beaufortresearch

Medr strategic plan: consultation with learners

Qualitative findings executive summary

Prepared for
Medr

Prepared by
Beaufort Research

Medr
Y Comisiwn Addysg Drydyddol ac Ymchwil
Commission for Tertiary Education and Research

Contact details

Agency contact: Fiona McAllister, Adam Blunt, Catrin Davies

Medr strategic plan: consultation with learners - *qualitative findings executive summary*

November 2024

Beaufort Research

2 Museum Place
Cardiff
CF10 3BG

(029) 2037 8565

enquiries@beaufortresearch.co.uk

www.beaufortresearch.co.uk

Terms of contract

Approval to quote or publish will only be withheld on the grounds of inaccuracy or misrepresentation.

Any approved publication must detail: Beaufort Research Ltd as provider, sample size and field dates.

© Beaufort Research Ltd 2024

Produced in accordance with ISO20252

Executive summary and conclusions

Introduction

Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research in Wales, is a newly established arm's length body of the Welsh Government with responsibility for funding and regulating tertiary education and research in Wales from 1 August 2024. Its remit is higher and further education; apprenticeships; adult community learning; and school sixth forms. One of Medr's main responsibilities is to ensure that the interests of learners are central to decision-making processes.

Medr is developing its first strategic plan, covering the period from 2025 - 2030. Essential to the plan's development is consulting with stakeholders - and the learner voice is to play a fundamental role in the development of the plan. Medr therefore commissioned Beaufort to carry out qualitative research among tertiary sector learners as part of this engagement process.

The research aimed to:

- Understand what is important to learners on their pathway through the tertiary sector, including from an engagement point of view
- Explore what mechanisms learners feel would be effective to ensure that Medr listens to the learner voice in all aspects of its work
- Elicit feedback on Medr's draft strategic aims
- Understand what changes learners would like to see as a result of Medr being set up.

We conducted six online video focus groups, covering school sixth form learners, further education (FE) learners, higher education (HE) students (mostly undergraduates), apprentices and adult community learners.

Forty seven learners from 17 education providers in Wales attended across the six groups, with fieldwork taking place between 17 and 24 October 2024. The majority of learners were involved in learner representative (rep) roles such as course reps, students' union officers or student governors.

In reading this report, it is important to note that the sample of learners who participated in the research were not representative of the characteristics or views of all learners in Wales. Their feedback therefore reflects only the views of those who took part, not necessarily the wider learner population.

Key findings

*Learners across tertiary educational settings tend to believe that their providers are **supportive** and **work towards resolving issues raised,** but HE and FE settings stand out with their variety of learner engagement channels.*

- **HE and FE** students describe the broadest range of engagement opportunities and **speak very positively** about them. They have access to a mix of formal and informal feedback channels such as surveys, representation systems, and direct contact with staff. FE learners in particular report experiencing a culture of listening by senior staff, with a

broad spectrum of representative channels and a commitment to feedback on issues raised.

> *There's a lot of support from the board and from the senior team in the college. They always make themselves known, that we can come to them for anything. (FE learner)*

- However, some HE students feel that the **pace of change** resulting from learner feedback could be slow.
- **Apprentices** value their supportive, proactive **relationships with assessors**, highlighting successful communication. However, they tend not to be aware of more formal feedback mechanisms.

> *I had that conversation with my assessor [about an issue], and she said, . . . 'let me speak to the teacher'. . . . And I felt it was a safe space for me to be able to do that, to be able to share that experience. (Apprentice)*

- **School sixth form** learners report feeling **heard within limited scopes**. It can feel as though school staff set the agenda for consultation. House councils and senior prefect teams are mentioned as forming part of the system to convey issues to staff. There are also examples of focus groups and social media as channels to express their views.
- **Adult community learners** appreciate **responsive tutors** and face-to-face feedback opportunities. However, most of their contact is with their tutors, so they feel a greater sense of disconnection from the organisation behind the learning provision compared with other learner groups.

