

# CTER Statement of Priorities

Shaping the future of further education:  
Delivering a stronger, greener, and fairer Wales

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This document is available in Welsh

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## Introduction

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**The establishment of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) is a landmark piece of legislation. It marks the introduction of one of the most significant reforms to the architecture of our education system since devolution. Wales will be the first country in the UK to pioneer a single overarching regulatory, oversight and coordinating authority for tertiary education.**

It comes at a time when the role of both further education and work-based learning to the future of our country is more important than ever. Whether it is recovering from the pandemic, shaping the future of work, adapting to an ageing society, or accelerating the transition to Net Zero, colleges are essential to every big challenge we face. In short, there is no path to a stronger, fairer, greener and bilingual Wales that doesn't require a high-performing and resilient further education sector.

Public finances are now under significant pressure, making it more important than ever that we are clear about our priorities and we show real ambition to address the long-standing challenges we face.

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## Statement of Priorities

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By the end of 2023, the Welsh Government will have published a Statement of Priorities to help shape the work of the Commission. This paper summarises the priorities the college sector believes must be delivered by both the Welsh Government and the Commission.

Colleges can be the foundation to achieve our shared ambition to make Wales stronger, fairer and greener by supporting us to deliver our core missions of helping more learners to succeed and to help grow a sustainable economy. Colleges are the engines for social mobility and social justice, and with sustained investment and support they can realise their full potential as local and regional anchor organisations.

Over the first quarter of a century of devolution, colleges have shown that they are a trusted partner with government. There are opportunities through the Commission to grow the role of colleges in providing opportunities for learners of all ages and through both our national languages, to create a genuine culture of lifelong learning, and to support sustainable growth in our local economies.

We are calling on both the Welsh Government and the Commission to match our ambition and to give colleges the resources and regulatory regime they need to succeed. Colleges must be given the space to innovate and the strategic freedom to deliver local and regional priorities.

## 1. Put learners at the heart of decision making

The Commission must put learners at the heart of a reformed post-16 sector. They must ensure that they are putting the long-term interests of learners first and that all types of learners, including vocational learners and adults, are reflected in the decision-making process.

Most importantly, genuinely putting learners first will help to drive momentum towards the long-term structural changes that are overdue and needed for the future. The Commission needs to show ambition in reforming the system so that learners have real choices at every transition point and that further education institutions have the resources and support to deliver the skills the country needs.

Central to the Commission's mission of establishing high-quality learning and transition pathways must be a commitment to reviewing the sustainability and offer between 16-19, in particular the viability of small school sixth forms and the breadth of choice learners are able to access. In too many parts of Wales this has been left in the 'too difficult' box, but this short-termism has ultimately been to the detriment of learners. There is now sufficient evidence from different parts of Wales that this issue can be addressed, and the Commission should expect local authorities to show leadership where change is needed. At a time of acute pressure on public funds, it is failing learners if we don't address school sixth forms that cannot offer the choice and educational experience they should rightly expect. The Commission, working in partnership with local authorities and colleges, should set out how it will address this over the coming years. With budgets under unprecedented pressure the Commission has a duty to act and to ensure that resources are targeted appropriately to the benefit of all learners.

At a time of significant pressure on public finances, the Commission and the Welsh Government need to show a willingness to make the long-term and structural changes required for the future. The credibility of the Commission rests on being able to address the long-standing weaknesses and challenges of the post-16 system and to genuinely put learners first.

## 2. Deliver the sustained funding to protect the curriculum and learner support

Through the strong partnership between the sector and all parties in the Senedd, there is now a clear political consensus about the value of investing in further education and apprenticeships. The FE sector has embraced transformation and reform over the last two decades. Time and again we have responded to the Welsh Government's reform programme and demonstrated our ability to make the difficult decisions in the long-term interests of learners.

However, there is a real risk that the scale of the potential funding reductions facing the sector will not only unravel this hard-won consensus but will actually significantly undermine capacity to deliver for learners and employers as they face the challenges of the future. There is no route map to a better Wales that doesn't rely on a thriving, resilient and successful FE and WBL sector. At a time when both learners and employers need access to further education the most, the Commission and the Welsh Government must prioritise investment in the sector. This must include a long-term commitment to sustaining investment in the apprenticeship programme, especially at a time when economic growth remains flat and employers need support to grow.

The Commission and the Welsh Government should recognise the rising cost pressures on colleges and make a clear commitment to protecting investment in the core curriculum offer and continuing to provide funding for wider learner support services and learner experience. In recognition of the ongoing challenge of pay pressures facing the sector we expect the Welsh Government's commitment to fully fund pay parity with schools to be reflected in the Statement of Priorities.

