

Growth, Opportunity and Fairness

2026 Manifesto



Foreword

This Manifesto sets out how the Further Education sector can be a part of tackling the challenges that Wales will face over the next decade - the challenges of net zero, delivering sustainable economic growth, rapid technological change, and new demands on public services.



I am delighted to present the ColegauCymru Manifesto ahead of the 2026 Senedd Election.

Wales' future economic success lies in the skills of our people, investing in skills is the key to economic growth and to tackle inequalities in Wales.

Colleges are proud of their role as anchor institutions in their local communities and economies. From progressing to university, accessing an apprenticeship, returning as an adult learner or training as a plumber, heat pump system installer, cyber security specialist, web designer, or nurse, colleges are places where everyone can succeed. They are catalysts for positive change and essential if Wales is to have the future that we all deserve.

Lisa Thomas

Chair, ColegauCymru
Principal and Chief Executive,
The College Merthyr Tydfil

The next Senedd term will be defining for Wales' future. The challenges of net zero, delivering sustainable economic growth, rapid technological change, and new demands on public services will shape Wales' future for a generation.

Introduction

The next Senedd term will be defining for Wales' future. The challenges of net zero, delivering sustainable economic growth, rapid technological change, and new demands on public services will shape Wales' future for a generation.

There will be difficult decisions for whoever is our next First Minister, but there is no route map to the Wales that every political party wants to build that doesn't rely on a strong, resilient and successful Further Education (FE) Sector. A new and stronger partnership with colleges should be at the heart of the next Welsh Government.

FE is a devolution success story. Over the last twenty-five years the sector has been transformed precisely because leaders were prepared to take the difficult decisions needed to be financially sustainable and to deliver high-quality education and training. Colleges have earned the right to be trusted by government and our sector is once again ready to play its part in meeting the challenges of the future.

Despite the strengths of the sector, there is a need to rebalance the system to help improve participation and progression, to more quickly meet the needs of employers and to unlock the power of education to tackle poverty and to raise the standard of living. We have come a long way from the time when FE was seen as a Cinderella service, but we still have a long way to go before colleges are properly resourced, valued and trusted by policymakers and regulators.



Mission driven reform

There are serious and urgent challenges facing Wales over the next decade.

Wales is being let down by a school system where the pathways to attainment are too narrow and where too many young people are being left behind. Our future economic success lies in the skills of our people, yet too many adults are trapped in low skill, low wage work. Our national failure to properly invest in skills is holding back growth.

New technology and a rapidly changing global economy will be defining challenges of the next Senedd term and now is the time to make a once in a generation change in skills and opportunities.

Inequalities are also becoming more embedded in Wales. Colleges are actively contributing to building a more equal Wales, delivering inclusive learning offers, and supporting the most under-served groups. Colleges promote equity of opportunity and reduce social disparities, fostering a more inclusive society. The sector is on the front line of building an anti-racist Wales and of tackling violence against women and girls. However, this work can only continue with adequate long-term investment. The needs of learners have changed dramatically in the past five years, increasing pressure on colleges' specialist pastoral support staff.

Colleges have answers to all these challenges and the role of the next First Minister must be to empower the FE and Work-Based Learning sectors to drive real and lasting change. A new and stronger partnership with colleges should be at the heart of the next Welsh Government and a new mission-driven focus on rebalancing the system and to improving outcomes for all learners.

We believe there are three missions which the next Welsh Government should prioritise and support the FE and Work-Based Learning sectors to deliver:

Mission One

Grow the economy by equipping industry and the workforce with the skills needed to meet the challenges of a changing economy that will be reshaped by the transition to net zero and the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Mission Two

Improve participation, progression and outcomes in post-16 education by breaking down barriers, helping young people to make the right choices about their future and be ready for the world of work, and delivering high-quality teaching and learning.

Mission Three

Tackle intergenerational inequality and poverty through adult education and access to second chance learning.

Mission One

Grow the economy by equipping industry and the workforce with the skills needed to meet the challenges of a changing economy that will be reshaped by the transition to net zero and the development of AI.