> *The questionnaire that we fill out at the end of each course focuses entirely on the tutor. The tutor we have is fantastic. . . . But we're never asked our opinions [on other areas]. (Adult community learner)*

- **Adult community learners** and school **sixth form learners** are more likely to feel that their views are not always listened to relative to the other groups.
- **Raising awareness** among learners of feedback mechanisms can still be a challenge in HE and FE settings.
- **Suggested mechanisms** for learner engagement include continuing with **current** approaches (HE, FE, school sixth form learners and apprentices). Additional ideas tend to relate to ensuring learners **feel comfortable** speaking up (e.g. having a named contact for raising an issue, small group discussions, and using their peers to collect feedback).

> *As long as there is some human contact straight away. I think I would feel a lot better about the issue. Just having someone there to reassure me. (HE student)*

- Participants suggested that **Medr** could tap into **existing learner engagement channels**, for example to administer an online survey link; or create an **online space or forum** for discussions / surveys, or convene targeted **online focus groups**.

*Discussion of learner pathway experiences is dominated by a perception that schools do not do enough to explain to learners the **range of pathways available post GCSE**.*

- While this issue is not directly part of Medr's remit, it was prominent in the discussions and highlighted some key dependencies that will impact on the effective delivery of Medr's strategic aims.

- Secondary schools reportedly often emphasise **staying on for school sixth form** and progressing to **higher education**, sometimes at the expense of explaining all post-Year 11 options. School sixth form learners with a clear aim of attending university say they receive ample support, including personal statement help and mock interviews.

  My school very much pushed on going to its own sixth form. . . . They were just a bit iffy about people going to the college. They weren't really very supportive about it and didn't necessarily think that it was a great idea. (School sixth form learner)

- Learners can therefore feel **uninformed** about alternatives such as apprenticeships or college courses due to this perceived focus on A levels and university.
- In a few cases, however, learners refer to careers advisors and schools **providing broader guidance** on post-compulsory educational paths. Career advisors helped them consider options beyond school sixth form, and provided advice on college enrolment or apprenticeships.
- FE college learners generally **praise their colleges** for guiding them effectively along their educational pathways. Colleges are commended for helping learners find suitable courses, including when an initial choice turns out not to suit the learner, offering careers services, work experience opportunities, and discussions on future goals.
- Some learners had faced difficulties due to the coronavirus pandemic affecting their final year in compulsory education but found **support once they approached a local college**.
- **Informal sources** such as friends, family, and conversations with existing university students or apprentices significantly influence some learner pathways.
- **Apprentices are generally clear** on their post-apprenticeship options and would seek advice from their assessors if needed.

  I'd probably use my assessor. The first port of call, it's a really informal chat with her, what's next? Just have her informal advice. (Apprentice)

- **Adult community learners** sometimes face difficulties **identifying local courses** available to them; and some prefer to learn as a **hobby** rather than for accreditation or as part of a wider learning journey.
- Even so, examples are given of adult community learners being on a pathway, in terms of developing **confidence**, managing **mental health and wellbeing** and learning skills to become **economically active** again.

  I struggle with my mental health as well and getting out of the house and it has really done my mental health good as well as learning things. . . . I really look forward to going. (Adult community learner)

*Participants can initially feel that **anyone can access the education and training** they desire, but some perceived **barriers** to learning are subsequently voiced such as finance, awareness of options, and rurality.*

- Some learners believe there is a **wide range of courses** available and at a **variety of levels** to suit all learners.
- FE colleges are thought to **support disabled learners** and those with **learning difficulties**, providing essential individual support.

> *I've got physical disabilities. Every time I sign up for a new course, they always ask, 'do you need any assistance? Is there anything we can do?' So they're really, really good with physical disabilities. (Adult community learner)*

- FE learning is highlighted by some as **financially affordable**, with provisions like bus passes and monetary support such as the Financial Contingency Fund. However, reported changes in bus travel funding are expected to make it more expensive for learners, potentially **increasing financial barriers**.
- **University prospects** are believed on occasion to be hindered owing to cost of living, financial complexities and lack of awareness of how student finance works.
- **Limited awareness** of educational opportunities and unhelpful careers advice, as described above, are cited as barriers.
- One HE rep had observed that FE learners can be **less academically prepared** than their school sixth form counterparts, prompting the university to offer additional support.

