W22/08HE - Summary of Consultation Responses

We received 11 responses to the consultation Circular W22/08HE, eight from Welsh Higher Education Institutions and three from directly-funded Further Education Institutions. The list of respondents is at paragraph 10.

To discuss the principles of the employability support in further detail, HEFCW held a consultation event on 6 May 2022, which was attended by representatives from seven Welsh Higher Education Institutions, the Open University in Wales, and two directly-funded further education colleges in Wales.

Overall, responses welcomed the funding made available to cover the end of the European Social Fund funded programme and the new activity. All were broadly supportive of the proposed delivery approach.

The responses to the consultation questions on targeted employability support for students are summarised below. The outcomes and responses to specific questions raised are detailed in circular W22/21HE.

1.   Do you agree with the proposed approach?

1.1.   All respondents were broadly in agreement with the proposed approach of supporting students from under-represented groups in higher education or from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who face additional barriers to achieving positive outcomes after graduation. It was noted that the proposed approach would facilitate a smooth transition from the ESF-funded programme into the new phase and allowed seamless engagement with students and stakeholders. Respondents also welcomed that structured Delivery Plans would enable encouragement of the alignment of project activity and outcomes with an institution's strategic priorities.

1.2.   Three respondents appreciated the increased flexibility regarding the student groups eligible for support, e.g. no age restriction, autonomy over setting targets and priority groups. Furthermore, the streamlined and simplified reporting process was also welcomed by two respondents as it will allow more resource to be allocated to delivery over administration.

1.3.   Continued collaboration between delivery partners was also considered a positive attribute by two respondents. This approach would ensure the impact of losing the ESF-funded provision would be minimal for students, referrers, and employers. With the loss of the central GO Wales database (held by HEFCW on the ESF-funded programme), it was noted that continued collaboration will facilitate a more joined-up approach across the provider in terms of sharing information and employer contact details.

1.4.   There were a few specific points raised, most notably in relation to the approach set out in the circular to providing funding to directly-funded FEIs, although one respondent noted that they were pleased to see that colleges and HE in FE have been recognised within the proposals. The outcomes to the specific points listed below are in circular W22/21HE.

- One respondent noted that they would like confirmation from HEFCW that institutions are permitted flexibility to define 'work experience', and to determine which participants would best benefit from it.
- One respondent sought clarification on the extent to which international students could receive support, as the domestic focus on the ESF programme had proved challenging.
- Given the additional challenges faced by neurodiverse students, one respondent recommended specific reference to neurodiversity (e.g. ASD, Dyslexia, ADHD, ADD) within the eligibility criteria. This acknowledged that these students are in particular need of employability support, but the conditions are not always perceived as a disability.
- One respondent requested consideration to specific reference to support for apprentices and apprenticeship activity in this or future approaches.
- On a less positive note, one respondent would have preferred to see a longer confirmed timeframe for this funding allocation. A stronger clarification of the ongoing nature of this support would ensure sustainability in the delivery design, especially around the staffing elements.
- One response noted that further consideration should be given to the funding and collaborative methodologies in relation to HE in FE students, which could potentially lead to adverse impact and inequitable funding for directly-funded FEIs. In addition, HEFCW expectations should be more transparent.

2. **Is it appropriate to use the number of students who consider that their employability has improved as a result of the support as a measure of success?**

2.1. The vast majority of respondents agreed that it was appropriate to use this approach. One respondent considered the use of an Employability Assessment Tool one of the best ways of measuring employability skills, similar to the approach used in the current ESF-funded programme, as students will have different experiences with the provision available. It was noted that not only is such an approach important to demonstrate positive outcomes for activity undertaken, but also a useful way for a student to see the distance they have travelled.

2.2. One respondent noted that this approach is considered appropriate, on the condition that students clearly understand employability concepts upon joining the programme, as they should then be able to accurately self-assess whether their employability has improved upon exit.

2.3. It was noted by one respondent that this is a quantitative measure and in order to provide a more holistic and accurate measure of impact, qualitative measures are best supported by quantitative measures as a person's consideration of improvement may be affected by other factors, both positive and negative.

What other performance measures could be used to measure the impact of success the funding?

