



All Wales Project on Curriculum Design

A Medr-funded QAA Cymru Collaborative Enhancement Project

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Executive Summary

This study reports on a collaborative enhancement project that sought to identify curriculum design and validation processes in higher education (HE) in Wales that stakeholders saw as providing “enhancement” value. We understood enhancement as taking deliberate steps based on evidence to improve the student learning experience. The study also considered how these processes might be better aligned to facilitate future partnership working in Wales and sought to provide recommendations and guidance on these issues.

This study seeks to support HE and further education (FE) institutions in Wales as they negotiate major changes to the higher education landscape. The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 aimed to create an integrated and learner-centred education system in Wales [1]. Notably, Medr, operational from August 2024, oversees FE, sixth forms and HE. Particular areas of interest to this study that Medr was tasked with by the TER are collaboration, learners voice and employability.

Since this report was initially submitted Medr has published its draft Strategy 2025-2030. Reflecting the TER, Medr’s work is presented in terms of strategic aims which relate to: promoting coherent learning and career pathways through collaborative working, developing a Learner Engagement Code to facilitate student participation in decision-making and, ensuring the alignment of educational outcomes with employer and societal needs [2]. These are alongside commitments to quality, excellent research and encouraging the expansion of Welsh medium teaching in the tertiary sector [2].

This project builds on and complements two Collaborative Programmes Wales projects that describe existing programme design and validation processes and principles across HE in Wales and defined principles for smoother partnership working [3,4].

The study used qualitative semi-structured interviews with 44 participants from a range of groups associated with validation and programme development in Wales and beyond. These included:

- Registrars or equivalents
- QA and planning officers
- Managers in FE settings involved in delivering HE
- Students and student leaders,
- Academics who had served as programme proposers and external experts and
- Representatives of sector-wide bodies.

In order to facilitate the collaborative working that was core to this project, framework analysis was used to organise data according to a framework agreed across the group. This approach also enabled the analysis to remain focused on policy-relevant issues.

Results are reported by participant group in relation to themes that emerged across groups. These were aspects that deliver enhancement value, effective partnership working and

¹ Welsh Government (2022). The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022. Cardiff, Welsh Government.

² Medr: Commission for Tertiary Education and Research. (2024) Strategic Plan 2025-2030. www.medr.cymru/en/strategic-plan/

³ QAA-HEFCW (2022) HEFCW-HEIR: Collaborative programmes Wales project – guidance resource pack. www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/our-main-areas-of-work/our-work-in-wales/hefcw-heir-collaborative-programmes-wales-project-guidance-resource-pack

⁴ Jarvis, R. (2024) Collaborative Programmes Wales (Reframed Outcomes). Presentation of interim findings to Wales Quality Network, June 16th, 2024.

barriers to effective partnership working in Wales. The use of technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) was discussed across these contexts, but primarily in relation to enhancement considerations in programme design and approval.

Discussion and conclusions

The discussion and conclusion sections consider our findings, focusing primarily on the following areas:

Early and broad-based collaboration in curriculum design: Engagement in the conceptual stages of programme design particularly involving industry stakeholders, external experts, and students was particularly valued. Some institutions provide professional teams to assist in designing strategically important programmes, such as degree apprenticeships, where stakeholder and student involvement has proven valuable. Design sprints, which compress the planning process into a few days, may facilitate collaboration but also risk reinforcing existing power dynamics, potentially sidelining non-academic perspectives. A more promising approach may involve training multidisciplinary students to contribute to curriculum design.

Optimising Student Engagement: Early student involvement leads to more dynamic and relevant curricula, better student engagement, and improved learning outcomes and was recognised here as being of real enhancement value. Student participation in validation and early curriculum design was widespread but elicited mixed reactions. While often viewed as a regulatory necessity and valuable in its own right, it was almost universally recognised as needing additional support.

Core aspects of validation and curriculum design that deliver enhancement: In higher education in Wales, current validation practices enhance teaching by involving diverse stakeholders in early discussion and aligning programmes with strategic goals, primarily surrounding employability and innovative teaching but also extending to promoting bilingualism, inclusivity and environmental sustainability. Actors, processes and documentation that participants regarded improving student learning were identified. However, recurring references to documentation required to meet baseline standards (aligning learning outcomes to assessments across a programme or referencing QAA subject benchmark statements) indicate that further efforts are needed to embed the enhancement approach in Wales.

Student involvement in validation is underused but offers crucial insights into changing preferences, priorities and learning styles. We consider research evidence on 'Generation Z' students, who are comfortable with digital and AI technologies, favour immediate access to information access and integrated learning and wellbeing support. Student participants' interest in inclusive design for disabilities and neurodiversity is considered as an untapped institutional resource.