> *In [FE] college, you're doing very practical things, you're not doing that much on the scientific side. And so it was a very big shift going to university and suddenly having all this science thrown at you and being expected to have known all the stuff from A levels. It was a really big issue in first year. (HE student)*

- **Rurality** can impact access to desired education paths, with limited transport options to schools with sixth forms for example, or to Welsh medium providers, and limited adult learning options.

> *I wanted to stay in school, but there's no transport from our town to the nearest sixth form. So I spent the whole of year 12 having to find my own way to the school I'm in now because our council doesn't do transport to the school. (School sixth form learner)*

- **Availability of apprenticeships** is believed to be limited in some regions of Wales, affecting students' choices.
- **Further potential barriers** to learning mentioned include the impact of poor GCSE grades, and insufficient enrolment numbers to sustain certain courses.

*Participants highlight **inconsistencies** with opportunities to develop Welsh language skills – some note **improving** and proactive offers, others less so.*

- **Opinions vary** among participants on the opportunity to develop Welsh language skills in education.
- Some **HE students** describe Welsh as being **prominent** in university life, with modules, accommodation, societies, and student union representation in Welsh.
- **FE learners** also highlight **proactive** college initiatives in Welsh language promotion. Examples include materials and assessments increasingly available bilingually, work submission in Welsh being accepted, staff being required to learn basic Welsh, and general efforts to create bilingual environments.
- **Adult community learners** can reportedly be offered the option to be **assessed** in Welsh, even if the assessor did not speak the language.

- **School sixth form** students at Welsh medium schools naturally report **frequent opportunities** to use and develop their Welsh, though some note Welsh-speaking friends **losing the language** in post-16 non-Welsh-speaking educational environments.
- Apprentices can report opportunities to **use Welsh with assessors** and to take **courses in Welsh**.

  I was offered [the course] in Welsh. If I'd said yes, I want to do it in Welsh, I can imagine the help would be there. (Apprentice)

- Less positively, instances are reported of only a **small amount of an HE course being in Welsh** even though learners are on the 'Welsh version of the programme', not being aware of any **opportunities to improve Welsh language skills** for those who speak a little Welsh, and a lack of subsequent **Welsh language education settings** when leaving a Welsh school with no sixth form.

  I find it quite frustrating as well. I'd like to learn Welsh and there's no real facilities here to do that. (HE student)

*Participants tend to feel **supported** in mental health and wellbeing by their providers although **not all are aware** of what's in place.*

- Some **FE learners** refer to and appreciate regular informal wellbeing checks by tutors, dedicated wellbeing teams, the availability of resilience courses, and mental health awareness events.

  I've been diagnosed with a mental health condition. . . . My tutors, they're amazing. I absolutely respect and love them. They've helped me get through the first year. . . . I actually managed to get my first ever distinction in something. (FE learner)

- **HE students** also report positive experiences, for example with teaching staff being good at reminding learners of pastoral support, signposting to support on offer, and being able to take time out from studies when suffering with their mental health.
- Some **school sixth form learners** speak of positive support through designated wellbeing staff, wellbeing weeks, and a sense that mental health and wellbeing are routinely discussed.
- **Apprentices** highlight the role of assessors who regularly enquire about their wellbeing, adjust workloads, and extend deadlines to ease pressure. There is also reference to weekly sessions for apprentices that provide a safe space to discuss issues.

  My assessor's really, really good. She realises that we're under a lot of pressure at the moment in work and it's really busy times. So she'll listen to what I'm saying when offloading a little bit around work capacity. (Apprentice)

- **Adult community learners** report positive experiences of approachable tutors with caring personalities who routinely ask about their wellbeing. Breaks have also been introduced which are deemed beneficial to health and wellbeing.
- Feedback was **not universally positive**, for example with some adult community learners unaware of mental health support; and report of negative counsellor experiences in school sixth form.

> *You can go to a counsellor. I know very few people who have, and very few people who've had positive experiences with them. . . . It's just not very helpful. (School sixth form learner)*

- There is also reference to HE student services being **inefficient** and **slow** to provide mental health and wellbeing support.
- It should be borne in mind that some may have withheld sensitive experiences in the discussion group settings.

