

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Materion Allanol a Deddfwriaeth Ychwanegol | External Affairs
and Additional Legislation Committee

Y goblygiadau i Gymru wrth i Brydain adael yr Undeb Ewropeaidd |
Implications for Wales of Britain exiting the European Union

IOB 14

Ymateb gan ColegauCymru

Evidence from CollegesWales

1. ColegauCymru (CollegesWales) is a registered charity that exists to promote world-class post-compulsory education in Wales. As part of this work it represents all the 14¹ further education (FE) colleges and FE institutions in Wales². ColegauCymru also represents the FE colleges at the UK National Agency's Country Advisory Group (Wales) for Erasmus+ and acts as the national contact point in Wales for the three European networks: EQF, ECVET, and EQAVET. ColegauCymru, along with the Association of Colleges, Colleges Scotland, and Colleges Northern Ireland forms part of the Colleges UK group. As well as Erasmus+ ColegauCymru participates in International Skills Partnership, the successful British Council scheme, which shares similar objectives.
2. ColegauCymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to the External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee inquiry on the implications for Wales of the UK exiting the European Union. The implications of leaving the EU are of particular concern to the Further Education Institutions (FEIs) in Wales as their work is influenced by and contributes to EU public policy and as bodies they are recipients of EU funding. This funding has included both a direct allocation of financial assistance towards capital investment and for services to address areas of concern such as employability and the need to address the competitiveness of the economy of Wales. In particular FEIs in Wales are involved in the EU skills agenda, they are key players in the Welsh and UK economies – successfully implementing EU funded projects – and as a result of student and staff mobility programmes they have built strong working relationships with partners across Europe over a number of years.
3. This response outlines the four main areas of concern from the sector which we believe should be part of the UK and Welsh Government priorities for negotiations regarding leaving the EU. These areas, which are interlinked, are: firstly access to relevant funding programmes, secondly maintaining the principle of freedom of movement of people, thirdly the continuation of the recognition of qualifications, and

¹ The 14 include 10 FE corporations including St David's Catholic College; an FE institution – Adult Learning Wales/ Addysg Oedolion Cymru; and The College Merthyr Tydfil, Coleg Sir Gâr and Coleg Ceredigion which are part of university groupings.

² In this paper the terms FEIs refers to 'FE college, 'college' and FE Institutions.

finally the ability to be involved in the development and implementation of EU policy and legislative instruments relevant to the FE sector.

4. The first area of concern is access to EU funding programmes that increase the capacity of FEIs to have a positive economic impact. Over the years, FE institutions have accessed a variety of EU funding programmes - from structural funds to mobility funding - implementing projects that have been beneficial to the Welsh and UK economies and in line with EU policy objectives such as improving skills and helping people into work or progression in their jobs.
5. The importance of the structural funds for FEIs is reflected by the scale and the impact of the funding accessed by Welsh colleges. Over half a billion pound of structural funds, mostly ESF, have been deployed by FEIs in the last ten years providing an effective delivery channel for the funds in Wales. The significance of EU funded projects is demonstrated by their impact as thousands of beneficiaries have gained qualifications, progressed at work and in their learning, enabling large work based learning projects, and contributing to an overall increase in productivity in the Welsh economy, driving the potential of inward investment.
6. Moreover, a great deal of the funding has been delivered through effective partnership working with Welsh Government and private and public sector organisations, operating in a cohesive and organic way, thus strengthening the framework of the Welsh economy.
7. The mobility funding programmes, such as Erasmus+ (2014-2020) and its predecessor Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013), are another very important resource for the colleges as it is a specifically tailored programme for the learning sector to promote mobility and partnerships of learners and staff, including VET and adult learning. The importance of the mobility programmes for the FE sector in Wales is evidenced by the number of projects that FEIs have delivered and their value. To date, under both programmes mentioned above the Welsh FE sector has successfully delivered projects of over €5.5m. Over the years this level of success has enabled hundreds of students and dozens of staff members to gain directly from the opportunities offered by the programme and it has brought tangible benefits to the economy in Wales.

