



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

The Future of Tertiary Education in Wales

response form

Your name: UNISON Cymru (contact Alastair Gittins)

Organisation (if applicable): As above

Email/telephone number: a.gittins@unison.co.uk

Your address: UNISON House, Custom House Street, Cardiff, CF10 1AP

Responses should be returned by 27 March 2026 to:

Strategy and Funding

Tertiary Education Directorate

Welsh Government

Cathays Park

CARDIFF

CF10 3NQ

or completed electronically and sent to:

email: TertiaryEducation.Consultations@gov.wales

Anonymity

Responses to the consultation may be published. Your response will be anonymous. However, if you would like your name to be published alongside your response, please insert an x in the box.

I agree to my name being published alongside my response to this consultation.	X
--	---

Additional information

Your rights

Under the data protection legislation, you have the right:

- to be informed of the personal data held about you and to access it
- to require us to rectify inaccuracies in that data
- to (in certain circumstances) object to or restrict processing
- for (in certain circumstances) your data to be 'erased'
- to (in certain circumstances) data portability
- to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) who is our independent regulator for data protection

Responses to the call for evidence are likely to be made public.

For further details about the information the Welsh Government holds and its use, or if you want to exercise your rights under the GDPR, please see contact details below:

Data Protection Officer

Data Protection Officer
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

E-mail: data.protectionofficer@gov.wales

Information Commissioner's Office

Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

Telephone: 01625 545 745 or 0303 123 1113

Website: ico.org.uk

UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR)

The Welsh Government will be data controller for any personal data you provide as part of your response to the consultation. Welsh Ministers have statutory powers they will rely on to process this personal data which will enable them to make informed decisions about how they exercise their public functions.

Any response you send us will be seen in full by Welsh Government staff dealing with the issues which this consultation is about or planning future consultations.

Where the Welsh Government undertakes further analysis of consultation responses then this work may be commissioned to be carried out by an accredited third party (for example, a research organisation or a consultancy company).

Any such work will only be undertaken under contract. Welsh Government's standard terms and conditions for such contracts set out strict requirements for the processing and safekeeping of personal data.

In order to show that the consultation was carried out properly, the Welsh Government intends to publish a summary of the responses to this document. We may also publish responses in full.

Normally, the name and address (or part of the address) of the person or organisation who sent the response are published with the response. If you do not want your name or address published, please tell us this in writing when you send your response. We will then redact them before publishing.

You should also be aware of our responsibilities under Freedom of Information legislation. If your details are published as part of the consultation response then these published reports will be retained indefinitely. Any of your data held otherwise by Welsh Government will be kept for no more than 3 years.

Summary of UNISON Cymru position

In past UNISON Cymru tertiary education submissions, we have argued there is an urgent need for Welsh government to decide what it wants the sector to deliver and fund it accordingly.

So, this comprehensive evaluation of what's working and what's not, is welcome. We share Welsh government's stated aspiration to create a tertiary education system that is far more equitable, more accessible, high quality, and better delivers for our changing economy and society.

UNISON represents thousands of business and professional support staff in colleges and universities. We organised focus groups from both to hear their views and this response is shaped by their experiences.

In higher education, marketisation has been a complete failure which has destabilised universities and undermined the learning they offer. The funding model is broken and many thousands of staff in Wales have been made redundant. Those who remain are asked to do much more with less and are burnt out with impossible workloads. Long-term, it is legitimate to ask if each of Wales' eight universities will survive financial pressures.

In further education, the record levels of young people applying brings its own funding challenges, when many more students present lacking the required English and maths qualifications to take them to the next level or with additional learning needs and where the money required by colleges doesn't arrive at the right time. Like H.E., staff are stretched too thinly.

Combined with 15 years of receiving only very low pay increases, particularly in H.E., it is not surprising staff morale across the tertiary sector is poor.

Investing in the business and professional support staff workforce would help improve student recruitment and retention, which is a serious challenge for all institutions.

Investing in staff should also mean valuing their voices in the operation of colleges and universities. The involvement of the workforce in decision-making means better decisions and governance which provides stability. Elsewhere, this is formalised under the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act (Wales) 2023, but there is a duty on Medr to promote this even if the whole tertiary sector is not formally covered.

As a society, it's important to unlock everyone's potential. UNISON represents workers right across the public sector, many of whom would be potential F.E. and H.E. students, looking to return to education often on a part time basis to reskill, upskill or change career and we look at the obstacles they, and those out of work, face and suggest more flexible courses would be more attractive. A great deal could be learned from the example of the Open University.

