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| **Promoting Collaboration with Trade  Unions in Tertiary Education**  Summary of conference, 26 June 2025 | A close-up of a logo  Description automatically generated |

**Introduction**

Medr has a strategic duty to promote collaboration between tertiary education providers and trade unions, which is mirrored in our strategic plan commitment to actively promote social partnership. We are keen to build on the positive progress made in further education over the last few years and embed social partnership across tertiary education.

To support delivery of our commitment, Medr hosted a conference on 26 June 2025 for further and higher education institutions, trade unions and other stakeholders.

The event provided an opportunity to deliver key messages about the value of collaboration and to engage with the sector, through workshops, to co-construct an ongoing programme of support to ensure the needs of the tertiary sector are met.

85 participants attended the event and all further and higher education institutions were represented. The table below shows a breakdown of the attendees.

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| **Work area/sector** | **Number of attendees** |
| Trade Union and TU representatives | 40 12 HEI TU reps  19 FEI TU reps  9 full-time TU officials |
| FEI leaders and staff | 15 |
| HEI leaders and staff | 11 |
| Other – Includes Medr, Welsh Government, ColegauCymru and Universities Wales | 19 |
| **Total** | **85** |

The Minister for Further and Higher Education spoke at the event to provide her support and to talk about the significance of collaboration and partnership working with trade union partners. A summary of the Minister’s key messages included:

* Partnership and collaboration are distinctive characteristics of how we work in Wales. As a government, we are very proud to champion this ‘Welsh way’, particularly in these current times, where it seems challenges are ever present.
* Medr, through its strategic duty, has a key role in encouraging and facilitating collaboration with trade unions.
* Working together we can achieve real progress in widening access, promoting lifelong learning and supporting learner progression.
* We can achieve the kind of culture which embraces challenges and opportunities with a shared-sense of responsibility. But this ‘gold standard’ approach can only be achieved if the spirit of collaborative working is truly embraced.
* Institutions and trade union representatives have the opportunity to play a crucial role in helping to create a fairer society by advocating for inclusive collaboration.
* Collaboration isn't just a concept; it's a powerful force that brings together different groups to make important decisions and achieve common goals, with people’s voices at the heart of them.

Presentations were also given by Shavanah Taj, the General Secretary of the TUC, and Coleg y Cymoedd and Coleg Cambria who provided insights into their social partnership pilot projects funded by the Welsh Government and Medr.

**Workshops**

Two sets of workshops were held, aiming to:

1. Establish the benefits of working in collaboration and social partnership.
2. Increase understanding of what’s currently being done/used and to share good practice.
3. Discuss and arrive at options as to how Medr can provide support.

**Workshop 1**

**Identifying benefits and challenges – setting the scene**

The table below gives a summary of the main points following discussion and collation of feedback from the four groups.

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| **Benefits and opportunities** | **Ideas on how Medr can provide support** |
| * Fewer disputes * Issues escalated and handled quicker * Help overcome silo working * Save time and resources * Build expertise and a more holistic understanding of what’s going on * Trust and overall relationships improved * Mutual respect * Better outcomes and decision making * Improved communication * Early intervention opportunities * Enables strategic decision making * Shared understanding * Testing and challenging rather than conflict * Supports and raises morale of staff * Common goals * Synergy and non-duplication * Renewed energy and efficiency * Joint ownership of issues | * Ring fenced funding * Self-evaluation tool * Details of expectations * Framework – clarity of expectations/measurable outcomes * A suite of resources * Establishment of a facilitated network * Cost-benefit analysis, to help make the case for institutions to invest in SP roles? * Training for all * Tailored consultancy support * Sharing and embedding good practice * Information on different models for different organisational sizes and structures * Senior level buy-in – what are the consequences for not taking part? * Workload relief/remission time * Clear remits for staff undertaking SP roles |

**Workshop 2**

**Moving forward in Collaboration – Next steps**

Key priority areas were identified across the four groups which could help promote collaboration and support social partnership working.

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| **Training** | * Raising awareness * Gap analysis * Self-assessment * Organisational commitment * Flexible model of training with a suite of resources |
| **Trust building** | * Messaging and communication * Medr to facilitate discussions * Communities of practice * Networks facilitated by Medr * Local identification of starting points and issues. |
| **Funding** | * Ring fenced funding for remission time and training * Cost benefit analysis |
| **Case studies** | * Pilot in HE |
| **Guidance** | * A framework with a shared understanding and clarity of expected outcomes * Indicators of success * Include scale – based on diversity of institutions |

The workshop ended with participants sharing their main concerns and things they were excited to take forward.

Five common areas of concern were:

1. Lack of resources including time and training
2. Funding
3. Creating capacity – impact on workload
4. Institutional commitment
5. Loss of union autonomy

Five common things participants were excited about taking forward

1. Having an opportunity to develop an approach which could work for everyone
2. A shared way forward
3. Increased collaborative working
4. Better decisions for institutions
5. Realised mutual benefits

**Next steps**

Evaluation forms have been sent to participants to complete and we are hoping this will encourage further feedback and suggestions. All information will be used to inform the co-construction of an ongoing programme of support for the tertiary sector.

Medr is planning to procure services to support the tertiary sector in the autumn, a draft specification for which will be shared with the sector and trade unions before going out to tender.

Medr also hopes to act on some of the feedback to establish some “quick wins” in order to start the process of providing support. We anticipate that activities will include:

* Visits to institutions and trade unions.
* Discussions with Medr’s new trade union/employer liaison group.
* Research into the training and resources already available and how they can be adapted, if necessary, to meet the needs of the sector. This will include looking at the Welsh Government self-assessment tool and online training.
* Running a pilot with an HE institution.
* Collation of case studies from previous pilots in FE and how this information can be disseminated.

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