8. In particular, this has enabled FEIs to enhance the offer of their education provision in two main areas. Firstly, the programmes provide students with the possibility of meaningful work experience abroad which increases their employability chances. As a consequence, Erasmus+ enriches the FE experience for learners and provides valuable work experience that can be taken to employers as learners' progress into the world of work. Secondly, the programme offers the opportunity of staff exchanges which increases the quality and level of the teaching. Furthermore, in the medium and long term the programme has enabled the FE sector in Wales to build important working and strategic relationships with a number of organisations across Europe. This has the capacity to support initiatives such as foreign direct investment, regional smart specialisation and therefore aid the competitiveness of the Welsh and UK economies.
9. Exiting the EU could potentially stop or severely reduce access to the ESIF and Erasmus+ programmes which will greatly reduce the benefits for staff and learners afforded by mobility projects and ESF projects alike. This would be detrimental to the skills and education agenda and ultimately could have a potential negative impact on the economy.
10. Considering the increased capacity that the colleges have gained from accessing EU funding, and more importantly the positive impact that the projects had on the Welsh economy, we believe that one of the negotiating priorities for the UK should be to maintain full access to the current round of funding 2014-2020, both the European Structural and Investment and the Erasmus+ programme. In particular, we would recommend maintaining access to the Erasmus+ programme for FE or at least having measures in place that allow the learner experiences and staff exchanges to continue even after the UK leaves the EU. If access to the current or equivalent programmes cannot be maintained, the Welsh Government should press the UK for sufficient funding to create a similar programme of both student and staff mobility. It should also consider the viability of developing its own targeted programme of support to FE students and staff if this is not an option.
11. The continuation of the EU funding round until its natural end of 2020 would provide much needed certainty to the current project delivery context; it would also enable the

full fruition of the funding committed, minimising disruption of the current planning and maximising the efforts that went into the preparation for the seven-year programming period. As a result, it would ultimately allow the full delivery of the benefits from the projects and it would also enable a smoother transition in a “post Brexit” scenario giving more time for planning the next strategic development.

12. The second area of concern is about the changes to the principle and practicalities of freedom of movement, as currently applied in the EU, that may come as a result of the UK exiting the EU. Irrespective of the when the UK leaves the European Union, Wales and the UK will remain an integral part of Europe for business and cultural exchange. Any change to the principle of freedom of movement of people could have a severely negative impact on FE institutions in Wales in two main ways. Firstly, it would make it much more difficult to implement mobility activities such as those of Erasmus+, potentially due to obstacles such as visas and work permits being introduced to visit EU countries. ColegauCymru is deeply concerned that an end to the Erasmus+ programme will severely restrict the ability of companies in Wales to employ staff with sufficient understanding of the global nature of business and the economy.
13. Secondly, the potentially increased difficulties of beneficiaries coming to Wales (and to the UK) from other EU countries would significantly reduce the attractiveness of the country to EU learners that currently visit due to the quality of the teaching, or for the opportunities for improving their language skills.
14. Therefore, ColegauCymru advocate that one of the negotiating priorities for the UK should be for the practicalities of freedom of movement for FE staff and learners to be maintained at their current standards. This would avoid any negative impact on the fruition of Erasmus+ or any such mobility schemes to FE in the future. ColegauCymru wishes to avoid stemming the flow of learners that want to attend colleges in Wales for academic and or linguistic purposes. Ultimately, not to do so would have a detrimental effect on the competitiveness of education institutions in Wales and the UK and it risks making access to the European job market more difficult for learners from Wales.
15. The third area of concern relates to the recognition of qualifications which provide easier access to the job market for FE learners through the specific mechanisms and

tools. These mechanisms promote the transparency, portability and transferability of qualifications across Europe.

16. The importance of these tools is further demonstrated by the fact that ColegauCymru is directly involved in them on behalf of the FE sector. ColegauCymru acts as the National Contact Point (NCP) in Wales for the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET).
17. These tools, which also cover countries beyond the EU, enable easier comparability and transferability of learning and skills provided by the FE sector. The recognition of the learning acquired during mobility periods in Europe is one of the key themes of the Erasmus+ programme; but it is also one of the elements that enable the FE sector in Wales to compete on equal footing with other similar organisation in the EU. Withdrawing from these mechanisms and recognition schemes would have a significant negative impact on the competitiveness and reputation of the education institutions in the UK, especially for the FE sector.
18. Therefore, ColegauCymru advocates for the continuation of these tools to be a priority of the UK negotiating strategy because they provide a vital chance for learners and future employees to widen their pool of opportunities.
19. The final area of concern is about the involvement in policy mechanisms that impact positively on the FE sector in Europe and in Wales, such as the Copenhagen process³. Since its launch in 2002, the Copenhagen process aims to improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) through enhanced cooperation at European level. Furthermore, the main principles of the process are shared by the FE sector in Wales (such as delivering the right skills for employment; new ways of teaching and learning; new approaches to funding and partnerships). The process is based on mutually agreed priorities that are reviewed periodically. A great deal of progress has been made at EU level to strengthen the European dimension of Vocational Education and Training (VET). Some early milestones include the recognition of qualifications and learning tools mentioned

³ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=URISERV:ef0018>

above. Of the latest achievements, the Riga conclusions (2015) are notable for increased promotion of work based learning and the Education and Training Forum 2020 (ET2020)⁴ which enables exchange of best practice, mutual learning, gathering and dissemination of information and evidence of what works, as well as advice and support for policy reforms through working groups composed of national experts.

20. The process, the tools and the achievements in such important European policy areas are vital to the FE sector in Wales and ColegauCymru believes that Wales and the UK should retain an active engagement with those and thus make it a priority of the negotiating strategy.
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⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework_en