2.4.   Other key performance measures proposed included:

- Confidence levels pre/post intervention, measured via the completion of an Employability Assessment Tool;
- Employer engagement via a range of activities: work tasters, work shadowing, and / or Meet the Professional opportunities (short virtual work experience opportunities, where students meet and question a professional to find out more about a specific career path, role or sector without the need to attend an employer's premises);
- Number of employability related events and activities undertaken. This measure could demonstrate the impact of encouraging students, who could struggle to attend such events offered through mainstream provision, from engaging with events which help to build aspirations and confidence whilst also offering opportunities to meet potential employers;
- Completion of reflection exercises where students consider and evidence their development;
- Progression into a placement / work-related opportunity;
- Number of mentoring/guidance sessions attended by students, as guidance and mentoring can equip those students furthest away from the labour market with decision making skills and empower them to take the next steps independently;
- Number of one-to-one appointments delivered to unique students;
- Number of work experience opportunities undertaken;
- Number of students offered and/or secured further employment following the support they have received;
- Number of bursaries issued; this measure could demonstrate the impact this funding is having on those students most in need, and could demonstrate the need for a ring-fenced pot for those students from Widening Access backgrounds and priority groups etc.;
- Career registration take-up;
- Graduate Outcomes Survey (and relevant questions in other student surveys) in terms of general overall picture;
- Learner Analytics information;
- Number of referrals into other services and activities;
- Number of graduates securing a graduate level job;
- Time between attaining the degree level qualification and gaining a graduate level job;
- Number of graduates that gain employment in the sector linked to their qualification (and skillset);
- Number of graduates that undertake further study to gain additional skills within a year of graduating;
- Number of graduates that secure employment who had gained work experience linked to their qualification;
- Number of graduates and the length of time they remain employed in their first graduate job.

3. Do you agree with the proposal to support a ring-fenced number of individuals for a limited duration after graduation?

    a) **If yes, is 10% of the total number of individuals supported appropriate? Please explain your response, and suggest an alternative if not.**

    b) **Is 15 months after graduation a suitable timeframe for graduates to access this support? Please explain your responses, and suggest an alternative if not.**

3.1. 70% of respondents agreed with the proposal of limiting the number of individuals supported for a limited period after graduation. However, three respondents stated that as the Graduate Support Fund (GSF) would be delivering to the end of July 2023 in their provider it would be prudent to focus this support purely on students with a view to reviewing this provision for any funding offered from 1 August 2023 onwards, should the funding for the GSF cease.

3.2. It was noted by one respondent that they agreed with this in principle, but that it should not be mandated for FE colleges, as the majority of their provision was at levels 4 and 5 and a large proportion of their students will continue to level 6 study at partner institutions.

3.3. On the proviso that the Graduate Support Fund concludes in July 2023 (where it is run for graduates in universities), respondents were broadly in agreement that a 10% limit would be reasonable. One respondent noted that the 10% proposal was fair, as the focus will be on proactive support of students, so only a small number of individuals should require support after graduation.

3.4. One respondent stated that they would prefer to be free to make these decisions as required, rather than working to a prescribed target. Another stated they would welcome the opportunity to reflect on this whilst rolling out the programme, and to continue the discussion around this as they progress, and another that the 10% is evaluated at the end of the first year of delivery, with a view to amending in order to provide better flexibility. The evaluation should also consider the end of the Graduate Support Fund, where it is delivered, and how this impacts on graduates across Wales. One provider asked for clarification on whether participants would be expected to be enrolled onto the programme whilst still students. Another respondent suggested that the 10% level is evaluated at the end of the first year of delivery, with a view to increasing the percentage if necessary in order to provide better flexibility.

3.5. In relation to the timeframe for supporting individuals past graduation, one respondent explained that from their experience of supporting students on the current ESF-funded GO Wales programme, it is evident that supporting students as they make the transition from university into work is extremely valuable. Many of the students who engage with the current programme have a large amount of support whilst at university from teams across the

institution. As this support is lost once they graduate, it can be a huge shock to many students and those who have received a considerable amount of support and intervention throughout their life and previous educational experiences. As final year students move towards graduation, they could benefit from some transitional support to ensure they are able to obtain work. In addition, some may still benefit from mentoring, advice, and guidance to navigate the application and interview process, whilst others could benefit from support related to accessibility and how to manage this with a potential employer. This element of the targeted support could improve graduate outcomes for providers' priority groups and ensure they have equal access to opportunities after university.

