

11 January 2012

Ms Claire Griffiths
Deputy Clerk
Children and Young People Committee
Legislation Office
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff CF99 1AN

Inquiry into the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure (2009)

Thank you for your invitation to submit evidence to the Committee as to how the implementation of the Measure to date has had an effect on young people.

As agreed with you, I attach written evidence addressing the questions raised for HEFCW and Higher Education Wales in your e-mail correspondence of 20 December 2011.

The direct impact of the Measure will be felt in the school and post-16 education sectors, with impacts for higher education being less direct. Given the date of implementation of the Measure (from 2009/10, with full implementation from 2011/12) we would agree with some other respondents that it is too early to measure the effects of the Measure, particularly at higher education level. However, the paper attached to this letter summarises some of the evidence we have available, both data and qualitative – including anecdotal - information from institutional sources.

Should you require any further detail or discussion, please do not hesitate to contact me.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Phil Gummett". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Philip Gummett

Inquiry into the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009

Background

1. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) was established by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. We administer funds from the Welsh Government for education and research in higher education (HE) institutions in Wales, and certain HE courses at further education colleges. Responsibilities for initial teacher training (ITT), including the accreditation of ITT providers, are covered under the Education (School Teachers' Qualifications) (Wales) Regulations 2004 and the Education Act 2005.
2. We wish to develop and sustain internationally excellent HE in Wales, for the benefit of individuals, society and the economy, in Wales and more widely. We strategically use resources from the Welsh Government and others to
 - * secure higher education learning and research of the highest quality;
 - * make the most of the contribution of higher education to the culture, society and economy of Wales;
 - * ensure high quality, accredited teacher training across Wales,in order to enhance social justice and support a buoyant economy – the twin objectives of *For our Future, the 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales*.
3. A key strategic theme of our Corporate Strategy 2010-11 – 2012-13¹ relates to widening access, to: 'Ensure equity, opportunity and success in higher education'. It is this theme which is most pertinent to the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure. Our performance indicator for this theme seeks a rise in the number of students from Communities First areas studying HE at institutions in Wales.

Questions

Q1 *What changes do the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Wales expect to see as a result of the implementation of the Learning and Skills Measure 2009? For example, changes to the numbers and qualifications of applicants to higher education courses.*

¹ www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/corporate_documents/corporate_strategy.aspx

4. HE institutions welcome the increase in the number of young people choosing to stay on in education or training after the end of compulsory education. Whilst this may not be due directly to the Measure, it is clear that the Measure has not worked against the improvement in staying on rates. However, it might be considered that more survey data and analysis, particularly on the views of learners to measure more accurately its effect on staying on rates, would be useful to the evaluation. Appropriate data may be obtained through the on-line surveys of young people already available on the Committee's web pages.
5. While there has been an improvement in male participation the gap in staying on rates between males and females is still of concern and this inevitably has a consequence for balanced gender representation in HE.
6. Higher education data on entry qualification trends over the last three years, 2007/08 to 2009/10 indicate that an increasing number of students enter higher education with vocational qualifications (see below). This increase pre-dated the implementation of the Measure, however, it is clear that the number of vocational entrants to HEIs from FEIs in Wales has increased, as has the proportion of students that have a vocational qualification as their highest qualification on entry.

Undergraduate enrolments on HE courses at Welsh HEIs by highest qualification on entry and previous institution

Previous institution	Highest qualification on entry	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	% increase 2007/08 to 2009/10
Welsh FEIs ¹	A levels	3,901	4,471	4,936	27%
	Vocational Qualifications	1,933	2,726	3,836	98%
	Other ³	3,598	3,841	4,289	19%
Total ²	A levels	45,499	46,612	48,311	6%
	Vocational Qualifications	5,907	6,999	9,095	54%
	Other ³	26,997	26,129	25,461	-6%

Source: HESA student record (*data for 2010/11 is not comparable due to changes to the higher qualifications on entry field*)

¹ Previous institution 'Welsh FEIs' includes students from named Welsh FEIs plus Welsh domiciled students coded as being from an unspecified UK FEI.

