



Prifysgol Cymru  
Y Drindod Dewi Sant  
**University of Wales**  
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**Yr Athrofa**  
Institute *of* Education  
Addysg i Gymru Education for Wales

# Wales Education Commission

Meeting One: Thursday 17th November 2016  
SWALEC Stadium, Cardiff, CF11 9XR

# Wales Education Commission

Present: Professor Medwin Hughes, Vice-Chancellor, University of Wales Trinity Saint David; Philip Blaker, Chief Executive, Qualifications Wales; Paul Collard, Chief Executive, Creativity, Culture and Education; Professor Trevor Gale, Dean, School of Education, University of Glasgow; Laura Perille, President and Chief Executive Officer, EdVestors; Amy Sanders, Director, Dynamix; Professor David Woods, Warwick and London universities; Professor Mick Waters, Wolverhampton University; Professor Catrin Thomas, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Wales Trinity Saint David; Professor Peter Rabbett, Yr Athrofa, University of Wales Trinity Saint David; Gareth Evans, Yr Athrofa, University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

This first meeting of the Wales Education Commission has brought together an international panel of distinguished educationalists to share their expertise in support of the Welsh Government's work to improve education. The Commission has signed up to be an independent voice, critical friend and source of advice to the education community. A core element of Yr Athrofa, the Institute of Education, the Commission ensures that we are outward facing, learning from the best practice and most effective research on teaching and learning, leadership and the development of a self-improving system.

This first meeting took place in and around the National Education Conference where the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Kirsty Williams, set out the Welsh Government's agenda for the medium and long-term improvement in education. Ms Williams spoke of the education system's "national mission" to ensure all young people have an equal opportunity to reach the very highest standards and acknowledged "the importance of partnerships" in driving Wales' reform programme forward.

The Commission was therefore asked to consider the Welsh Government's education improvement plan 'Qualified for Life', which was first published in 2014. The document outlines the Welsh Government's strategic objectives for education for 3 to 19-year-olds in Wales to 2020. Qualified for Life lists four key improvement objectives to facilitate positive change in Wales' education system. They include: Pedagogy; Curriculum and Assessment; Leadership; and A Self-Improving System. The Commission took each improvement objective in turn, with members using their vast and varied experience of education reform to put forward workable suggestions. It began by considering the latest addition to the Welsh Government's education improvement plan, Wellbeing.



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# Wellbeing

- The Commission welcomed the addition of Wellbeing to the Welsh Government's core improvement objectives, following an announcement by the Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams. The Commission suggested that a sharper focus on the key issues that impact on wellbeing would be of benefit. The Commission stressed the importance of addressing the impact of poverty as the starting point for this strategy.
- The Commission noted the importance of data and getting to know individual pupils as best as possible. It resolved that data on all groups of pupils should be properly benchmarked, before potential 'gap-busting strategies' are drawn. It considered that pupil tracking was essential and noted the potential for school inspection frameworks to be better aligned with matters of social justice, including the impact of deprivation.
- The Commission noted the Welsh Government's significant long-term financial investment in addressing the impact of poverty on attainment through the Pupil Deprivation Grant, but warned that learner outcomes were paramount to success. It recommended making more specific targets to ensure tangible progress is evidenced. The combined strength of schools, regional consortia and universities might be more closely focused on driving change that impacts in classrooms. The Commission concluded that further work to sharpen the evaluation of impact of this grant would be welcome.
- The Commission considered the possible emotional impact on learners associated with the Pupil Deprivation Grant and whether or not the grant could be renamed to breed more positive connotations. It was suggested that something like the "Pupil Excellence Grant" could give learners from more deprived socio-economic backgrounds greater self-esteem.



# Curriculum and Assessment

- The Commission welcomed the subsidiarity associated with development of the new National Curriculum, but sought assurance that teachers would be properly supported along the journey of reform. Members raised concerns that giving circa 120 schools the liberty to define a new National Curriculum could result in 120 unresolvable school curricula rather than something that could be defined as being wholly national. It was suggested that universities could be encouraged to work in an integrated fashion alongside schools, thereby bringing a number of different perspectives and expertise together. Nevertheless, the Commission warmly supported the Welsh Government's vision in this area.
- The Commission proposed more effective embedding of assessment skills within the teaching workforce, through Initial Teacher Training and Continuing Professional Development. It asked whether teachers were given sufficient and effective tools to understand education assessment and what more could be done to support the profession to better use the data available to it.
- Members warned of the risk of standardised assessment jarring with innovation and the more experimental culture being nurtured within the education system through the introduction of 'Successful Futures'. They resolved that assessment should primarily be used to inform teachers what they are going to teach. The Commission, however, recognised that rigorous accountability was essential but must value the higher order learning outcomes proposed in 'A Curriculum for Life'.
- The Commission acknowledged that comparative data was crucial to be able to drive up school standards, but considered the possible benefits of local accountability systems and schools being more accountable to the communities they serve, especially given the vast geographical range of schools operating in Wales.
- It was suggested that clusters of schools could come together to share each other's work and assessment data, with a more collegiate approach giving teachers a valuable opportunity to engage with colleagues and enter into discourse around best practice and alternative models of working.



