

Introduction: The response provided here reflects the views of Merthyr Tydfil College, a subsidiary company of the University of South Wales. The response is an observation of how arrangements in the South-East region are currently working as the college is not in a position to give detailed comments on partnership arrangements in operation in the north or south west.

1. Is the data and evidence being used by the RSP timely, valid and reliable? Have there been any issues?

The data used by the region is at a high level and does not reflect labour market trends at a local level. As a result there is not necessarily a fit between demand for learning at local and regional level. This situation does not help or support reliable and accurate short and medium term curriculum planning. In Merthyr Tydfil, for example, there is a buoyant retail sector which has been further strengthened through the relocation of Trago Mills to the town. This has not been identified in regional labour market information data.

2. How well do the partnerships engage with and take into account the views of those who do not sit on the partnership board, and how well do they account for the views of the skills providers themselves?

Whilst some large employers are formally represented on the RSP Board, there is a lack of engagement with some of the larger providers in Merthyr Tydfil including the local health board. Dialogue with these providers is essential in shaping the demand for employment into the future.

The views of skills providers are formally represented in the RSP. However the level of representation has been queried by the colleges given that there is greater representation of FE in the other RSPs. This does not seem right given the

significantly greater size of the South-East region and the larger number of colleges operating in it.

There seems to be a lack of clarity currently around the administrative arrangements and organisation of the RSP. There is not a clear statement of the governance arrangements, rights of representation or the organisational structure below Board level. The role the RSP is unclear for example in the approval process of the college outline and final delivery plans- at present dialogue has been with welsh government officials only with no involvement of RSPs.

3. Are the Regional Skills Partnerships able to actually reflect current and future skills demands within their regions? What about very specialised skills for which there may be low volumes of demand?

No. Whilst the aspiration of welsh government in the recently published Employability Action plan is to shape training around level 3-4 technical provision, there is considerable need in Merthyr Tydfil to develop the basic skills levels of the employed and unemployed. Whilst the college recognises the importance of STEM focussed training to provide the future workforce with these high level technical skills, lower level programmes are also needed in the STEM areas and in the Foundation economy for example to reduce disengagement in learning and NEETS and to provide progression routes into apprenticeships and higher level programmes.

The RSP has not considered the potential challenges posed by Brexit yet in any detail and the impact that this will have on future skills needs. The college through it's own engagement with employers across the region know that there are certain sectors who anticipate major skills related impact including engineering, hospitality, health and care and tourism.

4. Do the Regional Skills Partnerships have sufficient knowledge and understanding of:

- a) The foundational economy and the needs of those employed within it; and**
- b) The demand for skills provision through the medium of Welsh?**

The RSP has recognised the importance of the foundational economy in its various skills plans and assessments, although these are at a high level rather than

being locally based. The RSP has established that it recognises the sector, and in particular health and social care, as a priority skills sector for the region.

There has not been any significant consideration of the demand for skills provision through the medium of Welsh in any dialogue the college has had with the RSP.

5. Are the Regional Skills Partnerships adequately resourced to fulfil their growing role?

No. The RSP has developed around a number of participant groups who have volunteered time, supplemented by a very small staff team. This has not been sufficient to address the growing role of the RSP. Likewise attendance at meetings has been poor and some sector groups have not met for a considerable period of time. In time it is crucial that the role of the RSP does not duplicate the work of Welsh government particularly in relation to the planning of the curriculum with all providers.

6. Is there an appropriate balance between the work of the RSP and the wider views on skills demand?

No. The RSP view is shaped by high level labour market information and lacks the detail required for planning purposes at a local level. There is a mismatch between the views of providers who emphasise the need for programmes at level 1 and 2 to begin to skill the workforce of the future and the view of the RSP that the curriculum should be focussed in the majority of cases around level 3 and 4 programmes in the STEM areas

7. Is the level of operational detail set out by Welsh Government for skills provision in higher/further education and work based learning appropriate?

For further education and work based learning, the detail is appropriate. There is significant detail provided to the RSP around further education and work based learning provision from both the college and work based sectors. The RSP expresses an opinion on the sectors and provision that should be grown and those areas where there should be a reduction. There is a collaborative approach with all colleges in the region, although meetings have been infrequent, and there is a detailed consideration of the RSPs stated priorities which in turn informs curriculum planning. Performance against this is then monitored and is reported

on to Welsh Government. The role of the RSP's is unclear in this process and dialogue in the majority of cases is with welsh government only.

Merthyr Tydfil College is not aware of the approach taken with Higher education institutions.

8. If there are any, how are tensions between learner demand/learner progression reconciled with RSP conclusions and Welsh Government preference for funding higher level skills?

As explained above, much of the RSP approach does emphasise higher level skills, as does Welsh Government's approach. However, the provision of skills for adults at all levels are required and in particular at levels 1 and 2 - there is clear evidence that many adults and young people require access to support the development of literacy, digital literacy and numeracy. These requirements are an essential precursor to gaining higher level technical and vocational skills for many people and to reduce NEETS across each local authority area.

9. Have the RSP and Welsh Government been able to stimulate changes in skills provision 'on the ground' to reflect demand?

To an extent yes. There have been managed increases in, and reductions in, particular areas of the FE and work based learning curriculum in response to RSP identified sector priorities. However, a significant and sustained growth of provision generally in the STEM area at a regional level will require more young people to be encouraged to pursue this throughout their education – and this falls outside of the influence of the RSP. Consideration of the A level curriculum which provides a significant amount of STEM related courses, in Merthyr Tydfil , for example, is currently not considered as part of discussions with DFES and the RSP.

10. What improvements can be made?

RSPs are being given increasing influence over the prioritisation and spending of around £400m of public money. The view of Merthyr Tydfil College is that robust and transparent governance arrangements need to be in place which are

understood by both employers and all educational providers. The current situation does not demonstrate this and Merthyr Tydfil college would welcome the development of it and looks forward to continuing to play a central part in the future development of RSPs.