Around the world, industries are being reshaped by rapidly developing technologies and by the urgency of our response to the climate emergency. For Wales to be competitive, the next government must deliver a step change and invest and reform our skills system so that people of all ages can access opportunities where they live and so that businesses can access the talent and support they need to grow.

To deliver this mission the next Welsh Government, working with Medr, should:

- Develop a **Vocational Education and Training Strategy (VET)** aligned with Wales' economic and industrial priorities. The strategy is critical to driving economic growth and to developing the green skills needed for today and for the future. The strategy should provide a guiding framework for Qualifications Wales, awarding bodies and providers, and would ensure that there is a clear line of democratic accountability within the system.
- Underpin the VET Strategy with the **creation of a new Future Skills Authority**. This will provide world-class labour market intelligence and insights so that government, regulators and providers can understand gaps in future skills and where investment is needed.
- Work with the FE Sector to **accelerate the development of skills needed for the responsible and effective use of AI**. With support, colleges can embed the technical and non-technical skills required for AI use into vocational programmes and to roll out the availability of AI skills in the community.
- **Recommit to a new Apprenticeship Programme** to maintain the momentum achieved over the course of the last two Senedd terms. The next Welsh Government should reverse cuts to the Apprenticeship Programme and re-commit to delivering a minimum of **125,000** high-quality all age apprenticeships over the term of the next Senedd. We need to power the next generation of new jobs in the private sector and to help rebuild key public services.
- **Give colleges a central role in delivering the new, devolved employability programme**. As non-profit organisations and anchor institutions in their local communities, colleges are well placed to deliver a new, social value driven service that can link up local education, skills and health support.
- **Fund colleges to deliver a greater breadth of provision at Levels 4 and 5**, including HNCs and HNDs, where there is direct local and regional economic need.
- **Fund colleges to offer shorter bite-size, modular based courses** to allow people to build their skills and qualifications over time, as well as re-skill. As part of this approach, colleges should be supported to work together on a national digital badge scheme to recognise the skills, prior learning, and competencies of learners.

A 2025 Medr report (Q2, 2024/25) shows that there was a 20% drop in apprenticeship starts (compared with a 12% reduction in the previous quarter). The fall in apprenticeship starts coincides with a reduction in the overall apprenticeship funding over recent years, in part due to the loss of EU funding streams.

20%

The 20% reduction resulted in 915 fewer people taking up apprenticeship opportunities.

915

The Medr data also shows a 12% reduction in apprenticeship starts in Health and Public Services, further exacerbating NHS workforce shortages.

12%

In the construction sector, apprenticeship starts were down 48%, worsening workforce shortages in the construction industry which is needed for future green skills and growth

48%

Recent data from the owner of Screwfix and B&Q, Kingfisher Plc, also showed that the UK is set to lose out on £98billion of growth by 2030 due to a shortage of tradespeople¹.

£98_{bn}

A thriving skilled construction industry and tradespeople will be essential to meet net zero targets and deliver on green skills needed for the future.

¹October 2023 - UK to lose out on £98bn of growth by 2030 due to shortage of tradespeople (kingfisher.com)

Case Study: Skills for Transition to Net Zero



FE colleges across Wales are leading green skills initiatives

For example, Pembrokeshire College and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai's involvement in hydrogen and wind energy projects. Pembrokeshire College has designed training facilities, developed a specific curriculum, and has upskilled and trained staff, and employees at RWE Energy* are completing Engineering Degrees at Grŵp Llandrillo Menai. Grŵp Llandrillo Menai also has a purpose-built workshop for RWE apprentices and staff in Rhyl.

* one of the leading companies in the field of renewable energies, driving forward the energy transition in Europe and worldwide



Gower College Swansea is delivering green skills training for Pobl Housing Association

The college has trained a number of their staff in Solar Photovoltaic, Battery and Electric Vehicles, and have delivered further green skills training to their supply chain and sub-contractors. Gower College Swansea is also Pobl's* main education partner in their Green Careers Pathway Programme which will train businesses and young people in a range of green skills courses in partnership with Pobl.

* A not for profit Welsh housing, care and support organisation



Mission Two

Improve participation, progression and outcomes in post-16 education by breaking down barriers, helping young people to make the right choices about their future, and be ready for the world of work, and delivering high-quality teaching and learning.

