



Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Yr Athrofa
Institute of Education
Addysg i Gymru Education for Wales

Wales Education Commission

Meeting Three: Thursday 12th October 2017
Royal Society of Arts, London, WC2N 6EZ

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Wales Education Commission

Present: Professor Dylan Jones, Dean, Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David; Professor Trevor Gale, Dean, School of Education, University of Glasgow; Laura Perille, President and Chief Executive Officer, EdVestors; Professor David Woods, Warwick and London universities; Professor Mick Waters, Wolverhampton University; Professor Keri Facer, Educational and Social Futures, University of Bristol; Professor Jonathan Shepherd, Director Violence and Society Research Group, Cardiff University; Professor Peter Rabbett, Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David; Gareth Evans, Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

The third meeting of the Wales Education Commission reconvened 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: 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.

The meeting focussed predominantly on the Welsh Government's new long-term education strategy. Launched shortly before the meeting in September 2017, Education in Wales: Our National Mission set out the nation's reform journey and 'four enabling objectives' designed to support improvement. In her ministerial foreword, Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams describes our collective national mission as that "to raise standards, reduce the attainment gap and deliver an education system that is a source of national pride and confidence". The Commission was invited to reflect on key aspects of the document and consider how best actions may be implemented in practice.

Education in Wales: Our National Mission

- The Commission began by considering the strategy's target audience. It noted reference in the document to the 'education community' and questioned what community of educators did in fact exist in Wales. Members discussed the need to mobilise a community of practitioners in order to achieve collective goals. It said that ensuring widespread engagement with the strategy would be critical to its success.
- To that end, the Commission championed a vehicle through which the teachers' professional voice could be heard. It welcomed the Welsh Government's collaborative approach to curriculum reform, but questioned whether the Cabinet Secretary for Education had at her disposal a professional forum of teachers she could use to discuss the development of policy. Nevertheless, members recognised the tension that exists between the Welsh Government being providers of education and allowing the profession to lead.
- Members considered the "passivity" of the teaching profession a significant issue. They said that, historically, teachers are used to being "done-to" and often find greater responsibility a struggle. But it was noted that Wales is not alone in facing this challenge and "every Eastern European nation is struggling with getting the profession to pick itself up". The Commission concluded that the teaching profession more generally had suffered from a "culture of learning disempowerment".
- The Commission asked what reward exists for innovation in the classroom, and whether more could be done to incentivise new approaches to teaching and learning. Members noted that while schools are increasingly encouraged to take risks and try different things, they are often stifled by a punitive inspection regime and layers of accountability. The Commission advocated a move away from the "top-down mentality" of old to a more collaborative approach, empowering teachers to take more control of their day-to-day practice. In addition, members warned that with innovation would inevitably come failure – and that the Welsh Government would need to be mindful of having to deal with it.
- The Commission considered the benefits of introducing a reward scheme for teaching, similar to that employed in the medical profession. It drew comparisons with the Clinical Excellence Awards (CEA), a scheme intended to recognise and reward those consultants who contribute most towards the delivery of safe and high quality care to patients and to the continuous improvement of NHS services. The incentive scheme allows doctors to earn extra money on top of their basic salary for outstanding work or research. Bronze, silver, gold, and platinum awards are administered by the Advisory Committee on CEA. Thirteen regional sub-committees assess applications.
- Members noted that there was little mention in the Welsh Government's education strategy of external partners – and those not directly involved in the educating of children. The Commission considered it advisable that the strategy recognises all players in the drive to raise standards.
- Members asked whether Wales required a professional body for teaching. They suggested a more structured framework to support teacher development might be worthwhile in the context of whole system reform. Similarly, the Commission doubted what scaffolding was in place to develop young teachers into future leaders. It noted that the emerging National Academy for Educational Leadership should help in this respect.