3.6.   Six respondents agreed that 15 months seemed a reasonable timeframe, as it aligns with the timescales of the Graduate Outcomes survey. Two respondents suggested that the timeframe would be more suitably aligned to three years, as most universities allow for students to seek advice and support after graduating to this timeframe. One respondent suggested a 12 month timeframe, as it would be most helpful to graduates to maintain the support focused and concentrated soon after graduation, but they considered that a 15 month timeframe was also workable.

3.7.   It was suggested by one respondent that it would be beneficial if the guidance provided flexibility to support those graduates who would genuinely struggle to find suitable employment beyond the 15 month timeframe if the funding was intended to make a genuine difference to individuals gaining employment. Rather than introducing restrictions on the length of time an institution could work with a graduate, a better solution might include a work-based assessment for a graduate who has not yet found graduate level work or employment past graduation.

3.8.   One respondent suggested that during the 15 month timeframe the graduate could be signposted to employability support in their community, in readiness for the support ending. This could be incorporated into the individual's action plan from the outset, to ensure their expectations are well managed.

3.9.   Given the challenges of running and recruiting for a short-term programme, one respondent requested more clarity for plans post July 2023.

4.   Do you agree with the proposed funding model? Please explain your response, and suggest an alternative model if you do not agree.

4.1.   Six respondents agreed with the proposed funding model and acknowledged the difficulty in distributing funding for activity of this type and that funding reflects the number of students from widening participation backgrounds. One respondent noted that the funding model allowed delivery to move away from the limitations of the criteria of the current ESF-funded programme, and that the proposed model would allow them to replicate the success seen on the Graduate Support Programme.

4.2.   Whilst one respondent recognised that the proposed funding model introduced a cap on funding to the detriment of larger institutions, they accepted the principles of the methodology, which sought to ensure equity and activity that could be delivered across Wales.

4.3.   Two respondents indicated that they did not agree with the proposed funding model. One respondent considered the approach should recognise high achievement against targets under the current ESF-funded GO Wales programme over the past six years. The respondent suggested an alternative funding methodology whereby the budget, less £75k for the directly-funded FEIs, is divided equally between the nine participating HEIs. It was argued that this funding method would recognise that there are issues around the needs of the eligible groups of students and the locality of their place of study that are not reflected in datasets, and would as a result be fairer. Another respondent also welcomed an approach which reflected achievement of outcomes on the current ESF-funded GO Wales programme. They suggested that a portion of the funding should be shared according to performance against targets on the ESF-funded programme, as this would be helpful in terms of generating maximum impact from the funding going forward.

4.4.   One respondent suggested consideration of apprenticeship engagement and activity as part of the funding model, and another recommended that the funding model is reviewed towards the end of the first academic year.

4.5.   There were requests for HEFCW to reconsider the funding and approach to HE in FE students. One respondent highlighted that although the funding resulted in a budget that's comparable to their current funding in the ESF-funded programme, they identified that utilising it in an equitable manner across their franchised HE in FE provision would be a challenge, particularly if this provision was expanded. They suggested that the scope and scale of an institution's engagement with FE partners would be a desirable factor to include in the funding model. One respondent indicated that their directly-funded HE students are all in the one sector, are studying part-time and are generally already employed. One respondent noted that the different balance in FEIs between directly-funded and franchised students could lead to disproportionate amounts of available funding.

4.6.   One respondent identified that their geographical region is very rural, and that the funding could disadvantage the learners in the region further as costs (e.g. travel costs) have risen. They stated that they also have a significant number of learners who receive some provision through the medium of Welsh, and the staffing resource costs for this are usually higher.

5.   **Should the GO Wales brand name be retained at a national level, for students and / or employers?**

5.1.   Responses to this question varied, and there was no majority view. A few respondents questioned how the brand would be perceived if it was retained, considering the provision of services would be diverse across all providers.

One respondent was of the opinion that the brand name did not convey the programme's function, or even that it was linked to education or employability. The name itself was seen as less important in terms of student engagement, and one respondent considered that the brand can be a barrier for students as it can be perceived as a label and dissuade students from engaging.