We have chosen to answer the following questions:

- Demographic and lifelong learning, Qs 1-3
- Financial sustainability Qs 1-2
- Communities & the economy Q 5

Demographics and lifelong learning

1. What are the funding, legislative, and administrative barriers to increasing supply of, and demand for, flexible and accessible lifelong learning opportunities, both at lower levels (below level 3) and higher levels (above level 4)?

Funding of F.E. courses

As F.E. funding allocations are calculated on the previous year's enrolment, there is always a delay in money coming through and this can leave colleges struggling to meet provision and buy enough materials, especially when there is a boom cycle of increased interest for particular courses, such as construction at present or health and beauty in the past.

A rep at one college reported the current surge in interest in building trade courses and insufficient funding meant students had to be taught outside in tents. Training would be affected by extremes of weather and is not conducive to learning.

Given construction's importance to the economy, training delivered in this way is farcical. As the rep said, if students are coming to college they expect more than being taught in a tent.

One college is so popular it has over-recruited students and without sufficient financial resources lacks space and chill-out areas and consequently behaviour is becoming more of a problem especially when the weather is poor (and students are less willing to venture outside).

Investment in college staff

Years of underfunding pay means it can be hard to recruit specialists. They quite legitimately ask why they should work in a college when they would be paid more in a trade. Retention of staff is an issue, and something that might be improved with all-Wales pay scales for business support staff.

As colleges don't have the money, teaching jobs are advertised as part-time or hourly paid. People apply in the hope they will gain full-time position afterwards and when that doesn't happen, they move on.

Many reps pointed out the experience and high level of qualifications required by certain roles need is not recognised in the wages, particularly for science technicians.

A lack of adequate staffing means staff are regularly asked to go beyond their job descriptions and take on more work and longer hours for limited or no extra money. This job creep can include covering classes, and one technician compared their salary of £26,000 unfavourably to what might be earned in a school with the same experience and qualification.

Many more students are now presenting at college with additional learning needs (ALN) and anxiety, this demands more pastoral support from support staff. This is difficult to do effectively when workforce numbers are cut and staff become frustrated and stressed because they are inhibited from helping the students to the level they would wish as dedicated professionals.

Additionally, more students now arrive at college without GCSE maths and English, and without the extra funding, colleges must find time, teachers, support staff and space for these students to study for re-sits. There's a valid question about whether this is best addressed in schools or colleges.

Support staff are dedicated to helping their learners and the level of their skills and a failure to invest in them means many students don't feel they have the care and help they need and this affects retention, but more importantly leaves young people feeling that they have been failed by the system.

Support staff do not benefit from the same access or encouragement to undertake professional development that their teaching colleagues receive.

Prohibitive cost of post-16 education

Traditionally, it was widely held that better qualifications and learning led to higher earnings. Today, that link is not always obvious and the costs involved and debts that might be incurred are no longer judged worthwhile if they won't necessarily help an individual progress in their career.

This is especially likely to be the case for students in more deprived areas or for those in work on low pay. For mature learners, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds in coastal towns or post-industrial areas, the prospect of taking on debt for Level 4+ qualifications is a massive psychological and financial barrier.

The current maintenance support, while better in Wales than England, still does not fully offset the opportunity cost of lost wages for adults with mortgages and dependents.

UNISON members in F.E. noted in some cases the quality of teaching on common courses has been diluted as people have been brought in from industry on fast-track schemes, without benefiting from the comprehensive training teachers coming through the traditional routes, will have absorbed.

Inflexible structure

Widening access to education is important. The lack of flexibility due to funding in how F.E. courses are delivered is a major impediment to those in work who would like to access life-long learning opportunities and gain qualifications.

Twenty years ago, night classes were offered on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights across all sectors and weekend courses were often available, which meant far more options were available to those in work and juggling busy family life.

When Welsh government curtailed funding this provision was dropped. Now, little is offered outside 4pm-6pm.

There is no facility to release public service workers to attend part-time education classes around their work and the costs of courses are likely to be prohibitive for those on low pay.

A Welsh care worker and single mother earning even the real Living Wage of £13.45 per hour (April 2026 figures) is unlikely to consider reducing her working hours to allow time to go to college.

There is also no flexibility for the adult learner if they wish to proceed more quickly or slowly on courses to juggle family or work commitments.