Demand for FE from school leavers is on the rise and more learners are choosing colleges as their preferred destination for both academic and vocational courses. However, there are still too many young people not aware of the range of pathways available at college, especially the opportunity of high-quality vocational education and training.

There is a squeeze at both ends of the attainment spectrum. On one hand far too many young people are leaving compulsory education with no or few qualifications and with poor levels of literacy and numeracy. Many are leaving education altogether or arriving in college not ready to study at Level 3. At higher levels of attainment, the proportion of young people from Wales choosing to go to university is the lowest in the UK. Simply maintaining the status quo cannot be an option for the next government and we need to rebalance the system to improve progression, to raise standards and to make sure learners have the advice and support they need to make the right choices for their future.

Learners must be able to access high-quality vocational pathways throughout the 14-19 phase. We also want to see collaboration and planning on local curriculum offers. School pupils must have access to high-quality independent advice and guidance with colleges able to provide information directly to all pupils.

To deliver this mission the next Welsh Government, working with Medr, should:

- **Commit to a new 14-19 Learning and Progression Pathway** so that all learners have more choice and better opportunities to progress down the pathway that is right

for them. This should embed collaboration between schools and colleges to improve the availability and take-up of vocational options, including VCSEs, and the range of academic qualifications that are available locally.

- Introduce a **new duty on local authorities, schools and colleges to work together to develop local learner pathways and to support progression**. New local planning arrangements should be the basis on which all learners can access high quality education at 14-19. This should be supported by national funding to deliver vocational provision in colleges for 14 - 16-year-olds and to support an extension of the Junior Apprenticeship programmes.
- Begin a **review of the sustainability of school sixth forms**, as part of a coherent tertiary sector. This should commence within the first 100 days of the new government and should examine evidence of the sustainability of small school sixth forms. We recognise the importance of considering the challenge of geography in some parts of Wales, as well the importance of ensuring a continuity of learning through the medium of Welsh, but believe there is still space for significant reform to give all learners access to a full, high-quality local curriculum.

- **Improve access for learners at 14-19 to independent careers advice and guidance** so young people can make the right choices the first time around. Alongside this colleges must be allowed access to schools to offer in-person advice and information to all learners so that they can understand their options and make informed choices.
- Take **urgent action to tackle issues related to learner travel**, so that transport is never a barrier to learning, training placements or accessing enrichment activities. As a priority, the next Welsh Government should introduce national support for learner travel so that all learners are treated fairly whether they access travel on public bus routes, college funded buses or on trains.
- **Commit to sustainable funding for Pastoral Coaches**. In 2025, Estyn² highlighted how colleges are facing increasing challenges with social skills and resilience. Social media misuse is also becoming more widespread. Pastoral care is not optional, the work of the Pastoral Coach changes lives, and saves lives. The needs of learners have increased dramatically in the past five years and are increasingly complex and consuming for staff, requiring multi-agency working. Sustained funding for Pastoral Coaches is therefore essential for learners, and for reducing workload for teaching staff.
- **Commit to sustainable funding for mental health and wellbeing provision in colleges**. The number of mental health, wellbeing and safeguarding referrals is increasing year on year since 2021/22. The next Welsh Government should continue to support preventative approaches including active wellbeing programmes, which create healthier and more resilient college communities.
- **Ensure that the Welsh Government's Taith programme continues to be supported** so that enrichment activities for learners of all ages and backgrounds can continue, and staff mobilities can improve teaching, learning and pastoral support practices. Colleges must also be part of discussions with the UK Government regarding a return to Erasmus+. Rejoining Erasmus+ would provide a welcome opportunity to strengthen and rebuild our relationships with European partners.
- **Significant investment is needed within the education sector at all levels to meet the Welsh Government's 2050 target of a million Welsh speakers**. There will need to be robust transition arrangements for the new cohort of learners to enable the FE Sector to respond to the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill. The FE Sector is critical to the success of the 2050 ambitions and will need further financial support to recruit new staff and upskill existing staff to be able to deliver in Welsh. Working in partnership with the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, colleges are supporting their staff to develop their Welsh language skills, however it will take significant commitment and additional investment to enable the FE Sector to meet the Welsh Government's policy ambitions. The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol has set out three proposals relating to expanding provision and recruiting and upskilling staff. The costs of the proposals (by the end of year 3) comes to just over £1million.³
- **Ensure that colleges receive sufficient funding to support learners with Additional Learning Needs (ALN)**. Maintaining staffing levels in colleges is critical to manage the increased workload as a result of statutory duties under ALNET. Projections from college ALN leads indicate additional costs exceeding £3million for 2025/26. Without sustained investment, the quality and sustainability of inclusive provision are at risk.

