

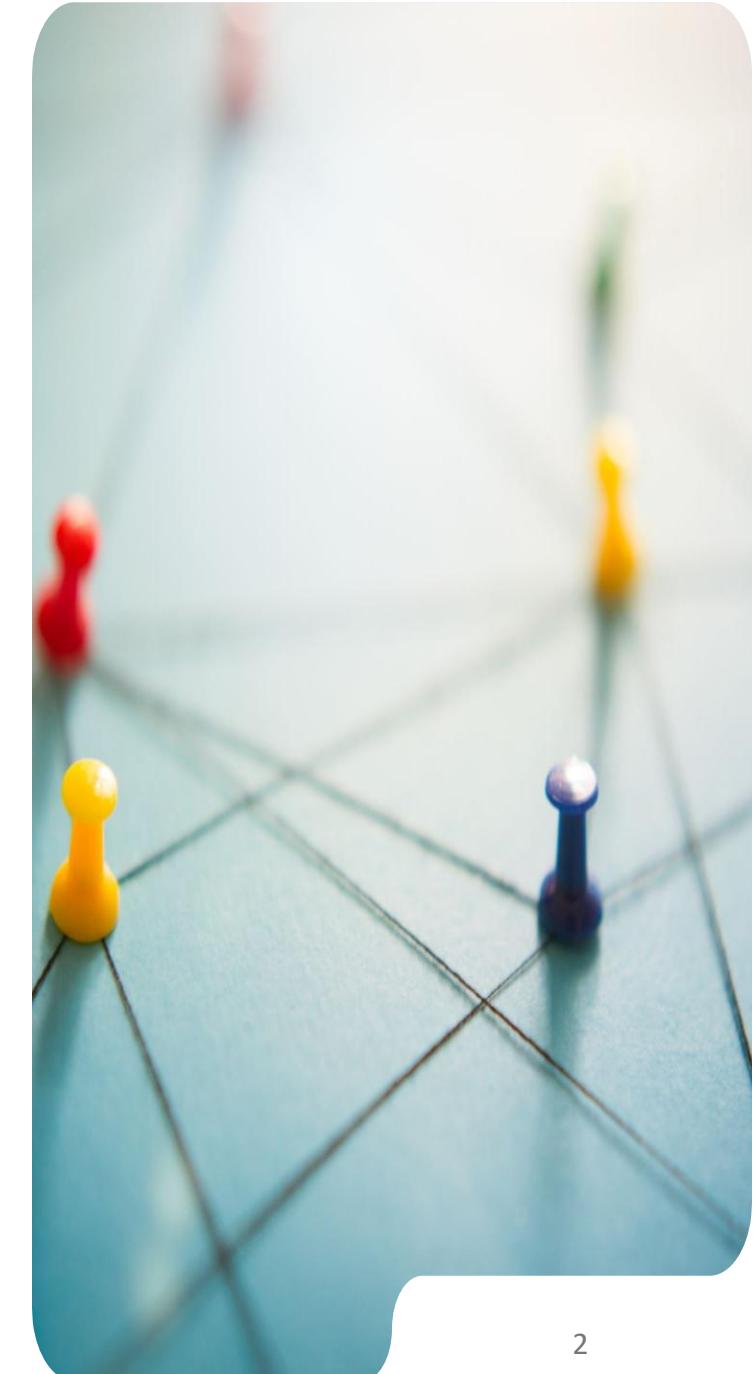


National Priority: Increasing Participation

We will achieve increased participation in vocational qualifications for all learner by making them readily available and accessible. We will ensure that learners, regardless of background can gain the necessary knowledge and skills to contribute to the economy and future demand.

Context

- In November, the Minister for Further and Higher Education announced a Call for Evidence on the Future of Tertiary Education in Wales
- What are the challenges we face in relation to increasing participation rates in education and ensuring we have a sustainable tertiary education sector that can navigate difficult times
- Will bring together evidence from previous relevant workstreams, including the work of this group and the discussion of national priorities, and other stakeholder engagement.
- Increasing participation has been discussed during previous national priority discussions (e.g. Parity of Esteem and Transition Pathways); the focus of this discussion will be to explore some of the issues in more detail





Participation in Tertiary Education – Why It Matters

Importance of Tertiary Education

Tertiary education builds a skilled workforce that supports economic growth, reduces inequality, and improves wellbeing.