Some courses must take 15 months, you can't go faster. The timescale of other courses has been truncated from 3 years to 18 months and have become so intensive they could not be managed around work and so potential students are put off.

Such inflexibility means a high drop-out rate for work-based learners. Around half do not complete their courses and this puts a further financial strain on colleges.

It has been suggested that the sector would benefit if Welsh government had a greater knowledge of what the economy required and courses and student numbers were matched accordingly.

In H.E., funding models are still heavily skewed towards the traditional 18-year-old, full-time undergraduate and "bite-sized" learning remains underfunded, discriminating against those who may wish to study part-time. If a worker wants to retrain, they cannot afford to stop working, yet the funding for modular, part-time credit accumulation is bureaucratic and insufficient.

Legislative & administrative barriers

The rigidity of ELQ (Equivalent or Lower Qualification) rules inhibit lifelong learning. Preventing funding for learners studying at a level they have already attained stifles retraining. If a history graduate needs to retrain as a nurse or data analyst, they are financially penalised.

There is a lack of cross-sector harmony, where F.E. and H.E. are not working well together. In north Wales for example, where providers like Grŵp Llandrillo Menai and Bangor University / Wrexham University operate in proximity, administrative systems often do not "talk" to each other, making credit transfer difficult for learners trying to step up from Level 3 to Level 4.

Competition can also happen between colleges and universities where some colleges were perceived as behaving in a predatory manner for students because they could deliver particular courses more cheaply.

The vital importance of good public transport

In rural areas, you cannot have accessible learning without accessible transport. Administrative centralisation of courses to main campuses excludes those without cars.

Competition not collaboration in Higher Education

Widening access and providing flexibility to attract students depends on appropriately funding the sector and the importance of collaboration.

Colleagues in H.E. talk of a broken funding model with not enough money coming to Welsh government from Westminster and from Welsh government to universities. Funding is short-term, meaning it is increasingly difficult to plan for the future when millions of pounds need to be saved at each institution every year.

Despite what it provides for Wales and its economy, there's a belief that universities are down the pecking order of priorities for Welsh government and the sector always has to make the case for more investment.

Marketisation of H.E. means that universities are competing for students. This inbuilt structure of competition prevents collaboration between institutions.

Insufficient funding has many negative consequences. Student services budgets, seen as non-essential, have been severely reduced. There is no consistency of student support across Welsh HEIs. Without a guaranteed baseline of support, students have no assurance of what they will be provided with. In Swansea University, there is now only one staff member for adult learning and much less support for these students.

Technicians speak of a shortage of equipment and resourcing being the worst in twenty years.

Round after round of redundancies and leaving vacancies unfilled means numbers are so limited if someone is off sick lessons cannot be delivered. Staff talk of being "in survival mode" because of a lack of slack in the system.

Redundancies are harmful to local economies too, taking money away from local high streets. This is even more of a challenge when the HEIs are in deprived areas.

The competitive university mentality is destructive and it is suggested that rather than look to collaborate on what works for each, universities instead would be keener for another HEI to fail so they are able to pick up the students and funding.

Marketisation, insufficient funding and the exclusion of unions from strategic planning leads to decisions that are not in the public interest. Only a concerted campaign by nursing students and health unions forced Cardiff University to pause plans to close its nursing degree teaching programme in April last year.

We said when high levels of nursing vacancies at Welsh health boards are hindering patient care, and universities are under immense financial pressure, closing a vital nursing course didn't make any sense.

H.E. members identified the vital importance of sufficient ALN funding in schools, where well-supported pupils have positive experiences and are more likely to consider post-16 education.

A thorough review of the sector would use the Open University as a best practice example on collaborative working and acknowledge the needs in deprived areas of north Wales are different to south Wales. It might conclude that insufficient staff numbers prevent universities offering more flexible/ hybrid study. Greater, well designed, distance e learning, with in person group and tutorial work held locally is a model that could work across Wales for all post 16 education and training.

Greater stability would be found if there was more use of public money to fund the training at HEIs of the next generation of Welsh public servants in courses like teaching or nursing. In other European countries industry contributes much more funding to universities.

We note that inflation has eroded the value of tuition fees and grants and without a sustainable funding settlement that recognises the true cost of education delivery, providers will be forced into a "race to the bottom" on quality.

Welsh universities are in direct competition with HEIs across the border and if Welsh funding per student were to drop significantly below English levels, it will struggle to attract students and staff.