*The most prevalent change that learners want to see to the learner experience centres on **pathway guidance** – especially at year 11.*

- Many learners express the desire for **improved guidance** regarding alternative pathways after year 11 and to a lesser extent after school sixth form. There is, for example, a call for better promotion and understanding of **apprenticeships** among learners.

> *The only people who seem to know about [the apprenticeships] is the people who work in [this company] and old apprentices. And so I think that definitely needs to be pushed out more. (Apprentice)*

- Some participants also suggest that **broader life skills education**, such as budgeting and independence, should be made available.

> *Especially after college, you are on your own now. You're way more independent than you were when you first joined. And that can be really scary. And I know it's only my first year, but I'm still quite scared for that. (FE learner)*

- A small number of changes are suggested regarding the **learner voice**. These include small group sessions to capture learner views, more consistent channels for capturing learner feedback across all levels of education, and feedback loops to be closed more quickly.
- Some adult community learners want **more engagement** with their providers which would make them feel more a part of the system. They also request more **efficient administration** for their courses including **tutors** getting the support they need (e.g. with materials), better **promotion** of adult learning opportunities, and more course availability.

> *The idea of us being able to be sent perhaps an online form or whatever, to talk about what our experience is like so that the company can find out what we feel about it. (Adult community learner)*

- Some FE learners raise the topical concern about the need for continued **free bus travel** for learners.

*Participants feel Medr's draft strategic aims **address relevant learner perspectives** but voice some **relatability** and **comprehension** issues*.

- On the whole, the draft aims are felt to cover **important areas relevant to learners** and their needs.

> *It's pretty good. These are things you will definitely want to see. (FE learner)*

- However, the term **'tertiary'** used in three of the aims is **unfamiliar** for many and can be off-putting, suggesting it is not learner-focused language.
- Some participants feel the aims would be more impactful with **timelines** for implementation attached.

***Strategic aim 1**: To focus the tertiary education sector around the needs of the learner - their experience, achievement and wellbeing, ensure they are involved in decision-making, and encourage participation in learning at all stages in life*

- This aim is valued for **prioritising learner needs** and decision-making but is considered **too wordy** and vague by some. A few participants suggest shortening it and including 'support for the learner' instead of listing 'experiences, achievements, and wellbeing'.

  All of it's positive, but it's just really long to read. . . . I think 'needs of the learner' itself is self-explanatory. (School sixth form learner)

***Strategic aim 2**: To create a coherent education and training system where all can acquire the skills and knowledge they need to make a real impact on a changing economy and society*

- This aim resonates for a few HE and FE learners regarding skills relevant to a **changing economy and society**, but more saw it as **less learner-centric** and remote. The aim's reference to 'economy and society', for some, feels too broad and detached for individual learners.

  If it's being aimed at the students, would it be better to be stating that their aim is to encourage people to reach their own potential? . . . I think aim 2 should be worded around the student. (Adult community learner)

***Strategic aim 3:** To ensure tertiary education aims for excellent standards, quality of provision, and raises educational expectations in order for learners to achieve their ambitions*

- HE students see **strategic aim 3** as **important** and **relevant**. A few adult community learners also like how this aim feels relatable because it refers to them as learners achieving their ambitions. However, the aim was more likely than the other aims to attract queries, less positive comments and suggestions for enhancements.
- Its emphasis on raising **'educational expectations'** is sometimes queried as potentially increasing pressure on learners, with participants interpreting the wording as relating to expectations being placed on learners rather than on education providers. It also **does not sound assertive enough** to a few participants because it refers to 'aim[ing] for excellent standards' which should be the case already.

  The primary worry for most learners are expectations. . . . That's rather terrifying for most people. (FE learner)

***Strategic aim 4:** To grow internationally-acclaimed research and inspire innovation throughout the tertiary education sector*

- **Strategic aim 4's succinctness** is **welcomed** by some, but references to 'internationally-acclaimed research' can **confuse** learners who are not in HE. It is not clear what this implies for the broader tertiary sector. HE students want more detail on how the research and innovation aims would be achieved.