² May 2025 - Estyn Thematic Report - Learner Behaviour in Further Education Colleges

³ Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol Manifesto 2026

School absenteeism, particularly among young people aged 14-16, has increased post pandemic. Absenteeism has been reported to be up to 42.6%.

42.6%

In the 2023/24 academic year, FSM (free school meal) eligible learners were absent for 20.1% of all school sessions, nearly double the 10.5% recorded in 2018/19.

20.1%

This is in comparison to non-FSM eligible learners where they were absent for only 9.8% of all school sessions in 2023/2024.

9.8%

Overall school attendance fell by 6.3% from 2018 to 2023.

6.3%

49% of absences of those on FSMs in 2023/24 were considered unauthorised.

49%



Case Study: Building school and college partnerships across North and North-West Wales



Grŵp Llandrillo Menai has established a robust network of collaborative provision across Gwynedd, Ynys Môn, and Conwy, working closely with schools to broaden access to vocational education and support progression into skilled employment and higher education.

The Conwy 14-19 Network is a well-developed partnership that brings together senior leaders from Coleg Llandrillo, local authority officers, and all mainstream secondary schools across the county. Through this partnership, the college has diversified and expanded opportunities for learners aged 14-16 in priority sectors.

In Gwynedd and Ynys Môn, a longstanding 14-19 consortium sees Coleg Menai and Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor working in partnership with schools to deliver a wide range of vocational courses. Each year, around 800 Year 10 and Year 11 learners, representing over 20% of the total cohort across both counties, attend college for part of their week to study subjects such as Construction, Engineering, Public Services, Travel and Tourism, and Hair and Beauty. Provision is supported by a dedicated consortium coordinator, who is funded by the two local authorities.

This collaboration has produced outstanding learner journeys:



Lewis Llywelyn Blease began his vocational pathway through the 14-16 partnership at Coleg Menai, progressing through successive apprenticeship levels and completing an honours degree in Applied Mechanical Engineering Systems awarded by Bangor University.



Stephanie Preston, from Holyhead, moved from 14-16 Engineering at Coleg Menai to a full-time Level 3 programme before securing an Aeronautical Engineering apprenticeship with Babcock International at RAF Valley. She has since become a role model for women in engineering in the region.



Harry Sutherland, a pupil at Ysgol Botwnnog, first attended Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor's Engineering provision before progressing to a Level 2 plastering course at Coleg Menai. He went on to win gold in plastering at the WorldSkills UK National Finals and has established his own business while continuing his Level 3 studies.

At Coleg Llandrillo, the innovative Level 1 Performing Engineering Operations programme provides Year 11 pupils with practical marine and construction skills through project-based learning. This culminates in learners launching hand-built dinghies on the Menai Straits each summer, showcasing their achievements to families and schools. Retention and attendance exceed 90%, with 80% of learners progressing onto Level 2 or 3 courses or securing cadetships in the maritime industry.

Across the Grŵp, these partnerships demonstrate how sustained collaboration can transform outcomes, offering learners high-quality vocational options in their communities and clear pathways into further study, apprenticeships, and skilled employment.



Mission Three

Tackle intergenerational inequality and poverty through adult education and access to second chance learning.

