Enterprise and Learning Committee

Transformation agenda for post-16 education in Wales

Evidence from fforwm
30 September 2009

Introduction

1. fforwm welcomes the opportunity to provide written and oral evidence to the Enterprise and Learning Committee as part of its inquiry into the transformation agenda for post-16 education. fforwm is the national organisation representing the 22 FE colleges and two further education (FE) institutions in Wales.

2. 14 colleges may be described as general FE colleges of which two are part tertiary and one is merged with the University of Glamorgan; five are tertiary; one is a Catholic sixth form college; one is a specialist land-based college; one is an adult residential college and two – YMCA Community College and WEA South - are FE institutions. In this response the terms 'college' and 'FE college' are used to cover all types of FE colleges and FE institutions

Context

3. *Promise and Performance,* the Report of the Webb Review into Further Education (published in December 2007) argued that efficiency gains in an FE institution are most evident when turnover reaches £15 million per year, but only 55% of our colleges are operating at this level. Webb also drew attention to the Audit Commission's recommendation that the minimum effective size of a school sixth form is 150 learners across two year groups. Only 47% of sixth forms in Wales were operating at this level (para 7.3).

4. *The Skills That Work for Wales Action Plan* (published by the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) in July 2008) drew attention to research indicating that larger learning providers are more cost effective and have greater critical mass to provide a broad, high-quality curriculum, student services, and the latest technology.

5. *The Action Plan* supported a reshaped learning network with providers, and groups of providers working in partnership to deliver innovative new types of learning. This network should be built around the needs of the learner, where students are actively involved in decisions about their education. A network should have sufficient scale to sustain a broad

range of curriculum options; the ability to realise efficiencies; and a clear quality profile and brand image that learners, employers and other stakeholders can recognise and trust.

6. *Transforming Education and Training Provision* (published by WAG in September 2008) invited Learning Partnerships to put forward strategic proposals to transform the delivery of education in their areas with a final deadline of 30 September 2009. This deadline has slipped somewhat.

7. A Transformation Sounding Board (on which fforwm is represented) was set up to advise DCELLS on proposals. Another working group has been established (again with fforwm representation) to set out a framework for the development of consortia.

8. In 2009 the *Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure* was passed by the National Assembly for Wales. This Measure gives an entitlement to all young people aged 14 and aged16 to receive a minimum number of academic and vocational courses. This is an important driver towards cooperation.

9. Finally, the WAG is likely to reduce the number of contracts in work-based learning (WBL) from the current 81 to a much lower figure.

fforwm view

10. There are currently 168 schools with sixth forms and 81 contracts with work-based learning providers (including colleges) and 24 FE colleges including two FE institutions. In addition, there are a number of local bodies including 22 local education authorities (LEAs) as well as an equivalent number of 14-19 partnerships and Young People's Partnerships.

11. fforwm believes there are too many providers and supports the WAG policy to reform the learning network. This should result in improved partnerships between providers; fewer but larger and better resourced FE colleges; fewer but better-resourced secondary schools; and increased tertiary arrangements.

12. FE colleges have responded positively to the Transformation agenda by taking an active part in proposals put forward by local Learning Partnerships. In addition, a number of colleges are considering the setting up of WBL consortia to put forward bids for WBL contracts for the next bidding round in 2010.

13. There are currently five proposals for college mergers - Barry College and Coleg Glan Hafren; Gorseinon College and Swansea College; Coleg Harlech/WEA North and WEA South; Coleg Llandrillo and Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor; Deeside College and Coleg Llysfasi. The first three are 'Type A' mergers in which both corporations are dissolved and a new

college established. The latter two are Type B mergers in which one college takes over the assets liabilities and staff of the other college which is dissolved. On 1 August 2009, Deeside College took over the Welsh College of Horticulture.

General progress

14. Colleges are also actively involved in a number of Transformation proposals, working with each other, with local authorities and with schools and higher education institutions.

15. Proposals fall into five broad models:

School/FE college consortia in which the planning and delivery of learning provision is united by establishing cluster governance and management arrangements.
Proposals to unite all learning provision including elements of higher education delivery at local level.
Reorganisation of local secondary schools and improving of links with other providers.
All Wales sectoral proposals e.g. National Construction College.
Other proposals such as consortia to deliver work-based learning.

Issues

16. fforwm believes that proposals need to reflect local circumstances and that ‘a one size fits all approach’ is not the best way forward.

17. Taking forward Transformation is costly in terms of time and resources. The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) needs to ensure that sufficient investment is made available to encourage proposals at local level.

18. *The Review of Governance Arrangements in FE* chaired by the Deputy Minister will explore how governance arrangements might be improved to support collaboration and partnership between colleges, schools and higher education. College governing bodies are drawn from a wide cross-section of local people with an interest in the college. These include local authorities, the local community, staff, students, business as well as those co-opted on the basis of their particular expertise. Recent Regulations passed by the Assembly - *Collaborative Arrangements between FE Institutions and Schools* – enable the governing bodies of FE colleges and schools to form joint committees to assist collaboration. Thus a mechanism is already in place to improve collaboration.

19. Critical success factors for Transformation include:

Benefits to learners. Increased access to high quality provision must be paramount.
Welsh medium and bilingual delivery needs to be expanded [fforwm is holding a major conference on 30 September which aims to develop a Welsh-medium & bilingual strategy for FE].
Transformation should introduce longer term savings but not be driven solely by the need to reduce costs
Critical mass – there needs to be sufficient numbers of learners to ensure Transformation is worthwhile.
A common purpose between organisations.
Strong leadership at local and national level.
Strong management structures and clear governance arrangements.
A dedicated person at local level who has the authority and respect from all sides to drive the agenda forward.
Trust – this needs to be fostered at every level of management and staff and governors.
Commitment of time and resources from all parties.
Excellent communication between the institutions.
Sustainability to ensure continuation after a change in leadership.
A regular and honest review to assess progress against targets.

20. Currently there are two different data systems in operation – the LLWR (for FE institutions and WBL training providers) and the PLASC (for schools, including school sixth forms). A common data collection system is required for schools and colleges. This is made crucially important as the evidence collected by data systems determines funding and benchmarking performance between institutions.

21. There are undoubtedly factors hindering collaboration. These include difficulties in organising transport; existing funding mechanisms which do not encourage cooperation; competition for learners; lack of trust; difficulties in timetabling; and the absence of a strategic body to plan provision. However these should be seen as positive challenges to be overcome and not reasons preventing change.

22. FE colleges report that some local authorities have been very supportive and are keen to move forward. Other local authorities have been less keen. Some schools have been reluctant to be drawn into local proposals although there are examples where schools have embraced change enthusiastically.

Conclusion

23. The key factors underpinning proposals to transform the learning network is that learners should benefit from improved access to courses, and that quality standards will be improved. There are also likely to be improvements in efficiencies although cost savings should not be the driving force. Local proposals should suit local circumstances.

24. Drawing up and taking forward proposals are very consuming of time and resources and the timetable set by WAG may in a number of cases be ambitious.

25. At present Transformation is still in its early stages and it is too early to comment on its success. However, the fforwm delegation will be pleased to provide examples from their own experience of what is currently happening and early lessons learnt.