

**RESPONSE TO WELSH GOVERNMENT
CONSULTATION ON SUPPORT FOR FOUNDATION YEARS IN HE**

Question 1 – *We have outlined a series of concerns regarding foundation year provision, principally that it represents poor value for money and does not obviously provide any benefit to the student when compared to the available alternative routes to higher education. Do you agree with this analysis? Why?*

1. The role of foundation years has changed in the last 20 years from a small-scale and niche route into higher education in a narrow range of subject areas to being a key recruitment tool for universities seeking to hit their recruitment targets for students in a competitive higher education market. This is the fundamental reason why the current finance system for foundation years has to change. Because of this fundamental change over time, foundation years now provide significant and direct competition to FE colleges in providing level 3 education in Wales.
2. It is not a coincidence that the rapid growth of foundation years has taken place since the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees in Wales. Universities in Wales are able to charge up to £9,000 for this foundation year provision and students on these programmes can claim the normal HE full-time student support regime. This is a regime more generous than that for FE level 3 students.
3. This is problematic not least because it is not part of any university strategic plan that we can identify that the institution sees its mission as being a provider of level 3 education. The rapid growth of foundation years is therefore a knock-on effect of the policy of the UK Government in England to marketise post-compulsory education and skills provision. The Welsh Government, in contrast, has sought to pursue a further and higher education and skills system that avoids nugatory competition and duplicative provision. This imperative of avoiding duplication and unproductive competition is all the more important given the effects of sharply reduced budgets in post-compulsory education.
4. Level 3 provision in colleges is precisely designed to assist students progress into higher education or employment. Welsh Government provides funding of between £3,000 and £3,500 a year for such programmes. Students would not have to pay for an FE level 3 programme by paying fees and getting into debt. Students can apply for Assembly / Welsh Government Learning Grant for this provision and younger students can claim Education Maintenance Allowance to support them during their study. Until 2015/16, a broad range of part-time adult skills programmes were available for over 19 year olds in FE colleges in Wales.

5. It is therefore a genuine concern to note that at the same time as there has been a significant increase in Welsh Government funding of foundation year provision (at level 3) in universities there has been sharp reduction in the funding for part-time adult FE provision, including at level 3. The net effect of this *de facto* transfer may be to reduce opportunities to those adults who wish to study part-time, due to family or other caring commitments, while increasing the amount of public funding expended on full-time provision.
6. Colleges have an excellent and improving track record in getting students into higher education. A HEFCW commissioned study published in 2012 showed a marked increase in progression from FE to HE in Wales in the previous four years.¹ We would expect this improvement in progression to have continued beyond 2012.
7. A further concern with this so-called 'level 0' study is that the learner does not leave with an accredited qualification after the foundation year if they do not progress to degree study at the university beyond the foundation year. With an Access to Higher Education programme or a FE level 3 programme the student would exit with a accredited qualification that would help them progress to HE level provision at a later point.
8. In cases where a student already possesses level 3 qualifications at a good 'pass' level, but not in the subject area where they wish to progress into higher education, there are good options for the student to study a specific Access to Higher Education programme that will allow them to study in the sciences or other areas. 'Access to Science' programmes, for instance, are widely available at colleges across Wales. These programmes prepare students for STEM based subject areas. We would also question whether generic so-called 'kick-start' foundation years in universities genuinely help students progress into the STEM disciplines.
9. For the reasons listed above ColegauCymru believes that scarce public resources used to fund such foundation year provision in universities in Wales via fee grant, student support and the RAB charge may more helpfully be directed at:
 - (i) Access to Higher Education and other similar level 3 courses in colleges or in universities be they full-time or part-time.
 - (ii) Level 4 and above Higher Apprenticeship provision which has come on stream rapidly in Wales since 2012.
10. We would expect the result of this re-portionment to be no deterioration at all in the progression to level 4 study for prospective HE students. There is a strong chance that such a re-portionment would increase the flexibility of progression opportunities for students as they would not be tied to a particular course in a single university but would have a qualification that was transferrable as noted in para.6.