- The Commission suggested that there was a need for greater action research across the education system. But it questioned to what extent teachers would be able to conduct such research. Members said teachers needed to be actively engaged in setting the research agenda in Wales – and that they must have a key role in driving it forward. The Commission resolved that there is a huge amount of research being undertaken outside of higher education and via more traditional routes, but that this research is often not respected or properly used. It suggested universities should allow schools access to their research, given that there is "no scholarly infrastructure" outside of the university environment. Members considered the undertaking of research one way of promoting school-to-school collaboration. They said universities should be obligated to provide schools with access to relevant facilities – and suggested the possibility of making every headteacher in a region a university fellow, with full access to university research.
- The Commission questioned to what extent teachers were "data literate", and how able they are in interpreting and using data effectively. Members called on interested parties to incentivise research and communicate properly the benefits it can bring to classroom practice. They questioned the funding available to schools for research and suggested the possibility of introducing a bespoke research and development grant. The Commission said it should be a requirement of local education authorities and regional consortia to provide basic statistical data training to staff.
- Members were invited to consider the Australian Changemaker Program as a possible framework for knowledge exchange and professional learning. The Changemaker Program is an action learning experience for educators who are ready to step up in their leadership journey and drive positive change in their schools. The programme is based on research with educators and system leaders across the globe and aligns to the Australian Qualification Framework as a Level 9 course, allowing for credits towards Masters programs at a number of tertiary institutions. The experience is grounded in deep practical learning and made up of a number of contributory components.
- The Commission warned that policymakers should not forget to ask children and young people how to improve learning in their schools. Members bemoaned the "forgotten voice" of those going through the education system currently.
- Members noted the UK-wide challenge in recruiting new teachers into the profession. The problem is also felt in Wales where numbers applying for teacher education courses has fallen. The importance of making teaching more attractive to graduates and school leavers was considered essential.
- The Commission welcomed the Welsh Government's collaborative approach to curriculum reform. But it warned of the possible negative implications stemming from the 'Pioneer' model. It was suggested that selecting schools to become Pioneers could risk ostracising those that are not Pioneers. Members proposed encouraging schools to be 'pioneering' in other ways, and that the Pioneer model could be expanded beyond curriculum development.
- Members considered the new technologies available to support teaching and learning. They were introduced to 'ClassDojo', a classroom communication app popular in the United States used to share reports between parents and teachers. Teachers track student behaviour and upload photos or videos. The gamification-style system teaches developmental skills through real-time feedback. The application, which has been translated into 35 languages, has been used in 180 countries and by 90% of the school districts in the United States.
- The Commission considered the tenuous link that currently exists between assessment, evaluation and accountability. Members questioned whether there was scope in moving towards portfolio-based assessment, especially in the context of Successful Futures and the curriculum blueprint championed by Professor Graham Donaldson.
- Accountability mechanisms were the topic of considerable discussion. The Commission considered a new and innovative approach to accountability involving the measuring of input, as opposed to output. Members preferred to look at how schools create the conditions to develop creative, enthusiastic and healthy children, rather than using more punitive measures that exist currently. It was suggested that accountability should be stripped back to what schools can and should be held accountable for. Members said 'environment statements' were one such possibility, with schools assessed on the basis of the conditions they create. Schools, they said, could be better judged on whether or not they create the conditions to facilitate learning.
- The Commission bemoaned the wide variation that exists between schools, especially those in rural and urban areas. To negate the impact of geography – and availability of resource – on performance, members proposed better funding of digital platforms. This, they said, would support in the development of small schools, in particular. The Commission suggested Wales could learn from other nations with schools of many different contexts, many miles apart. It considered practice in countries like Canada, the United States and Australia as

Final thoughts and recommendations

worthy of closer analysis. Estonia, in particular, was held up as a beacon of good practice for its use of technology.