National Milestones for 2050

Ambitious targets include 75% adults qualified at Level 3+, under 5% without qualifications, and 90% young people in EET.

Current Challenges in Wales

Wales lags behind UK averages with estimated higher NEET rates and lower qualification levels (L3+) among young adults.

Need for Targeted Interventions

Addressing gaps requires focused efforts to ensure equitable education access and increase participation.

Further Education



Stable Post-16 Participation

Participation rates post-Year 11 in Wales have stabilized around 90% after the pandemic, reflecting steady student progression (Medr, 2025)

Growth in FE College Enrolments

Full-time enrolments at Further Education colleges grew by nearly 12% from 22/23 to 24/25 (Medr, 2025)

Level 3

Learners In Wales are less likely to be undertaking AS/A level and other L3 courses, and this is particularly true of those from deprived backgrounds (EPI report, 2024)

Academic vs Vocational

Recent growth on lower level vocational courses , relative decline in L3 (Medr, 2025)

Level 1 & 2 Vocational learners

Learners on level 1 and 2 courses are less likely to complete their course than those on level 3 (Medr, 2025)

Higher Education and Lifelong Learning



- **Applications:** 32% of Welsh 18-year-olds applied to university (UK average: 40.6%).
- **Deprivation Gap:** IMD Quintile 1 entry rate – Wales: 18.9%, UK: 26%.
- **Part-Time Strength:** 36% of Welsh HE students study part-time (England: 23%).
- **UCAS Insights:**
 - Mature applicants (35+) twice as likely to apply for Level 4/5 (8.9% vs 4.4%).
 - Disadvantaged applicants nearly twice as likely to include Level 4/5 choice (7.3% vs 3.9%). FE Trends: Part-time FE declined (2013–2020) but rebounded recently via PLAs.
- **Growth in Part-Time numbers:**
 - Welsh students are more likely to be older and studying part-time than elsewhere in the UK.
 - FE: 60,510 part-time learners in 2023–24 (+10.7% YoY)
 - Combined FE & community learning: 155,580 learners – recovery underway.

Inequalities in Participation



Socioeconomic Participation Gap

Learners from socially deprived backgrounds as well as those with ALN pursue vocational routes more and achieve fewer Level 3 qualifications than peers (WCPP report, 2024)

Gender Disparities in Higher Education Medr report that for 22/23 the Higher Education Initial Participation measure by sex was 65.3% female compared with 43.7% male – this gap had widened since 2016/17

Medr (2025) report higher progression into post-16 education rates among....

Females, least deprived neighborhoods, not eligible for FSM, not accessing SEN/ALN provision, from Asian, Asian British, Asian Welsh ethnic groups, EAL fluent, and those attending Welsh medium schools in year 11 or fluent in Welsh

Commitment but ongoing challenges....

Transport – too many learners cite transport as the main/one of the main barriers to participation

Inequalities affecting progression – e.g. socio-economic background, parental education, disability.

Financial pressures – transport, meals, resources; confusion surrounding support schemes discourages uptake (CYPE committee)

Mental health and well-being – Continues to significant disruptor to education

Destination data – lack of data surrounding destinations/drop out makes it difficult to pinpoint exact issues



Questions

Are there any barriers/challenges not addressed in this paper?

Would more flexible delivery models for 16-18 year olds (e.g. multiple entry points) improve participation and progression rates?

Would greater part-time delivery models specifically for academic qualifications (e.g. AS/A levels) increase progression to higher education for both school leavers?

Given the success of the Junior Apprenticeship programme, would further collaboration between institutions, targeted at vocational learning improve engagement and progression in vocational education?

Would more initiatives, like the College of Sanctuary/University of Sanctuary, encourage institutions to do more for underrepresented groups in the community?