Submission to the CYPE Committee -Tertiary Education and Research Bill

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This submission is being made on behalf of the providers of post-16 education in the Catholic sector throughout Wales and reflects the initial thinking in response to the draft bill and the potential challenges it may pose for our sector. Across the three Welsh dioceses, this represents 6 institutions made up of five 11-18 secondary schools and one FE college. There are 86 providers of Catholic education in Wales at both primary and secondary level serving around 28,500 learners. The Catholic community works in partnership with Welsh Government and Local Authorities in its provision of education.

Since 1850 the Church’s aim has been to provide a place in a Catholic school for every Catholic learner. The Dioceses of Cardiff, Menevia and Wrexham are committed to strengthening and further developing Catholic post-16 education across Wales, providing continuity of Catholic education where possible for learners aged 3-18.

In February 2021, a group was formed to discuss the future provision of Catholic post-16 education considering the publication of the Draft Tertiary Education and Research Bill (February 2021) and the recommendations of Estyn’s thematic review of Post 16 Partnerships (January 2021). The group membership comprises the Headteachers and Principal of the six Catholic institutions providing post-16 education supported by the Wales Adviser of the CES and the Diocesan Directors of Education.

There is agreement amongst the dioceses and Catholic post-16 providers that a review is required and response to the Tertiary Education and Research Bill will influence our thinking regarding the future of post 16 provision in the Catholic sector in Wales. This review will seek to:

* consolidate and further develop Catholic post 16 provision across Wales
* may lead to change across the sector
* will develop collaborative provision across the Catholic sector and with local schools
* will assist with the development of a strategic plan for a secure, sustainable future.

The post 16 strategic group is committed to strengthening and further developing Catholic post-16 education in Wales to meet the needs of its learners. A strong Catholic provision will contribute to maintaining the diversity of learner choice at post 16 as well as providing continuity of Catholic education 3-18. In addition, we aim to ensure that the contribution of Catholic education to delivering outstanding provision is widely acknowledged.

Mission and the Four Purposes

The Catholic church provides schools, including sixth form colleges, to meet the aspirations and needs of learners and communities that we serve. This clearly includes their civic mission of the complete formation of the whole person to enable them to contribute as responsible citizens for the good of Wales and the wider world.

Their belief in the value of each individual leads Catholic schools and colleges to have a duty of care for the poor and educate those who are socially, academically, physically or emotionally disadvantaged.

 In fulfilling the mission of Catholic social teaching, our schools and colleges serve some of the most disadvantaged communities and our clear commitment to providing a preferential option for the poor means that we play an important role in ensuring social mobility.

Catholic schools and colleges seek to cultivate Christian virtues (character strengths) and form personal values, rooted in the Gospel of Christ, and expressed in the teachings of the Catholic Church. Fostering these character strengths through virtues education will assist Catholic schools in meeting their statutory obligation in realising the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales.

The commitment of Catholic schools to virtues education, provides an opportunity to extend the ethos of the Curriculum for Wales into post-16 education. It would be helpful to providers if this opportunity to build on the four purposes is more clearly defined in the bill or accompanying WG guidance.

Access to Catholic education

The Bill has a clear focus on meeting the needs of learners who want to continue their studies in a Welsh medium setting. However, the needs of learners who wish to continue their sixth form studies within a church school do not appear to have been given due consideration. We would hope for equality of opportunity for students who wish to access post 16 provision in a church school.

We would expect the rights of students to continue to be educated in accordance with their religious convictions and cultural identity in accordance with the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011 and Article 29(1)(c) of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, and the rights of their parents to ensure that their children are educated in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions in accordance with Art. 2 Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights, to be respected.

Parents seeking a school for their children at any age, should have a choice between secular teaching and faith-based teaching. There should be access to provision for Catholic students across Wales including those areas where there is no Catholic provision available.

Often schools are the hubs of their communities and the outreach from schools is an essential part of community life. If the closure of sixth forms was an unintended consequence of the bill, in schools may therefore be at a cost to the community that the school serves. This would also have a detrimental impact on communities and affect the ability to deliver a ‘civic mission’.

Quality and breadth

Catholic schools and colleges seek to offer high quality, cost-effective academically sound solutions for Catholic post-16 education in Wales. To achieve this aim, we are exploring the development of a curriculum model across the schools/college with national virtual college to support. This model would include the expansion of a vocational offer and the development of online provision using the best practice lessons learnt during the pandemic.

 A key element of online provision should be something that reflects our Catholic identity. Such an approach would strengthen provision by offering breadth of choice, rationalise teaching in undersubscribed subjects and offer a Catholic dimension to the studies of students who do not have access to a Catholic sixth form. A Professional learning offer developed by St David’s College would run alongside the curriculum offer.

How would the bill and the Commission support this work?

Collaboration

There is openness to collaboration across the Catholic schools in Wales to enhance curriculum opportunities for learners. We will continue to develop collaboration with secular partners to meet the needs of learners and continue to serve areas of socio-economic deprivation.

Technological developments of the kind proposed above are the only means by which the geographic barriers to Catholic sector collaboration can be overcome and with the development of an effective system of delivery is a clear start-up cost implication. What support is available for schools wishing to develop collaborative networks in this way?

Account also needs to be taken of the financial impact of increasing collaboration between providers. What will this mean in terms of students moving between education establishments? There will be additional cost involved in organising this if it leads to students moving elsewhere. How will any additional costs be funded, including increased costs of transport for students moving beyond their local communities?

Promoting the Welsh language

Integral to the future plans for post-16 education is a commitment to foster and develop ability in, and understanding of, the Welsh language and the culture of Wales. In this way Catholic schools will contribute to one of the fundamental aims of the Welsh government to encourage an increase in the number of learners who become confident Welsh speakers using both languages in their everyday life. This will include developing opportunities at post-16 for students to maintain and further develop their skills in spoken Welsh.

We will support staff members who wish to access the Welsh Government sabbatical scheme for teachers to improve their Welsh language skills. We seek to engage with Welsh Medium Providers offering, translation of materials produced into Welsh and develop where practicable, bilingual delivery.

How will the commission support the efforts of English medium schools and colleges to deliver the Welsh Government’s policy objectives around the Welsh language?

Engagement

There is a requirement for the Commission to consult such persons it considers appropriate before issuing guidance. We would expect that consultation will be wide and include the institutions that will be affected by it. We would also expect that dioceses with any sixth form colleges or schools with sixth forms will be included as consultees. We are concerned that insufficient weight will be given to the views of the learners in the Catholic sector given that there is only a single Catholic sixth form college.

Catholic schools have welcomed the opportunity to respond to proposed legislative changes and to work directly with officials. We would hope that this constructive partnership working will extend into the work of the Commission enabling Catholic education to flourish in Wales.

Pandemic

The Welsh government recognises the extreme pressure faced by schools, colleges and universities as they continue to address the difficulties caused by the pandemic. It is hoped that the bill’s introduction will await a point when the education system is no longer under the existing pressures.