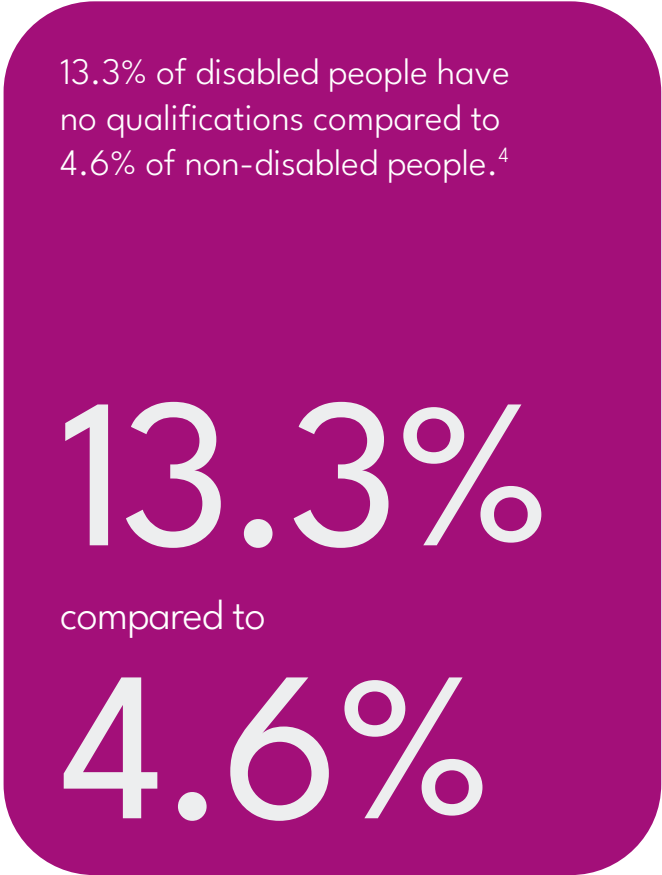
Unlocking long-term growth, improving living standards and tackling intergenerational poverty rests on people being able to access opportunities to learn in their communities, to reskill and upskill for the jobs of the future and access learning for health and wellbeing. The path to a fairer and more prosperous Wales lies in colleges being funded and supported to deliver the flexible learning opportunities that adults need at the different stages in their lives.

To deliver this mission the next Welsh Government, working with Medr, should:

- Commit to **deliver a new entitlement to lifelong learning for every adult** in Wales. This should be a long-term policy goal that starts with reversing cuts to adult education, introducing new funding lines to allow colleges to provide rapid and flexible reskilling and upskilling and that ultimately allows individuals to access a personalised, flexible learning fund that they can access throughout their lives.
- **Invest in rolling out Recognition of Prior Learning** to support adults with the fewest qualifications to gain recognition for the skills they have. This will help fast-track learners to achieving recognised qualifications and provide them with the opportunity to gain higher-skilled, higher-wage jobs.
- Recognise the opportunities and challenges from the development of AI by working with colleges to **ensure every adult who wants it has the access to learning they need to understand the basics of using AI**. Colleges should be funded and supported by both the next Welsh Government and by Medr to be the frontline provider of foundational AI learning, to be a part of the pathway into AI careers and to support employers to upskill their workforces.
- **Adult Community Education must be valued** for the work it does to improve skills, to strengthen communities and to contribute to better health and wellbeing. The next Welsh Government must continue to recognise the importance of investing in adult basic skills such as numeracy, literacy and digital and work with the sector to create stronger adult learning partnerships that secure lasting and sustainable provision.
- Recognise the value and impact of families learning together by **introducing a new Family Learning Policy**, and support colleges to work with schools to provide opportunities for adult education in primary and secondary schools.

Participation in lifelong learning has fallen over the last decade in Wales with large inequalities in access to learning by age, socioeconomic group, and prior educational attainment.

There is a growing trend of working-age adults in Wales being under-qualified and lacking essential skills.



Almost half of adults from the lowest socioeconomic groups have not received any training since they left full-time education.



⁴ONS: Outcomes for disabled people in the UK 2021
⁵2024 Stats Wales - Highest qualification levels of working age adults by UK country, region and qualification

Case Study: Empowering Families, Transforming Futures



Since 2014, the Parent Learning Group – Cathays High School, Cardiff, in partnership with Adult Learning Wales, has emerged as an inspiration of opportunity, demonstrating the profound and far-reaching benefits of adult education, particularly for women and their families.

