



**WALES
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**RESPONSE TO:
Draft Higher Education Strategy to 2026**

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The University and College Union (UCU Wales) represents almost 7,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians, and postgraduates in universities, colleges, adult education and training organisations across Wales.

UCU Wales is a politically autonomous but integral part of UCU, the largest post-school union in the world. It was formed on the 1st June 2006 by the amalgamation of two strong partners – the Association of University Teachers (AUT) and the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) – who shared a long history of defending and advancing educators' employment and professional interests.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Draft Higher Education Strategy to 2026.

The shape of the post 16 landscape is facing many changes and the education landscape is likely to look very different by 2026. The recent set of reviews outline a brave new world of integration and collaboration amongst education providers to offer quality post 16 education and training for all ages, all modes and at all levels.

Both Hazelkorn and Diamond outline a role for an arm's length organisation to oversee the post 16 education and training sector; the draft higher education strategy provides the high level framework needed by such a body to help shape the HE provision of the future. It also provides a blueprint for wider post 16 education and training strategy, in the event that Wales develops a new and integrated post 16 funding council.

In terms of what Wales needs, it is clear in the reports from Diamond, Donaldson, Furlong and Hazelkorn, that we need to rethink of the way that we currently deliver education and training. If we are to provide what is needed to equip future generations with the skills to shape their changing environment, then we need to develop a system that allows our schools, colleges and universities to build on their own strengths, but at the same time promote and encourage collaboration, so that we can establish a flexible education and training network that will meet the demands of all those that wish to access it.

This view reflects the vision for higher education as set out in 'For our Future' and in the HEFCW Policy Statement for Higher Education 2013.

We have an amazing opportunity to reinvent our education system in Wales; to break down barriers between vocational and academic qualifications; to offer opportunities to those for whom traditional qualification routes have been incompatible with their circumstances; and to showcase the uniqueness and the expertise we have within and across providers at all levels.

By linking the HE Strategy to the Wellbeing Goals within the Future Generations Act, it establishes a framework for ensuring that HE provision of the future is fit for purpose. The strategy also allows scope for the delivery of HE to take place in a variety of settings; but this should be far more explicit in the HE strategy document. The further roll out of HE in FE and the increase of higher apprenticeships, will necessitate a culture shift; a move from the idea that universities are the only appropriate place to deliver HE. Further education colleges will need to be given the same kudos if we are really to offer valued, vocational qualifications at higher levels, otherwise we will fail in our bid to provide the highest quality learning experience to all those with the potential to benefit. The future Wales should be a country that truly values the contribution of all its citizens and gives equal esteem to both vocational and academic skills.

It will take time to achieve such a shift in thinking and attitude, but that shift must start with the agencies seeking such change. Welsh Government, in this strategy, will need to endorse this vision. Therefore the language used in the document should be very clear that higher education and training is of equal value wherever it is delivered. We need to increase the move away from the terms 'higher' and 'further' education being used to define places, towards the language of further and higher 'levels' of education and training. Although the draft strategy makes reference to the term HE providers, meaning universities, colleges and designated alternative providers, we would like to see more emphasis on this point. It would be helpful if specific reference to the equal value, of the contribution of different providers to the delivery of higher education, was more prominent. For example, in outlining the scope of the strategy on page 4, reference is made to the inclusion of further education not being given explicit coverage. Whilst we appreciate that the Hazelkorn recommendations are still under discussion, from our point of view, it is not helpful to segregate further education providers in this way, as they are likely to increase their role as key providers of higher education in the future. Looking forward to 2026, the strategy *should* make explicit coverage of the increasingly important role of alternative providers of higher education, in delivering a variety of higher level courses, to previously 'hard to reach' audiences. We agree that each provider will have its own differentiated mission, which will link to other parts of the education system, but we would like to see greater emphasis on the value of differentiated missions, and the individual and unique strengths that they bring to the overall 'education eco-system'. In the interests of developing a flexible and sustainable model, we need to encourage providers to focus on what they are good at and enable them to let go of areas that could be delivered more successfully in a different setting. If we are to improve quality and develop clearer and more easily understandable pathways, we must avoid nugatory competition between providers. We would welcome specific reference to this in the strategy, as well as reference to the mechanisms that could be put in place to avoid this.

To conclude, we support the draft higher education strategy, but would like to see more emphasis on the value of the contribution of all higher level qualification providers. We believe that this will reinforce the strategy by clearly signposting the direction of the future landscape of post 16 education in Wales. It will also help to change the language of education and challenge the thinking, that quality higher education provision belongs to the universities. There is going to be greater role for alternative providers for higher level qualifications in future, with the increase in demand for higher level apprenticeships and local, part time higher level provision. We must not allow students to continue to be disadvantaged, by boundaries that have no place in the 21st century.

UCU Wales view the various proposal for the future of education in Wales as an exciting time. Although it will not be without challenge, we have an opportunity as a country to develop a new and innovative system. We would welcome the opportunity to work with HEFCW to move this vision forward.