5.2. However, other respondents acknowledged that a recognisable name on a national level could be helpful, especially when trying to work collaboratively with other institutions, and two respondents supported retaining the GO Wales brand at a national level for engagement with employers only.

5.3. One provider supported the GO Wales brand name being retained for the new funding, provided institutions could take a flexible approach to its use, as appropriate. One respondent suggested there should be scope for providers to run an umbrella project, potentially branded within the core services of the provider, which could then include GO Wales Placements/ employer engagement activities and work-related learning as a component.

5.4. A few respondents expressed they would like to see a relaunch with a new brand name for this funding, to signal a move away from the ESF programmes, and one respondent suggested that it could be helpful to consult with students to ensure they identify with any new name.

5.5. One respondent could see advantages and disadvantages with retaining the brand, and was keen to understand other providers' views.

6. **Are there any unintended consequences or negative impacts regarding the proposals in this consultation?**

6.1. A number of unintended consequences and / or negative impacts were identified in the consultation responses, although four respondents signalled they could not foresee any unintended consequences.

6.2. The main negative impact, highlighted by four respondents, was the short-term nature of the funding. The respondents commented that whilst it was indicated in circular W22/08HE: Consultation on targeted employability support for students that there is likely to be funding beyond July 2023, the short-term nature of staff contracts proves problematic for providers in attracting and retaining staff. Another respondent suggested it was be helpful to have confirmation that this funding will be in place beyond a single year, as one-year funding models do not provide sustainable support to project activity. This would be challenging in terms of the frameworks and structures which need to be set up to support activity, and is an unhelpful approach in relation to partnership activity with employers.

6.3. One provider noted that the success of this activity could increase demand for services across wider careers and other professional services, and could lead to pressure on those services to meet increased demand.

6.4.   One provider identified that as a direct result of the reduction in funding that they faced under the proposed funding model they would need to reduce the support available, which would have a negative impact on a significant number of students at their institution. Two respondents noted that the reduction in funding in comparison to the ESF-funded programme's budget will lead to some staff redundancies.

6.5.   Another negative consequence identified by one respondent was the absence of a central GO Wales database, which had facilitated employer links and collaborative working on the ESF-funded programme. It was envisaged that this will make collaborative activity more difficult and may result in some competition between providers, particularly in South Wales. One respondent identified a negative impact if international students could not be supported via this funding.

6.6.   On a positive note, two respondents welcomed the flexibility within the proposal to enable provision adjustment and ensure a bespoke offer is made to the students most in need of this support.

7.   What positive or adverse effects might the proposals have on:
   a)   opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language; and
   b)   treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?

7.1.   The consultation responses highlighted primarily positive effects. One respondent recorded that it would be positive to engage with more Welsh-speakers and offer more Welsh language opportunities. Another reported that the fund will be promoted to their Welsh language networks (internal and external) and employers and they noted that, depending on the demand from employers, providers may see an increase in Welsh language work experience opportunities. However, one respondent noted that the limited timeframe may hamper staff or students learning or improving their Welsh.

7.2.   Respondents described that in their day-to-day activities they do not treat the Welsh language less favourably than the English language. They stated that students wishing to be supported through the medium of Welsh or to undertake a work experience opportunity in a Welsh language environment would be afforded the opportunity to do so. All activity would be undertaken in line with the Welsh Language Act 1993 and the Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 strategy.

8.   Could the proposals be changed to increase positive effects, or decrease adverse effects on:
   a)   opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language; and
   b)   treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?

8.1.   The majority of responses received suggested that there was scope to further increase the positive effect of engagement with Welsh speaking students and delivering bilingual or Welsh work experience opportunities. One respondent suggested that this funding could assistant in maintaining and growing connectivity with employers in Wales, and suggested that that using a portion of the funding to encourage the creation of bilingual work placement activity may be helpful in terms of increasing opportunities for people to engage via the Welsh language. Another conveyed that there could be an increase in their service offered in Welsh e.g. workshops, Careers Adviser appointments, online resources and placements.

8.2.   One respondent stated that they regard use of the Welsh language and bilingual activities as a key employability skill so would embed this within the proposed activities, so did not consider adding any further to the proposal was required.