² Previous institution 'Total' includes all UK FEIs and HEIs, UK schools and other providers.

³ Highest qualification on entry 'Other' includes unknown and no qualifications.

Q2 How will the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure help to progress the Welsh Government's priority to address social injustice and to widen access to higher education?

7. Institutional views endorse Estyn's main findings – that a great deal of progress has been made in widening the choice for learning and in the provision of the learning core for 14-19 learners. We are informed that this has been assisted by the publication of options menus by each 14-19 learning network. The curriculum at key stage 4 and post 16 is now more relevant to a broader range of learners, although differences of application have been noted between different local authority areas in Wales.

8. HEFCW's Corporate Strategy measure for widening access:

A 10% rise in the proportion of all Welsh domiciled students studying higher education courses at higher education institutions and further education institutions in Wales who are domiciled in the Welsh Communities First Areas from 15.6% to 17.2% in 2012/13

is on target, with 16.2% enrolled in 2009/10 and sector forecasts indicating that this target will be achieved. This measure is entirely focussed on students who are domiciled in Wales and these improving figures could indicate a broader range of applicants to higher education from within Wales. However, we are told by HEIs that there seems to be a relative under provision of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ) in Communities First areas compared to more affluent areas of Wales and that the learning core is delivered in less successful ways. It would be useful to see published data on the availability of the WBQ throughout Wales to establish whether or not this is the case.

9. In addition, institutions draw attention to the need to address the growing trend of year 13 leavers who are not engaged in education, employment or training. We need to know more about this cohort to identify whether they have failed to progress to HE or employment because of lack of qualifications, lack of opportunity, or perhaps because they are taking a 'gap year'. Reforming the higher education admissions system to a post-qualifications (ie post-results) process (see link below) could help to address this issue².

Q3 Has the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure had any effect to date on progression routes into higher education?

10. As noted from the data above, progression to higher education from Welsh FEIs has been increasing, although data to measure the impact of the Measure after 2009 is not yet available. We need more information about progression, including the potential impact of other factors, particularly structural change in provision arising from the Transformation agenda. Detailed information about the current position regarding progression to higher education institutions, particularly on a regional

² www.ucas.com/reviews/admissionsprocessreview/

basis, is the subject of an existing project, funded by the Welsh Government (Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales) and managed by Colleges Wales/Colegau Cymru. The CQFW Progression Project is working within the three HEFCW regions to collate qualitative and quantitative data on regional progression. It will report in February 2012 and the outcomes will form part of a HEFCW report on part-time employer-focussed provision and opportunities for progression from further education to be submitted to the Minister for Education and Skills in March 2012.

Q4 How will the wider choice of academic and vocational courses for young people age 14 and 16, as a result of the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measures, affect the admissions policies of Welsh higher education institutions? and

Q5 Has progress been made towards parity of esteem between vocational and academic courses in respect of admissions policies into higher education courses?

11. It is difficult to measure progress in terms of broader choice of academic and vocational courses and parity of esteem against higher education admissions policies. For most higher education institutions, such policies already include vocational qualifications and mechanisms for considering applicants with non-traditional qualifications. The Measure will not have impacted significantly on the policies themselves, although the use of contextual data (eg on the background of an applicant) to supplement the applications process has been increasing more recently within higher education. Parity of esteem is a cultural, as well as an educational issue. Some applicants may be being steered towards more academic or more vocational pathways for particular reasons, unrelated to their ability to benefit from higher education. This may reflect the aspirations of teachers and parents as much as higher education admissions policies.
12. However, it is also the case that some vocational courses may not be the best preparation for study within higher education. We are aware from institutions that some BTEC courses can be poor preparation for certain HE programmes, although the reasons for this are unclear and this area would need further research. It could be a combination of a tendency of schools to direct less academically able students into the more vocational BTEC pathway; that BTEC courses tend to be weaker on core science; and the reliance on assignments as the sole method of assessment in the BTEC system. It has been suggested that some HE institutions would welcome a mixed economy of academic and vocational courses which have greater coherence in terms of complementary skills, eg the use of smaller BTEC or OCN awards in combination with A1/A2 qualifications, particularly if there is an A level prerequisite for progression to HE.
13. The implementation of the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification, now accepted as an entry qualification for higher education institutions in Wales and beyond, has broadened progression routes into higher education, with some institutions currently accepting the WBQ in lieu of a third A level. We understand that the Measure has

been very useful for the development of the WBQ with many schools using coaches when developing students' vocational skills and work experience portfolios.