# Pedagogy

- The Commission noted the importance of communication and recommended the development of a language teachers could use to talk to each other about the different aspects of their pedagogy and how it works. The Commission set out clear recommendations on the effective research that should underpin this work with schools.
- The Commission considered the notion that there is a direct relationship between teaching and learning - but questioned what was happening between the two and the contextual circumstances that may hinder a child's progress.
- Members acknowledged the importance of Professional Standards for Teaching, but questioned whether every teacher would be able to relate fully to what was being asked of them. They said getting hold of what professional standards meant for individual teachers would be crucial to successful implementation. They also noted the important role headteachers have in using professional standards to bring about change in their own classrooms, schools and communities.
- The Commission noted the potential in partnership arrangements between schools and universities, in which teacher education would take place in both settings and is not confined only to the education of student teachers. It reflected on a partnership model employed in Scotland which involved training teachers in schools as well as students being educated more formally through higher education institutions. In Scotland, universities host seminars on best practice in schools themselves and practising teachers are invited to attend.
- The Commission considered teachers' workload and the potential for the workforce to be allowed moderated time, either during or after the school day, to undertake pedagogical development. It considered whether a financial investment could be made in a school-university partnership to help facilitate this.
- Similarly, the Commission considered the impact of sustained educational change on teacher morale and noted the importance of the future wellbeing of the teaching profession as Wales continues on its reform journey. It acknowledged teachers as agents of change and warned against a "blame culture" that has dogged other education systems across the globe. Members resolved that teachers faced a number of challenges and support was essential.



# Leadership and A Self-Improving System

- The Commission considered Leadership and A Self-Improving System together, as it believed both were reliant upon one another to function properly. Members welcomed the Welsh Government's plans for a new National Academy of Educational Leadership, designed to prepare all leaders in the Welsh education system with the right skills and knowledge to benefit pupils. It acknowledged that Wales would require "architects, not surgeons" in order to sustain long-term improvement and a healthy and sustainable "supply chain" of school leaders was essential. It did, however, note that the whole education system would need to be focussed upon "architecture rather than surgery" moving forward and school leaders could not be expected to work in isolation.
- It was suggested that we learn from the process and impact of the National Standards of Excellence for Headteachers, unveiled by the Department for Education in England in January 2015. These might be a useful point of reference.
- It noted the challenge of ensuring every school leader is "on-board" with the leadership development plan and the need to promote the notion that it is every headteacher's moral obligation to do their best for Wales as well as their own school.
- The Commission considered the various models of school leadership and whether or not more thought could be given to the separation of instructional leadership from operational leadership. It noted the opportunity for a school's instructional leadership to be viewed as a subset of teachers rather than an individual role.
- The Commission stressed that building capacity within the workforce would be essential if it was expected that teachers would take on a more fundamental role in developing and delivering a genuinely self-improving system. Members questioned the rigour and consistency of the "scaffolding" that exists to assist teachers to drive forward change in Wales' education system.



# Final Thoughts and Recommendations

- That the Welsh Government ensure that there is a clear connection between official Government papers and their target audience – teachers in classrooms. The Commission noted that it was sometimes said that the biggest gap in education was often that between an Education Secretary and pupils in a classroom – albeit the Welsh Cabinet Secretary for Education was commended for reaching out to the profession in her national address.
- That the Welsh Government builds on its vision for education in Wales with further consideration of the practical structures to support it. The Commission recommended the development of a guiding framework to underpin Welsh Government improvement objectives. It considered capacity building integral to the successful implementation of the ambitious vision set out by the Cabinet Secretary in her opening address to the National Education Conference.
- That the Welsh Government consider condensing its improvement objectives, down from five core areas into three. The Commission recommended blending together Pedagogy with Curriculum and Assessment; and Leadership with A Self-Improving System. In order to develop a more conceptually coherent narrative, members suggested accompanying each objective with a short statement of intent aided by bullet points. A connection between the three objectives would need to be articulated. Members resolved that there was little in *Qualified for Life* to disagree with, but questioned if advancing on such a broad front was likely to achieve desired improvements and whether a more rigorous and prioritised approach was necessary.
- That the Welsh Government consider supplementing its improvement objectives with specific success criteria for each priority. Once targets have been agreed, a clear communication strategy would ensure that everyone associated with delivery is aware of the proposed direction of travel. It was suggested that an executive summary of the Welsh Government's improvement plan be sent to every institution in Wales with a message from the Cabinet Secretary. It would be expected that more localised plans drawn by the regional consortia, local authorities and schools themselves would align with this overarching national vision.
- The Commission was intrigued by the potential of Pioneer Schools as a vehicle to help drive positive change. It welcomed the ambitious approach to the co-construction of a new National Curriculum, initial teacher education, leadership strategy and a self-improving system. It advised that the message need to be clear, coherent, communicated effectively and that capacity be built throughout the system to ensure its effective development. The Commission concluded that the attention, energy and expertise of teachers in classrooms will be crucial to the success of this work and look forward to supporting the Welsh Government to achieve their objectives.