A lack of social partnership

When the workforce and union representatives are consulted and listened to on institutions' strategic decisions, those decisions are better and this goes for planning to increase lifelong learning opportunities too.

Whilst there are good examples of partnership working with trade unions in F.E. and H.E institutions, there are many that have not embraced the benefits and continue to resist this more constructive way of working. The intention is often expressed, but in practice there remains a resistance.

The roots of social partnership are not deep in the sector or necessarily built to last. Where there are good relations, it only takes a change of senior personnel and joint working with the unions can be weakened.

There is a lack of appreciation at the highest levels of the benefits involving union voices. It was significant that there were no university vice chancellors present at the Medr collaborative conference despite their personal invite from the Minister for Further and Higher Education.

Unions are already busy defending members from redundancies and cuts to services. Our finite resources make it difficult to concertedly lobby for social partnership with organisations who don't want to listen. We want to push on an open, not closed door.

<p>2. What changes need to be made to ensure appropriate opportunities for adults to improve their foundational skills in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy alongside vocational skills and other learning?</p>

If adults have had a bad experience at school or feel a sense of shame and embarrassment at lacking certain skills, they may be demotivated by the thought of studying basic skills and more likely to feel comfortable if learning was offered in a work environment and they weren't sat amongst young people.

Literacy and digital skills must be embedded within vocational and academic courses, not bolted on as separate hurdles and perhaps they should be known as "professional upskilling" rather than "basic skills". Some adults would prefer studying for GCSEs rather than foundational skills, but this is not funded. It was felt there should be a promotional campaign about the value of vocational skills and these qualifications.

You cannot expect a vocational lecturer or instructor to also be a specialist in adult literacy without training and time. We need a funded workforce development strategy to upskill existing staff to deliver these foundational skills within their subject areas.

Get the offer to adults right and deliver the courses in a welcoming environment and colleges could be transformed into vibrant places in the evenings.

Reps described the content of some courses, such as digital skills as too thin, where tuition was geared to helping people pass a test and not in a meaningful manner to help them in life.

In higher education there was concern that whilst Welsh government talks of increasing access, funding cuts are narrowing opportunities for those adults wishing to return to education and more basic skills support is needed. Special services to help for students to write essays, for example, has been reduced.

3. What further education and training for adults aged 19 and over should be prioritised for inclusion in regulations to be made under section 94 of the Tertiary Education and Research Act?

We suggest the following for consideration:

Green and net zero skills: Wales can be a hub for low-carbon energy. Regulations must prioritise funding for retraining fossil-fuel reliant workers into new industries and sectors.

Welsh language proficiency: Adult provision for learning Welsh must be protected and expanded, not just for cultural reasons, but as an employability skill within the Welsh public sector.

Critical citizenship and humanities: We must resist a purely utilitarian view of education. Regulations should protect funding for courses that foster critical thinking, civic engagement, and social cohesion, which are essential for a healthy democracy.

Health and social care: Given our aging demographic, priority funding for adult retraining in nursing and social care is vital.

Financial sustainability

1. What are the best examples of tertiary providers ensuring efficiency in the delivery of course provision while maintaining quality? And what are the challenges in doing this?

Staff in post-16 education see 'efficiency' as a euphemism for cuts to their departments and student provision which mean they must work even harder for the same pay. Where the student to staff ratio strains to unmanageable levels the quality of learning and well-being inevitably suffers.

In F.E., in some cases colleges have made savings by pressurising instructor technicians to deliver teaching, outside of their contract. This is teaching on the cheap and roles must be clearly defined and the quality of learning must not be diluted.

A desperation for funds colours the decisions colleges make on which courses are run. In one example of inefficiency, a college in a more rural area has organised courses not to meet local need but to receive a sparsity payment.

Higher education staff said it is wrong to claim quality of education is being maintained when institutions continue to make huge reductions in spending. As the sector contracts with fewer students, all universities are making cuts to live within their means and feel close to crisis if they don't recruit enough people for the next academic year.

Some providers claim efficiency by using zero-hours contracts or agency staff, this destroys quality. Students need continuity of care from secure, well-rested staff, not burnt-out people worrying about their next contract.

During covid, the H.E. sector and workforce showed it is very capable at developing new ways of learning and providing support to students. Unfortunately, the will to collaborate, and concentrate on what each institution is good at is absent. HEIs are too busy competing with each other.

There have been so many years of redundancies across Welsh HEIs there is nothing left cut to make it more efficient.