Operating within Cathays High School, where nearly half the learners are eligible for free school meals and over 65 languages are spoken, the Parent Learning Group directly addresses the unique needs of this low-income community. By offering a range of both accredited and non-accredited courses, the initiative empowers parents, predominantly women, with the skills and confidence necessary to actively support their children's educational journey and pursue their own personal and professional growth.

The impact extends far beyond the classroom. Recognising the holistic needs of families, the group has implemented vital support systems such as food-sharing programs and wellbeing services, including crucial immunisation support. The success of their

breakfast club, which serves nearly 500 pieces of toast each week, underscores the fundamental link between basic needs and educational engagement, demonstrably boosting learner attendance by ensuring children start their day nourished and ready to learn.

The ripple effects of this adult learning initiative are tangible and transformative. Almost 50 women who have engaged with the Parent Learning Group have successfully re-entered the workforce across various sectors, including education and care. This newfound economic independence not only raises family income but also significantly improves their overall quality of life.

Crucially, the programme has played a vital role in building skills and fostering confidence, particularly among Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic women within the community. By empowering these women to overcome barriers and rejoin the workforce, the Parent Learning Group is not only benefiting individual families but also injecting valuable skills and talent into the local economy.

The success of the Parent Learning Group - Cathays High School serves as a powerful illustration of the wider benefits of investing in adult learning initiatives. By equipping individuals with essential skills, fostering confidence, and providing crucial support networks, these programmes are not only empowering individuals and families but also contributing to a more skilled workforce, a stronger local economy, and a more equitable and sustainable future for all communities in Wales. This initiative highlights the vital role adult education plays in breaking cycles of disadvantage and building a more resilient and prosperous society.

The impact of the Parent Learning Group has been recognised, with the group winning the 2025 Adult Learning Wales Community Contribution Award. More information about the work and impact of the Parent Learning Group - Cathays High School can be seen in this short [video](#).



Missions Underpinned by Financial Stability

The three missions cannot be met without recognising the importance of addressing the financial pressures in the sector, ensuring colleges have greater long term financial stability and operational flexibility to meet the needs of their communities.

Despite careful and professional financial management processes across the sector there are still real pressures on FE because of record increases in the number of learners choosing college after school, pay rises that haven't been fully funded, unfunded inflationary costs of delivering courses, and the increase in National Insurance employer contributions.

To support greater financial stability in the sector and to provide the resources colleges need to deliver for learners and employers, the next Welsh Government should work with Medr to:

- Introduce a three-year budget cycle for FE and Work-Based Learning so colleges can plan for the long-term, including capital funds. Recent analysis by ColegauCymru shows that enrolment in the 16-18 age group for 2024/25 has increased by 8.27% since 2023/24. Enrolment figures have particularly increased for those learners coming in at lower levels, and learners who require support to remain in education.
- Recommit to funding pay scale parity between FE lecturers and school teachers, and provide additional funding to help meet the pay costs of business support and work-based learning staff, committing to fully funding the increase in National Insurance employer contributions.
- Initiate a cross-government regulation review to free up resources by reducing low priority regulatory burdens. Alongside new investment, genuine efficiency savings can free up resources that can be better used to support learners and improve teaching and learning.
- Commit to long-term sustainable funding to ensure Pastoral Coach roles across colleges so that learners receive the support they need and lecturer workload can be focused on the delivery of high-quality teaching and learning.
- Increase the unit rate of funding to meet the full inflationary costs of delivering high-quality education.
- Sustainably fund ALN provision and support. College data shows that there will be a predicted rise in costs created by the new ALN duties. For the 2025/26 academic year colleges estimate additional costs of £2.7million. ALN leads suggest the additional costs for the following year to be closer to more than £3million.


List of Members:

Adult Learning Wales	Gower College Swansea
Bridgend College	Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
Cardiff and Vale College	NPTC Group of Colleges
Coleg Cambria	Pembrokeshire College
Coleg Gwent	St David's Sixth
Coleg Sir Gâr /	Form College
Coleg Ceredigion	The College
Coleg y Cymoedd	Merthyr Tydfil

For more information visit:

www.colleges.wales

 @colegau.cymru

 ColegauCymru | CollegesWales