

UNISON Cymru/Wales submission to Welsh Government consultation on the draft professional standards for assisting teaching

1. UNISON Cymru/Wales represents roughly 22,000 members of staff across all sectors of education, principally learning support workers, and notes Welsh Government's draft professional standards for assisting teaching.
2. As the main trade union representing Teaching Assistants (TAs) in Wales, UNISON Cymru/Wales is pleased to be able to respond to this consultation and welcomes the recognition that Teaching Assistants rightly deserve, and the acknowledgment of the work they do.
3. The main challenge our members face, discussed at every meeting we have with TAs, is the absence of a consistent approach to the deployment of TAs and their responsibilities at each level. This means some TAs suffer a 'role drift', taking on ever greater tasks for which they are not paid. To achieve standards of substance, there is an onus on Welsh government to consult all parties, NJC trade unions and local government employers, at the outset on how consistency can be achieved.
4. Schools cannot survive without Teaching Assistants; they help to support Special Educational Needs children and those underperforming, help teachers to cope with big classes, release teachers for preparation time and help those with English as an Additional Language – but this can only be done with a commitment on the behalf of the employer to both training and ongoing support. Too many TAs are thrown in the deep end without proper professional development and left to get on with it.
5. The majority of TAs are women; they suffer low pay, a lack of career opportunities and institutional discrimination that belittles their role. Part-time, casual and term time working,

dominate. Previously, UNISON Cymru/Wales has embraced Welsh Government's professional registration of TAs as a first step.

6. However, to have continued improvement in standards, there must be further investment in the professional development of TAs, a proper career structure with transparent fair pay and conditions, uniformly applied across the whole of the country and a spirit of inclusiveness in schools that recognises their contribution.
7. Teachers have nationally agreed, uniform rates of pay, but the salaries of Wales' tens of thousands of TAs vary depending on where they work; pay is set by each of the 22 local authorities and their experience and responsibility are not always recognised in the pay structure. Some TAs work without a proper written and agreed job description; you can have the same job title doing very different duties, receiving vastly different pay across Wales.
8. There is an urgent need for transparency and a career structure linked to uniform rates of pay and grading and a qualifications framework paid for by the employer. Many of our members are concerned that the professional standards outlined to the extent described in the consultation document take a further step in erasing the boundary between teacher and TA. This continuing assimilation is not met with additional remuneration in acknowledgment of the expanding role of the TA.
9. Many employers across Wales join UNISON Cymru/Wales every year in celebrating '*Stars in Our Schools*' which celebrates all those who go unsung in helping run our schools; TAs, administrators, caterers, midday supervisors and cleaners. These celebrations must be followed up with actions that do not simply celebrate those unsung heroes but reward them with the standards and training necessary to allow them to progress.

10. It is incredibly unfortunate that some TAs feel they have to pay for additional training or to attend UNISON's free training which is held on weekends, during their own free time. Due to austerity, many schools are having to tighten their belts and can no longer afford to send TAs on courses or even provide a better salary on completion of training. Yet, thanks to the dedication of school support staff, both schools and pupils benefit.

11. As regards HLTAs, UNISON Cymru/Wales members on the ground in schools across Wales have noted that the current HLTA position is not fit for purpose. There are many staff who have completed all the courses necessary to become a HLTA and are already carrying out the work of a HLTA without the appropriate recognition or remuneration which reflects their work activities in that role.

12. Whilst recognising that having professional standards for TAs is a good idea in principle, many of our members are concerned that the level of standards described in the draft goes too far too quickly and is of too high a standard to achieve for many TAs. If professional standards were to be implemented, they must be introduced at a much slower pace and more incrementally than what is proposed. Any incremental increase in standards must come with recognition of the role of the TA as well as remuneration that can be invested by schools for further development for TAs.

13. Many UNISON Cymru/Wales members who work as TAs have been in the profession for many years, some for several decades. There is increasing concern amongst these members that there will be an onus on them to retrain if and when the new standards are introduced. Our members would like to be reassured that they will be able to continue doing the job they are doing without having to study for and attain additional qualifications.

14. UNISON Cymru/Wales is concerned about practicalities of the Professional Learning Passport (PLP). Many of our members in the TA profession are low paid, and consider the

use of the PLP unnecessary for members of staff who are not teachers. UNISON Cymru/Wales believes that if the PLP becomes compulsory for TAs to complete, that time must be given during working hours to allow TAs to achieve this. Many of our members do additional work during their breaks and after school, in many cases unpaid, a requirement to fill in the PLP would either take away our members from the duties they currently have or would require additional admin time, which would go unpaid. For this reason, UNISON Cymru/Wales believes that the PLP should not be a part of the appraisal process for TAs and support staff.

15. There are additional concerns over what methods will be used to measure the new standards. There seems to be no reference in the draft guidelines on how performance of TAs will be measured against the new standards and what positive or negative outcomes there may be if TAs are able or unable to meet them.
16. UNISON Cymru/Wales notes the mention of the planned rollout of these standards in schools. UNISON Cymru/Wales has reservations on this point as it would effectively create a two-tier system for TAs in schools across Wales. As it would not be compulsory for all schools to accept the new professional standards, there would be variation from area to area and potentially between two schools within the same local authority area. UNISON Cymru/Wales believes that all members of the profession should be measured by the same standards, and that if these professional standards were to be applied, then they must be applied equally and simultaneously across Wales.
17. Whilst UNISON Cymru/Wales broadly agrees with the principle of applying professional standards, the current recommendations in the consultation document are too high to achieve in one stage, and should be more incremental. UNISON Cymru/Wales has additional concerns over this rollout following on from members' current and previous experience of the rollout of the Education Workforce Council three years ago.

18. EWC targets from three years ago still have yet to be met, which makes UNISON Cymru/Wales query what the effectiveness of this rollout of professional standards would be. We would urge caution going forward, as many issues with EWC professional registration link very closely to the application of new professional standards. Whilst these EWC problems are ongoing, lessons should be learnt from the EWC process before proceeding with the implementation of the new professional standards.