacity of government and businesses.

Fully-funded individuals should be those who would not only benefit from further education, but also need it to improve their basic skills or to gain employment. Co-funding should be available for individuals who wish to improve their skills at higher levels or for workplace learning.

Barriers to learning and participation

There are several barriers to lifelong learning such as costs, care responsibilities, or self-esteem issues i.e., feeling that the opportunity has passed or that one is too old (Learning and Work Institute, 2019).

Fees and funding to cover living costs are major concerns for learners. It is often the lack of maintenance funding, and the need to continue working, that act as barriers to higher education.

Another underlying factor is previous educational success. The higher the qualification level, the more likely person is to be self-motivated and to seek out further training. This has been demonstrated during the pandemic, and is documented in recent reports published by the Learning and Work Institute (2019) and the Centre for Social Justice (2020).

Social and economic benefits of lifelong learning

The economic and social reasons for lifelong learning support each other as lifelong learning can make learners more confident as well as increasing productivity.

Lifelong learning brings positive outcomes for individuals, the economy and society. Adults over 25 who obtain level 2 qualifications increase their earnings by 8% on average, rising to 10% for those who obtain a level 3 qualification.

Lifelong learning has been linked to enhanced mental well-being, and has resulted in recovery from mental health illness amongst 52% of

people with clinically significant symptoms (Ipsos MORI et al., 2018).

The role of the government in creating an enabling environment

Given its wide-reaching benefits, government has a key role in creating an enabling environment and providing a consistent narrative on lifelong learning that starts with pre-nursery education and continues throughout life. UNESCO (2020) identify several key elements needed to create the culture for lifelong learning to thrive (see Figure 1).

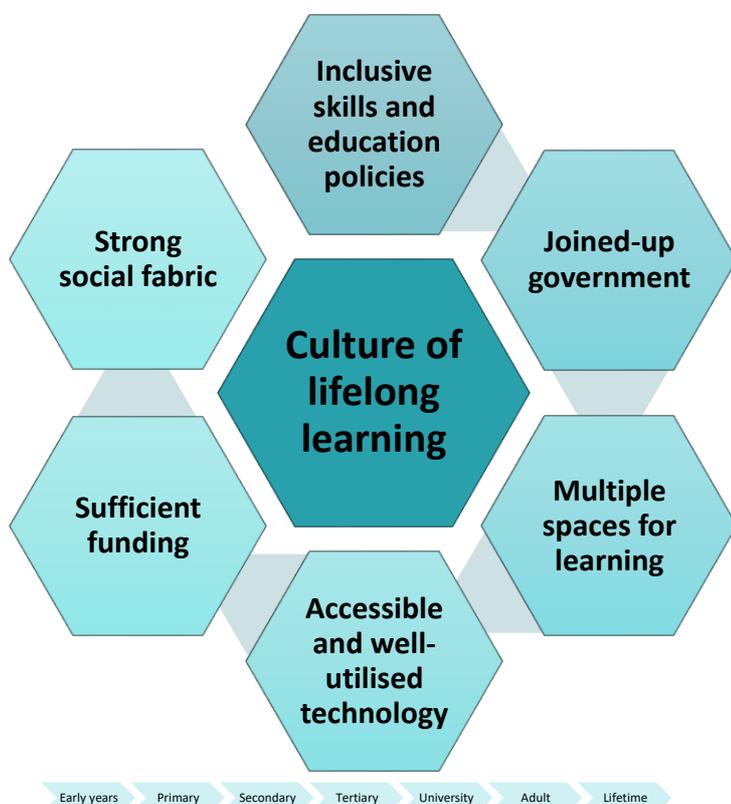


Figure 1: Creating an enabling environment for lifelong learning

The establishment of the CTER presents an opportunity to set the strategic direction for lifelong learning. We recommend that this is situated within a secure funding framework and that institutions are supported to meet local needs.

The clarity of roles and the relationships between all the players are key to the whole system functioning effectively. Welsh

Government should consider drawing together key government departments to inform and assist the CTER on all matters to do with lifelong learning. Key roles would be taken up by CTER and Estyn, with the post-18 institution base seen as a key trusted partner and joint owner of policy and implementation, rather than just a contractor or provider.

Supporting institutions to increase participation

Government can support institutions and stakeholders to deliver through: increased funding, consistency of message, advocating for education and skills development, and a long-term vision. It should also be recognised that institutions know their area and their students, and are best placed to determine the needs of the local workforce. They are capable of working collectively and collaboratively to ensure there are clear pathways and progression routes for learners.

Recommendations and conclusions

Wales is well-positioned to adopt an all-age lifelong learning strategy and many underpinning policies are already in place.

The recommendations detailed throughout the report relate to the main findings, which are summarised below:

- 1 There is an absence of an overall vision and agreement on the definition of lifelong learning;
- 2 There is no consistent, cross-cutting narrative;
- 3 There is a need to enhance rights and entitlements;
- 4 There is a need to agree on a method on how priorities are to be determined; and
- 5 There are organisational issues that need solutions, including:

- a) the need to provide clarification on the roles of responsibilities of key actors in the system; and
- b) the need to develop working methods that support institutions to continue to provide a quality offer to learners, with systems making it easy for them to offer a collaborative, agile, and responsive programme to students and future learners.

These findings and the associated recommendations point to the need to articulate a positive and cohesive vision for lifelong learning, which builds on the existing solid foundations. It is important that the Welsh Government and the CTER foster trusting and progressive partnerships with a shared vision and purpose.

References

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Find out more

For the full report see Pember, S. et al. (2021). **Supporting the Welsh Lifelong Learning System.** Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy

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