Worsening student behaviour

Student behaviour across colleges and universities has seen a marked decline in recent years since covid, business and professional support staff are often the first point of contact for these young people outside their class/lecture rooms.

Bad behaviour affects other learners and undermines quality. There is a general feeling that staff are not properly supported by their senior leaders, who they say are reluctant to remove or discipline students who attack or are abusive to staff because the college needs the money they bring.

2. Where are there opportunities for cost-savings in the delivery of tertiary education?

In higher education cost-savings through mass redundancy programmes have damaged the delivery of tertiary education/student welfare support.

Colleges and universities could save money by improving recruitment and retention of students through investment in the pastoral care provided by business and professional support staff. Well-supported students are more likely to be attracted to study and to complete their course.

The number of very well-remunerated senior managers in colleges and universities has ballooned at a time when comparatively funding has decreased. The scale of this hierarchy was judged wasteful by business and professional support staff who are often called to do much more work for no greater pay. This layer of bureaucracy should be reduced and decisions brought much closer to the operational side.

One college reported having 8 or 9 people earning between £80,000 and £90,000.

Elsewhere, expensive management consultancies have been engaged by universities on lucrative contracts to provide advice on planning and architecture. The University of South Wales is believed to have spent more than a £1m on a recruitment agency to find and appoint a new vice chancellor.

Such extravagance insulted business and professional support staff who are doing their very best to maintain the student experience in the face of significant cuts.

We suggest stopping capital vanity projects. There is a tendency to favour construction of shiny buildings while neglecting the maintenance of existing estate or the staff inside them. Repurposing existing spaces is more cost-effective and environmentally friendly.

Ending outsourcing and bringing services like cleaning, security and catering in-house can save money wasted in the tendering process and extracted as profit by the private company. Insourcing also gives a better guarantee of service quality.

It is suggested that an option for a blended digital/in-person delivery of college courses where learners create their own qualification like Open University, should be examined. Such a course would still include the opportunity for an on-site lecturers and support staff to speak to

Students are likely to be more engaged if they could choose more of the course themselves. Pathways might be clearer and it could be more economical to run. Some caution must be exercised however, at offering just online courses and those with ALN would benefit from the support provided in face to face settings.

Colleges face substantial costs from a high turnover of staff that could be avoided. Years of poor pay awards and the instability of facing annual contract reviews directly contribute to the churn. Investing in and valuing staff would instead dramatically improve retention, the sector is no longer seen as an attractive career choice for the reasons outlined.

Creative thinking around more agile working and giving lecturers more flexibility on how they want to develop and deliver their courses could produce savings for colleges.

Communities and the economy

5. What opportunities and threats does AI pose to the future of tertiary education? What implications are emerging from its uses for providers and for Welsh Government policy?

AI technologies can be harnessed to the benefit of all workers and help improve public services, including the tertiary sector, workers and unions must be at the heart of that process. If decisions are left only to senior managers or corporations, there's a general concern that the use of AI will generate more redundancies.

It's essential the workforce has a voice in how and where AI is used. We as a union want to be involved in these conversations. Medr must promote social partnership working and the need for colleges and universities to collaborate on a framework behind AI and regulation. The sector could learn from good examples of agreement between the social partners elsewhere in the public sector and the [TUC Cymru principles around AI and fairness at work](#) are a good starting point.

If implemented correctly, AI could reduce the administrative burden on staff (such as timetabling, basic grading of multiple-choice assessments), freeing up time for pastoral care and research. AI tools could potentially help identify students at risk of dropping out earlier, allowing for timely intervention.

Colleges and universities are equipping people for the world of work and employers will expect new recruits to have been trained in how to use AI. So, there's a need for education staff to themselves be trained in how it best be applied, yet this is not always offered to business and professional support staff and is reserved for managers. Access and training must be provided to employees on a fair and equitable basis.

We highlight the importance of reskilling those affected by the development of AI. Welsh communities bear the scars of the closure of the mines and deindustrialisation when investment and re-training did not follow.

Any savings created by AI must be reinvested in the workforce.

There is concern AI has an inbuilt bias and students may unwittingly be susceptible. Staff noted the difficulty in preventing students from using AI in coursework and how there has been a move to assessment through more in-person exams and presentations as a result. These require more staff time, not less.

There are concerns around data privacy and ethics. We need strict Welsh Government policy on data sovereignty and should not provide student data to opaque corporations.