Risk and affordances of AI in curriculum design and validation: The impact of AI on teaching and learning was significant among study participants. The broader debate on readiness, ethics, trust and the added value of AI is used to contextualise our findings. Specifically, AI is beginning to be used in curriculum design, with institutions like Swansea University and the University of East London exploring its potential for generating ideas and initial drafts. However, there are ongoing concerns about the ethical implications and accuracy of AI-generated content in teaching but also in curriculum design and validation. The varying guidelines on acceptable AI use across institutions highlight the pressing need for standardised governance and regulation.

Delivering regional educational pathways in Wales: Participants' views on partnership working between HEIs and college-based HE providers in Wales are considered in the

context of the TER Act and the duties and emerging priorities of Medr. Collaboration between HEIs and colleges was seen as being essential to address strategic goals such as workforce upskilling and reducing regional inequalities. These partnerships were also recognised to be increasingly important in terms of resource sharing, particularly in specialised fields and promoting bilingual education. However, structural challenges, particularly related to perceived and real competition, hinder deeper partnerships. Addressing these issues will require strategic support and alignment across the education sector.

Recommendations

Recommendations relating to **programme design and validation** include developing pan-Wales principles and guidelines on the ethical use of AI in curriculum design, alongside a good practice guide for AI in specific teaching areas. Developing a pilot scheme to standardise and enrich student training is also suggested, while potentially creating a Wales-wide pool of student specialists in niche areas. Additionally, the recommendations emphasise sharing good practices from QER reports to raise professionals' awareness of enhancement as opposed to compliance with sector-agreed standards. We also suggest developing a checklist for incorporating diverse stakeholder contributions in early programme design stages.

Our recommendations relating to **supporting more integrated partnership working across HEIs and colleges** in Wales include identifying interventions that support clear collaborative planning on a partnership and programme level. This process includes defining viable student pathways into HE and addressing cultural and competitive issues. Further recommendations include engaging in a candid collaborative examination of competition and enhanced recognition for HEI-based staff supporting and building the capacity of HE staff in colleges. Additionally, a pan-Wales list of best practice points, including on issues such as credit transfer and Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL), should be developed to guide institutions in effective partnership working.

Recommendations in **other areas** related to exploring non-academic interinstitutional collaborations, particularly in areas such as student wellbeing. We recommend that HE institutions work more extensively with student unions to understand students' study patterns, preferences, and learning needs, and to engage in horizon-scanning for new and relevant models in curriculum design. A final recommendation concerns the introduction of mini-enhancement sabbaticals or allocations for staff with teaching leadership roles. These might be akin to research allocations and would facilitate more exploration and leadership in subject-based curriculum design.

1. Background and context

This project was funded by QAA Cymru and Medr (formerly the Higher Education Funding Council or HEFCW) as a Collaborative Enhancement Project in January 2024 and ran until July 31st 2024. Some aspects of the report were updated in November 2024. The project was conducted by a consortium of universities in Wales (Swansea, Cardiff and Wrexham) and led by Bangor University.

HE in Wales faces a particular set of opportunities in relation to collaboration, student engagement and employability. In order to address these opportunities, the project objectives were as follow:

1. To identify curriculum design and validation processes across HE in Wales that add enhancement value in the view of stakeholders.
2. To identify risks and opportunities in relation to achieving greater alignment in curriculum design and validation processes across HE in Wales.
3. To make recommendations for the sector and identify next steps.

1.1 The TER: collaboration, learner voice and employability

The Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (TER) represented a strategic overhaul of Wales's tertiary education and research landscape [1]. The TER led to the establishment of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, later renamed as Medr, to replace HEFCW as the regulator in Wales. Medr began its operations on August 1st 2024 and has powers over FE and sixth forms alongside HE.

The TER Act outlined strategic duties to guide the Commission and more latterly, Medr's functions. Three of these areas are of particular relevance to this project.

- Learner-centric approach

Learner consultation and reflection on learners' views is required in decision making on funding, quality assurance and strategic priorities. Mechanisms to ensure that learners' experiences and perspectives are actively sought and acted upon are required at all levels of the tertiary education system. The Commission and more latterly, Medr is tasked with developing a mandatory Learner Engagement Code to ensure that learners can voice their opinions on educational quality and participate in decision-making processes. Compliance with this code will be mandatory for registered HE providers.

