

Senedd Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee inquiry:

Challenges facing organisations that support and promote the Welsh language

29 November 2021

ColegauCymru is a post-compulsory education charity; we promote the public benefit of post-compulsory education and learning. We also convene the further education (FE) Principals' Forum, which represents Further Education colleges and FE institutions (FEIs) in Wales. ColegauCymru also undertakes research, policy development and provides practical support to FE colleges in Wales, including on work-based learning (WBL) which is a key part of FE college activity.

ColegauCymru manages the Cymraeg Gwaith Addysg Bellach Programme on behalf of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol with funding from the Y Ganolfan Dysgu Cymraeg Genedlaethol. Under the programme ColegauCymru has strengthened use of Welsh language skills in the workplace incorporating 11 FE colleges and exceeding the target of 210 individuals undertaking 120 hours of Welsh during the 2019/20 year. This year's newly introduced self-study scheme, already with over 800 learners, is a successful way of offering a more flexible learning scheme.

FE Colleges fall under Section 44 of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and both the individual institutions, as well as the sector, are supportive of the aims of reaching 1 million Welsh Speakers by 2050.

We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Senedd Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee's one-day inquiry on the challenges facing organisations that support and promote the Welsh language.

1. The immediate and long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

1.1 The immediate impact in March 2020 was to ensure colleges focused on urgent priorities such as implementing health and safety measures and putting in place the capacity to continue teaching online rather than face to face.

1.2 This was not necessarily done at the expense of developing Welsh medium provision for learners or improving the Welsh language skills of staff - but it did mean that staff, ranging from Senior Management to classroom teachers, had less time available to devote to other areas. There was also a lack of Welsh in some digital resources with the interface available in English only.

1.3 Efforts were made to maintain opportunities for staff to continue to use their Welsh language skills: staff in some colleges held online meetings for Welsh speakers to maintain opportunities to use the language.

1.4 With many staff working from home during significant parts of the pandemic, maintaining and deepening Welsh language and cultural awareness through informal interaction became more of a challenge. This activity often depends on engendering understanding, empathy, and trust through face-to-face contact with individuals and groups.

1.5 This made it more difficult for staff to build an effective rapport with learners: online learning platforms can be more difficult than the classroom environment. Likewise, relevant staff who support the Welsh language have not been able to introduce themselves to groups of learners and some colleges reported that the lack of 'drop in' for discussion and support in Welsh was problematic.

1.6 Colleges reported that often learners' response in language awareness sessions/developing Welsh language skills is better face to face in the classroom than online: learners are more ready and willing to practice their spoken Welsh skills than on an online platform and Welsh conversation is more natural and fluid in person.

1.7 Learners also missed out on educational and extra-curricular opportunities, including trips. This has affected the learners' experience and engagement with the Welsh language

1.8 As a result of disrupted teaching, many pupils entering college demonstrated less confidence in their linguistic skills.

2. Plans for recovery

2.1 In terms of the long-term impact and plans for recovery in 2021 and 2022, some colleges reported that Covid-19 has actually created opportunities to think imaginatively in relation to staff development and expanding bilingual and Welsh medium teaching. As more and more staff and learners have had to adapt to online teaching via Teams, Zoom and other virtual solutions, they have becoming familiar with – and less intimidated by - video conferencing as a concept and an experience.

2.2 Multicampus colleges and those covering a large geographical area (one college noted it has 10 campuses, up to 100 miles apart) have previously found it difficult to identify sufficient numbers of staff and students to be grouped together as a subject class or level for the purposes of face-to-face teaching. Continued online or hybrid teaching in the post-Covid-19 era, however, holds out the potential to develop more virtual teaching of Welsh lessons for staff as well as bringing geographically disparate groups of learners together for course teaching through the medium of Welsh. The additional investment for developing hybrid teaching received from Welsh Government is very much welcome in this respect.

2.3 Other colleges welcomed interaction and working with the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, including funding to support bilingual development tutors. This helps to develop capacity and resources to support the learners. There has been increased interest in the Cymraeg Gwaith scheme as staff have become more familiar with online learning and are more receptive to digital learning.

2.4 On a different note, more research is needed on the experiences of young people and their opportunities to use Welsh outside of the classroom and formal education. FE colleges are able to see which learners have come from Welsh medium schools and better use should be made of this information.

2.5 A greater focus on young people 16-25 from both the Urdd and Mentrau Iaith, including specific posts where necessary, would be welcome. This should include targeting young people outside of Welsh medium education provision and focusing on second language learners and those from English medium schools.

2.6 Likewise, the Welsh language needs to be mainstreamed across the wider community activities available to young people – activities should not be seen “Welsh” or “English” wherever possible.

2.7 College leaders are aware that even before Covid-19 impacted their operations, the number of Welsh Language learning opportunities across academic, vocational, and technical programmes was at a low base. The reasons for this are multifaceted and represent a complex challenge to overcome. For this to improve, a significant investment of time, effort and of course money is required across a number of fronts. It will also require a change in culture and

values from across a wide range of stakeholders as well as from learners and their parents, particularly those who are Welsh speaking. It is easy to overestimate the challenge that colleges face based on the impact of Covid-19 and to ignore more fundamental long-term challenges that were apparent before the pandemic.

3. Priorities for the Sixth Senedd

3.1 In addition, we would like to reiterate the points made in relation to the Welsh language made in our response to the Committee consultation which closed in September 2021:

3.2 The legacy report of the previous Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee highlighted the need for its successor Committee to assess progress against targets in the Cymraeg 2050 strategy, prioritising the targets for Welsh medium teachers and education.

3.3 Colegau Cymru is supportive of this suggestion. However, focusing on the targets set for primary and secondary teachers should be part of a wider focus on bilingual and Welsh medium teaching across the whole of the education system, including Further Education.

3.4 The Cymraeg Gwaith scheme, for instance, has had a positive impact on upskilling staff in FE to develop their Welsh language skills to be able to deliver at least part of their teaching in Welsh. However, funding is only granted on an annual basis and this is in line with financial years (April to March), rather than academic years, which is problematic. A Committee inquiry could consider how improvements could be made to the schemes and support provided to the education sector to enable more lecturers or teachers to be able to deliver through the medium of Welsh.

3.5 Similarly, the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol's vision for the further education sector – and reflected in the Further Education and Apprenticeship Welsh-medium Action Plan – is to ensure that the Welsh language is accessible to all, utilising a skills development model to increase levels of awareness, understanding, confidence and fluency, which will lead to the upskilling of everyone in the sector. The extent to which progress has been made, especially on the base levels of the pyramid – awareness and understanding – should be part of a Committee inquiry into progress on Cymraeg 2050 more broadly. Key to this will be an investigation of whether the Coleg actually has sufficient funding to achieve this element of its vision and support the skills development model.

3.6 Such an inquiry might benefit from joint sessions with the Children, Young People and Education Committee.

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