The educational and social impact of the pandemic is still evident through poor levels of attendance in schools, significant mental health challenges facing many learners, and evidence of wider behavioural challenges of learners entering college. Further education needs to be properly resourced to allow it to mitigate the impact of the pandemic during school education and to ensure that the most vulnerable learners are not doubly disadvantaged. This should include significantly improved data sharing on learners progressing to further education, for example, through exploring a 'Learner Passport', which could help to support work on wellbeing provision for learners in their transition.

At the time of the financial crash in 2008 the Welsh Government rightly mobilised to protect young people. Today we need the same scale of response and ambition to ensure we don't face a lost generation of young people as a result of the educational impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Further education and work-based learning is the frontline of this challenge. Learners today and in the future must not bear the brunt of funding cuts.

### 3. Renew the commitment to vocational education and training

The Commission and the Welsh Government must give a strong commitment to the value of vocational education and training, including increasing the vocational offer through the medium of Welsh, and specifically to taking forward the recommendations of the Review of Vocational Qualifications.

The Review acknowledges, *'there is much in the world of vocational qualifications which is good'*, but as a sector, we believe the Commission and the Welsh Government must now translate the recommendations into action. This should include a commitment to urgently developing a Vocational Education and Training (VET) Policy that will align with the wider economic and industrial strategy. It must ensure that there are clear progression pathways for vocational learners, including apprentices, and support for colleges to develop technical and vocational provision at Levels 4 and 5 to better help local and regional employers to grow and succeed, without the reliance on franchise arrangements from higher education.

Underpinning this new approach to VET must be access for all learners to high-quality independent advice and guidance, and for colleges to have access to young people in Years 10 and 11 so that they can understand the options available to them at this key transition point. Too many learners aren't aware of the vocational pathways that are available, including apprenticeships, and the Commission and Welsh Government must work together to ensure learners can understand the choices available to them. Improving access to high-quality independent advice and guidance is something which has been called for repeatedly over many years, and this is an opportunity for the Commission and the Welsh Government to address this directly.

The Commission must give a renewed and strong statement of support to vocational education and training. It is vital that the Commission demonstrates support for genuine parity of esteem between different learner pathways. This must be underpinned by a clear commitment to high-quality vocational provision.

An early priority for the Commission must be to establish a functioning infrastructure to ensure that decisions can be taken quickly to enable apprenticeships and work-based learning provision to be more flexible and responsive to benefit employers and learners.

#### 4. Develop a new, enhanced 14-19 learning and transition pathway for all learners

While the Commission will be responsible for post-16 provision it must not allow a false divide to deepen with pre-16 education. Instead, the Commission and the Welsh Government should prioritise the development of a new 14-19 learning and transition pathway. The 14-19 pathway must include greater opportunities for learners in Years 10 and 11 to be able to access vocational education in college, including the opportunity to rollout Junior Apprenticeships so that more learners across Wales have the opportunity to benefit from this innovative programme. It should be underpinned by a new right for all school age learners to hear directly from colleges about the option of studying in further education and work-based learning. As part of this pathways, it is critical that we end the current postcode lottery for 14-16 year olds on the vocational offer that is available to them, ensuring that all young people have access to high-quality vocational qualifications at Entry, Level 1 and Level 2 in Key Stage 4.

Finally, the Commission should urgently review the experience of those learners with the lowest or fewest qualifications. We know that far too many learners don't thrive or fulfil their potential in school and we need to reform our offer to them post-16 so that they can build their confidence and find a pathway that works best for them. This should include how best to enable them to be assessed on their literacy and numeracy skills to help them take the next step on their education journey. The Commission should establish an expert task and finish group to look urgently at the experience of these learners and to make recommendations on how to remove barriers to them achieving success.

## 5. Lifelong learning and progression opportunities for adults

Over the last decade there have been various commitments to increase the take up of adult and part-time provision, including the development of a new right to lifelong learning and the ambition to make Wales a second-chance nation.

However, realising these ambitions will require a coherent and long-term policy commitment that is backed by sustained and secure investment. Key to giving more adults the opportunity to succeed in education are accessible entry points and progression routes, including improving community-based provision so that those furthest from education have the opportunity to re-engage and to progress.

The current pattern of adult education provision is fragmented, while the policy intentions are too narrow and limited or have been developed ad hoc in response to specific and short-term challenges. By working more collaboratively across the whole post-16 sector we believe there is significant potential to increase the number of adults taking part in education.

The Commission and the Welsh Government must work with the sector to develop a long-term and coherent policy for adult education. This should include support for literacy, numeracy and ESOL, as well as recognising the value of learning for health and wellbeing and of informal learning as part of a longer-term progression pathway.

As part of the commitment to lifelong learning aimed at supporting economic growth, the Commission should look to implement a planning system that allows colleges the autonomy and freedom to respond to local labour market need. Colleges must have the flexibility they need to provide retraining and upskilling support for business and individuals, including the scope to offer greater technical and vocational provision at Levels 4 and 5.



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