8.3.   One respondent suggested that the list of characteristics of students in scope could be extended to include students wishing to work through the medium of Welsh. Another suggested that it might be helpful to consider increasing the funding allocation for providers who champion the use of Welsh in the workplace. However, they acknowledged that this would alter the funding model, which they were fundamentally happy with. Another suggested that Delivery Plans could include the support to be offered to up skill Welsh language learners ready for employment.

9.   Do the proposals for the fund have any positive or negative impacts or unintended consequences in terms of equality and diversity and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act's seven well-being goals, Sustainable Development Principle and five ways of working?

9.1.   The responses received highlighted that the proposals appear to offer positive impacts on the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act's seven well-being goals, Sustainable Development Principle and five ways of working. The proposal continues the work of the ESF-funded GO Wales programme to encourage social mobility and increase access to 'decent' jobs for the higher education sector's Widening Access and other priority group students.

9.2.   One provider stated that alignment and supporting the ambition for Wales, as outlined in the Welsh Government's [Stronger, Fairer, Greener Wales - A Plan for Employability and Skills plan](), to ensure that 'nobody is left behind, nobody held back, through a shared commitment to ensure everyone reaches their potential'.

9.3.   One negative impact reported by two respondents is the initial length of the funding, as this does not align with the 'long-term' principle. One academic year's funding raises concerns around meeting students' long term needs. The transition into a new tranche of funding would need to be seamless for provision to continue for the students and to support graduates.

9.4.   Responses included the following to demonstrate the positive impact:

- **A prosperous Wales**: Promoting skilled workforce development in a local setting, generating opportunities within the economy, and driving sustainability. Supporting the student to achieve a positive outcome at graduation and encouraging employers to be more inclusive. Where paid placements are viable, this will provide both the student/graduate and employer with immediate financial support, increasing the chances of longer-term financial viability. One respondent noted that providing opportunities to the students most in need will increase prosperity and move students closer to the labour market, ensuring they have equal access to opportunities. Also noted was that this proposal provides targeted funding for education and the development of employment opportunities and skills.
- **A resilient Wales**: Reported by one respondent, this proposal provides social and economic resilience; adapting to changing employment markets. One respondent reported that they are aiming to be carbon neutral by 2040. This is part of their Carbon Strategy, which recognises that decarbonisation is an essential requirement to operate and maintain a sustainable university environment.
- **A healthier Wales**: Enabling students and graduates with health issues to access tailored work experience and employability support which will have a positive impact on their wellbeing and future employment prospects. One university noted that data from the Office for Students (2019) demonstrates that students with a declared mental health condition are less likely to secure highly skilled employment.
- **A more equal Wales**: Supporting equal opportunities and promoting fair work, which runs throughout the principles of this proposal. Five respondents noted that this proposal has a focus on promoting diversity in the workplace. Furthermore, students will have the opportunity to access equal opportunities to participate in their employability development and become more informed to make important decisions.
- **A Wales of cohesive communities**: Encouraging diversity in the workforce. Students will have an increased sense of place and link to employers in their communities. One respondent noted that their University Group is committed to providing a safe, welcoming and inclusive community for all colleagues, students, partners and visitors. Activity will have the ability to connect universities with local and regional employers.
- **A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language:** This proposal provides the opportunity for students to undertake Welsh language placements and employability support, and there is an increased likelihood of Welsh graduates staying in Wales. Students would be encouraged to use their Welsh language skills as part of their placement opportunities. One respondent noted that this proposal can be used to promote the Welsh language and provision of local, regional, and national opportunities.

- **A globally responsible Wales**: Supporting local students and local business to impact on greater life chances and economic sustainability. The proposal actively supports links with SMEs.
- **Sustainable Development Principle**: Respondents noted how a collaborative approach is positive and aligns with this principle; this has worked well on the Graduate Support Programme and the current ESF-funded GO Wales programme. Teams coming together would enable the provider to be aligned more closely with mental health support and provision available to their students and could help to increase collaborative projects. Collaborative projects which could support students to learn new skills and develop confidence, which can be integral to helping those helping those starting or returning to their employability journey.

10.   List of Respondents

- Aberystwyth University
- Cardiff Metropolitan University
- Cardiff University
- Gower College Swansea
- Grŵp Colegau NPTC Group of Colleges
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
- The Open University in Wales
- Swansea University
- University of South Wales
- University of Wales Trinity Saint David
- Wrexham Glyndŵr University