- Members urged policymakers to develop a “richer narrative” about what is valued about education in Wales. They said this would support in the construction of a more positive vision for the education system at large, and help dampen more negative publicity and the popular perception that Welsh education is not as good as it could be. Similarly, the Commission stressed that the Welsh public would need to be prepared for a possible fall in GCSE and A-level results as the roll-out of the new national curriculum progresses. Members considered that innovation and “trying new things” sometimes comes at a price.
- To that end, the Commission chose to focus on what is distinctive about Wales. It called on the people of Wales to celebrate and promote that which it does well – and instil a love of learning in all of its learners. Members considered building public confidence in Wales’ education system crucial. Recent announcements by the Cabinet Secretary for Education would support that view. Nevertheless, the Commission urged some caution that “any narrative will exclude as well as include”.
- The rise of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was noted. A triennial survey, PISA which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. In 2015 over half a million students, representing 28 million 15-year-olds in 72 countries and economies, took the internationally agreed two hour test. Students were assessed in science, mathematics, reading, collaborative problem solving and financial literacy. A series of poor results for Wales have attracted considerable negative publicity and the Commission warned policymakers to brace themselves for further bad news when results are next published in December 2019. Members said Welsh officials would need to know what they can speak back to PISA critics – and to have strong, positive messages in line to lift Welsh spirits in the event results are not as they had been hoped.
- The Commission questioned whether policymakers could articulate what the new national curriculum will mean for students of different ages. Members suggested it may be useful to break down the implications of curriculum reform for different groups of learners, to better support the change process and gain traction across the system.
- The new timeline for implementing Wales’ new national curriculum was shared with the Commission. Members welcomed the staggered roll-out, but asked if it may be sensible to offer schools the opportunity to implement the curriculum earlier if they are in a strong enough position to do so. It was suggested that “we should not get in the way of those that want to move on quicker” and schools should be supported to do so where appropriate.
- The Commission questioned whether language, culture and the arts could be drawn more clearly into the ‘National Mission’ for education in Wales.

With the fruits of three meetings’ discussion to draw upon, the Commission was invited to record what it perceived were the strengths and weaknesses of Wales’ education system. This was not done for critical means, but instead to support interested parties in the wider reform agenda with a more objective standpoint. The following bullet points were drawn from both verbal and written evidence emanating from the Commission’s meeting in London:

- Members questioned whether “Wales knows what Wales knows” and championed a more strategic sharing of good practice. They called on the system at large to be better adept at celebrating Wales’ best schools and teachers – and not to shy away from the variation that exists between providers. The Commission said Wales could look to countries like Singapore in terms of “nation building” and how to develop a strong cultural identity. It suggested decisions regarding regeneration could be more closely aligned to education, with schools anchored more appropriately within their communities.
- Members considered a strong sense of place, identity community and cohesiveness, and commitment to wellbeing as apparent strengths of the Welsh education system.
- Members felt a strong sense of national pride in Welsh heritage and history, culture and language, and its distinctiveness, could be better built upon to support improvement.
- Members commended an emerging consensus around Wales’ new national curriculum, Teaching and Leadership Standards, and its new National Academy for Educational Leadership.
- Members welcomed the publication of Education in Wales: Our National Mission as helping to provide ambition, aspiration and focus. This, they said, was not immediately apparent in documents published in England and Scotland and Wales had potentially shown the way.
- Members considered a lack of structural coherence a significant negative, with too much variation and inconsistency of practice among regional consortia, local authorities and other key providers of education across Wales.
- Members bemoaned a lack of confidence in identifying and designating the best schools and leaders to lead school improvement – and championed a process akin to “the best helping the rest”. They called on educators across the system to celebrate better the excellent or ‘world class’ educational practice in Wales. They said that, in terms of standards, the bar needs to be raised to advance system excellence while at the same time closing gaps. Members said Wales needs to “grow the top” to ensure system uplift.
- Members considered the ‘Pioneer’ model, while commendable, potentially divisive unless other ‘non-Pioneer’ schools were given the opportunity to contribute to the reform agenda in an alternative way.
- While acknowledging the crucial role schools play in educating future generations, members noted that they could not do it alone and needed support. The Commission therefore called on all players in the Welsh system – including parents, policymakers and the wider education community – to share responsibility for driving up standards.
- The Commission stressed again the importance of making teaching more attractive to graduates and school leavers as the ongoing “recruitment crisis” continues.
- Members called on universities to allow schools more access to their research. They said universities should be obligated to provide schools with access to relevant facilities – with the naming of university fellows to support proper dissemination of papers relating to professional learning and best practice.



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