> *Does that mean I'm researching about things across the world, or am I taking research from places across the world? Am I doing research? . . . I don't really understand what it means. (School sixth form learner)*

Strategic aim 5: To encourage greater use of the Welsh Language, and increase demand for, and participation in, learning and assessment through the medium of Welsh

- This aim's focus on Welsh language use is recognised as **important** including among those who are not Welsh speakers. However, a few participants think the aim sounds like it is **pushing the Welsh language on learners** and believe the wording should convey that it is optional and not compulsory.

> *Personally, I think number five is quite important. Trying to get more people speaking Welsh and learning in Welsh. . . . A major thing. . . . Where I am, there's not a lot of Welsh speakers and not a lot of people learning Welsh either. (Apprentice)*

Conclusions and recommendations

- HE, FE, and school sixth form learners report formal and informal structures and resource in place as well as a proactive listening culture. However, some school sixth form learners would like greater freedom to express views. Apprentices and adult community learners appear to be more reliant on their assessor or tutor for engagement, rather than feeling part of overall organisational structures and systems. This suggests it would be helpful to ensure such learners are regularly reminded of the learner voice options open to them, other than via their tutor / assessor.
- The theme that emerged of ensuring learners feel comfortable speaking up indicates this is an area to consider when developing learner voice opportunities.
- Issues with learner pathway experiences is the most prominent theme to emerge from the research as it was highlighted by most groups. It also featured most prominently when participants said what they would really like to see change in the learner experience. In particular, participants' experiences of finishing year 11 and understanding the choices ahead can vary greatly. There is a need to continue to develop a coherent progression for learners finishing compulsory education so that they fully understand the opportunities before them.
- While the research provides a broad and reasonably positive learner view regarding equal opportunities, mental health and wellbeing, and a mixed view regarding developing Welsh language skills, a deeper understanding of these experiences would require more targeted work among learners (e.g. dedicated samples of learners with experiences of barriers, mental health and wellbeing challenges etc.).
- The concepts behind the draft strategic aims address areas learners say are relevant. No significant omissions were highlighted and for the most part, none of the aims as a whole was challenged for its inclusion. Learners' feedback centred on comprehension issues and sometimes the impression that an aim or part of an aim is less learner centric. Points to consider reviewing include:
    - Use of the word 'tertiary'
    - Whether aim 1 can be made more concise
    - How to make the concept of impacting a 'changing economy and society' in aim 2 feel more relatable to learners

  - How to incorporate 'educational expectations' in aim 3 without learners feeling the expectations are on them
  - Whether aim 4 should explicitly refer to HE with its 'internationally-acclaimed research' or if it can be made more relatable for the tertiary sector as a whole
  - Ensuring aim 5 presents Welsh language developments as opportunities and cannot be misinterpreted to suggest compulsory Welsh language learning
  - Whether learner pathway guidance should be explicitly incorporated given its prominence in the feedback.

- Any further sharing of strategic aims with learners would benefit from context – in that they are supported by details of how the aims will be achieved and by when.

Implications for Medr's approach to learner engagement

- There is a stated willingness to engage with Medr via existing channels as the channels would be efficient and familiar to learners. There is still openness to Medr-led engagement channels such as an online space or forum. Participants responded positively to the video focus group approach used in this research which reflected some suggestions for smaller group discussions.
- It should be remembered that participants received an Amazon voucher for taking part. Echoing this, a few participants explained that incentivisation helped to motivate learners to get involved with the learner voice.
- Recommendations for future targeted engagement using focus groups would be to reduce the maximum number of learners per group to 5-7 participants attending. This will help to give each participant enough time to respond to topics and in more depth.
- We also recommend that future similar engagement limits the number of topics covered, particularly if detail is required. This research project was unable to delve too deeply into the subjects given the breadth of coverage needed.
- The learners who participated in this research do not necessarily see themselves as part of a wider post-compulsory education system. The term 'tertiary education' does not resonate with learners, and references to aspects of the system that were not directly relevant to the individual learner's experiences, such as training or research, could cause confusion. However, in other areas some participants acknowledged that aspects such as the Welsh language and wider benefits to economy and society were an important part of the strategic plan.
- In its future consultations and research, Medr will need to carefully consider how it achieves a balance between overarching strategic themes, and more specific areas which learners can connect to their day-to-day experiences.