Question 2 – *Which of the four proposals do you think should be implemented? Why?*

¹ *FE-HE Progression Project Report for the Welsh Government*, ColegauCymru (March 2012). The research showed a sharp increase in admissions to universities from colleges in Wales.

11. ColegauCymru believes that option D (outlined below) is the option that should be implemented.

D) Cease support for the foundation year. This would remove support for the foundation year of undergraduate degree courses in the higher education sector but would maintain support for similar courses to be delivered in the further education sector, generally without cost to the learner. Widening access activity would operate as usual.

12. ColegauCymru believes that fee loan and student maintenance support provision for foundation year should cease from 2017/18 for those not already accepted onto foundation year programmes. As they are autonomous institutions, universities may choose to continue to offer foundation year provision for non-Welsh domiciled students. This would preserve their competitive position against HEIs across the border and allow them to attract students from England if that is their wish.
13. To ensure that there is no 'one off' impact of the withdrawal of foundation year programmes, HE, FE and Work-Based Learning providers in Wales's three regional learning partnerships should be tasked with looking again at progression routes for people over the age of 21 into work-based higher education, adult-focussed FE mainstream provision at level 3 or Access to HE provision in their regions. This would ensure that a broad range of opportunities are identified for students wishing to progress to higher levels of learning.
14. This work should feed into, and helpfully relate to, the Welsh Government's Demand and Supply Assessments for skills for each region. This would help ensure that students were assisted in progressing into higher level skills programmes that maximised their opportunities for future employment.

Question 3 – *Do you think our definition of foundation years at paragraph 30 will capture the type of provision we have discussed?*

15. Yes, the definition provided is useful. Clear reference to so-called 'level 0' HE study being considered explicitly as the equivalent of CQFW level 3 study would be a helpful additional clarification within the definition.

Question 4 – *What do you think the impact on widening access will be if the Welsh Ministers were to cease support for these courses? Do you think any particular groups would be disadvantaged by this policy? What are the characteristics of the people taking these courses?*

16. ColegauCymru would predict that the 750 students or so who would have otherwise have studied on a foundation year will be able to access widely available alternative level 3 courses that would enable them to take up higher education study. This is especially the case if the monies used to fund foundation years are redirected to mainstream FE or work-based level 3 provision, or to Access to Higher Education provision in either colleges or universities in Wales.

17. This will be better for students in that they will not be bound to progress to a particular higher education programme at an individual university, but would be qualified to pursue a range of potential options including 'earn as you learn' work-based higher education in the form of Higher Apprenticeships. There are now thousands of places available in Wales for work-based learners wishing to start an apprenticeship at level 4 and above. This was not the case in 2011 when the rapid growth of foundation years began. In this scenario, the student will also avoid several thousand pounds of debt, especially if they left the university at the end of the foundation year without a qualification that it recognised elsewhere.

Question 5 – *We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them.*

18. The rapid growth of foundation year provision indicates the weakness of Wales's system for planning and coordinating post-compulsory education and training. This substantial growth in level 3 provision at universities has occurred without any reference to Wales's regional learning partnerships or agreement at them. This expansion has not been raised in liaison between the FE sector and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, despite there being fora for the discussion of such matters in formal HEFCW committees (where colleges are represented) or in bilateral meetings that take place between the FE sector and with HEFCW.

19. This situation exposes the clear gap in strategic direction of post-compulsory education in Wales which tends to be filled by provider interests rather than the learner interest. It reinforces the case for much better strategic planning of post-compulsory education in Wales, as set out in the Hazelkorn Report.

20. ColegauCymru also notes that 'level 0' foundation year provision at universities is not subject to Estyn inspections, despite it being *de facto* level 3 study provision. Other level 3 programmes at universities (and colleges), such as Welsh for Adults and Access to Higher Education programmes, are subject to Estyn inspection. This seems to be an inequitable and questionable aspect of foundation year provision in universities and we would question whether this exemption from Estyn inspection for such provision is appropriate.