14. The view has been expressed that, in a context of managed numbers in higher education, and increased demand, it may be more difficult to avoid a risk averse approach to new types and patterns of qualifications.

Q6 Are there clear vocational progression routes for students who wish to enter higher education for some or all HE courses?

15. Leaving aside the argument that a great deal of 'traditional' higher education provision is vocational (eg medicine, law, engineering, etc), we cover here the development since 2000 of Foundation Degree provision. Foundation Degrees were first introduced as a new type of provision in 2000 to provide graduates who are needed within the labour market to address shortages in particular skills. Foundation Degrees also aim to contribute to widening access and lifelong learning by encouraging participation by learners who may not previously have considered studying for a higher level qualification. Such qualifications provide a direct vocational progression route for students who wish to enter higher education with more vocational entry qualifications and/or those already in work who wish to progress into part-time higher education. They are located at level 5 of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) qualification benchmark for Foundation Degrees³ specifies that Foundation Degrees will normally link to at least one programme leading to a bachelors degree with honours. This provides a progression route beyond the Foundation Degree. A range of new Foundation degrees is currently being developed, through specific funding provided by the European Social Fund, by HEFCW 'One Wales' funding and through the Universities Heads of the Valleys Institute (UHOVI). This builds on the small amount of existing Foundation degree provision in HE and FE institutions in Wales.
16. HEFCW's work with the sector in the development of regional strategies for the three defined regions of South East Wales, South West Wales, and North and Mid Wales is assisting collaborative working between HE and FE institutions to improve provision regionally, especially for learners who, for whatever reason, are geographically constrained, and for employers who are seeking higher education support, of whatever kind, locally. The CQFW progression project, noted in paragraph 10 above will provide further information about progression opportunities and gaps.

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Foundation-Degree-qualification-benchmark-May-2010.aspx

Q7 Is there professional independent advice available to 14 and 16 year olds (and their parents) on progression into higher education courses, especially for young people intending to choose vocational courses?

17. The recent review of Careers Services in Wales⁴ noted variation in the quality and degree of careers planning support for young people, arguing for a need to coordinate more effectively the diverse professional groups engaging in such activity. Higher Education Careers Services primarily provide support to students and graduates and are less involved in providing advice for young people entering higher education. Whilst individual institutions do provide such support, it is less likely to be regarded as independent, although it is likely to include advice for applicants with vocational qualifications.
18. The key HE source of advice for applicants to higher education is the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), which provides the admissions system for full-time entrants. This system is currently under review and the introduction of a post-qualifications admissions system is under consideration (see footnote 2). HEFCW is a joint funder, with the other UK HE funding bodies, of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) programme, which has worked with institutions across the UK to improve admissions services, which can be expected to strengthen the understanding of vocational qualifications.
19. The UK higher education funding bodies jointly fund the Unistats website⁵ which provides information about higher education provision, including the results of the National Student Survey, a survey of student satisfaction conducted annually across the UK. This enables potential applicants to compare institutions. HEFCW is also working with the other UK HE funding bodies and institutions to develop the Key Information Set or KIS. This is a set of standard information about each higher education institution, including information about employability, which will be available from September 2012.⁶
20. In addition, HEFCW-funded regional Reaching Wider partnerships, which include representatives from a range of bodies with an interest in widening access to higher education, including Careers Wales, coordinate regional work to improve access to higher education. This includes providing information to young people on opportunities in higher education.

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new.wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/publications/researchandevaluation/evaluation/futureambitions/?skip=1&lang=en

⁵ unistats.direct.gov.uk/

⁶ www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/infohe/kis.htm