- Promoting collaboration

One of Medr's primary duties set out by the TER Act is to foster collaboration across the tertiary education sector, ensuring that HE institutions and colleges offering HE and FE provision work together rather than in competition, especially in areas such as curriculum design and workforce planning. The Act highlights the importance of collaboration in meeting regional skills needs and addressing economic and social challenges. Universities and Colleges offering HE or FE providers are expected to collaborate with each other and are also required to work with employers and local authorities to align their offerings with regional priorities. While collaboration is not specifically mandated, the Act requires institutions to align with the Commission's (now Medr's) strategic plan, which is required to promote collaboration as a key principle. The Act envisages that providers would need to demonstrate collaboration when applying for grants or funding, particularly for projects targeting regional and national priorities. Collaboration is also encouraged to deliver innovative teaching methods, shared resources, and progression opportunities for learners, such as joint courses or flexible programs that span FE and HE.

- Integrating employability into teaching

The TER Act emphasises the importance of equipping learners with the skills and knowledge necessary for lifelong learning and career success. It creates a framework that strongly incentivizes the integration of employability into teaching by:

- Aligning curricula with labour market needs
- Promoting vocational training and apprenticeships
- Fostering partnerships with employers and Regional Skills Partnerships
- Supporting lifelong learning and workforce development.

The strategic approach outlined in the Act encourages the development of programmes and initiatives that align educational outcomes with industry needs, thereby enhancing students' career prospects and contributing to economic growth.

Reflecting this initial mandate, Medr's five proposed strategic aims for 2025-30 include a particular focus on learner voice, employability and creating coherent learning pathways [2]:

1. *to focus the tertiary education sector around the needs of the learner – their experience, achievement and wellbeing, ensuring they are involved in decision-making and encouraging participation in learning at all stages in life*
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.*

Promoting coherent student journeys within and across from FE and HE, is central to Medr's aims within its first five years of operation. Medr is also committed to finalising a learner engagement code and launching a learner voice forum by August 2026. Other strategic aims relate to commitments to research standards, quality and encouraging growing Welsh medium provision and demand for Welsh medium provision across the tertiary sector.

1.2 Building on the Collaborative Programmes Wales projects

This project builds on and aligns with two Collaborative Programmes Wales (CPW) projects that explore the potential for greater alignment between decision making structures, regulations and practices across HE and FE in Wales.

The Collaborative Programmes Wales phase 1 project (CPW1) analysed the validation processes of seven higher education institutions in Wales [2,3]. It surveyed the key features and stages of these processes, noting considerable variation in the documentation, format and approach. However, whilst acknowledging these variations, it found evidence of considerable overlap and consistency around basic principles, particularly with regard to the form and parameters of externality, peer review, academic stakeholder involvement and business case analysis.

The CPW Phase II study follows the same timescale as our project. CPW II will seek to outline draft governance process for collaborative provision and suggest how institutions may develop a process to mutually recognize regulations, processes and documentation, using the CPW principles of alignment, recognition, complementarity, sustainability and simplicity [4].

We were aware of the risk of overlap between our project and the CPW projects, however we sought to focus on the *enhancement* value of existing systems rather than their alignment. Discussions around partnerships are also very different due to our use of in-depth interviews in this study.

1.3 Quality regulation and enhancement

The Quality Assessment Framework for Wales, [5] aligns with UK-wide quality frameworks, as implemented by QAA. Higher education institutions in Wales are evaluated using the Quality Enhancement Review (QER) method. This process involves a comprehensive provider submission that includes input from students and participation from various stakeholders during the review visit. The enhancement approach encourages institutions within the sector in Wales to identify opportunities individually and collectively for improving the student experience, even when the basic quality and standards are met. Central to this system is a commitment to ‘enhancement’, which is defined as follows:

“.. using evidence to plan, implement and evaluate deliberate steps intended to improve the student learning experience” [6].

This definition of enhancement underpins the project so that questions on the ‘enhancement value’ of elements of validation are intended to identify aspects which use evidence, understood to include contextual and experiential insights, to plan to improve students’ learning experience.

⁵ Atherton, G., Lewis, J., Bolton, P. (2024) Higher education in the UK: Systems, policy approaches, and challenges. Research briefing. House of Commons Library, 15th July. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9640/CBP-9640.pdf>

⁶ QAA Cymru (2023) Quality Enhancement Review Handbook, August 2023. Cardiff, QAA Cymru. <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/quality-enhancement-review-handbook.pdf>

2. Methods

A qualitative approach was used to gain relevant insights from stakeholders from a range of groups that were identified as being key to programme development and approval across HE and within HE provision in FE in Wales.

2.1 Collaborative working

The collaborative nature of this project has characterised it throughout. Research team members met fortnightly throughout the 6-month period of study to discuss progress on set up, recruitment, data analysis and report writing. All members of the initial research team contributed to participant recruitment. Most were involved in data analysis (GapG, AD, MD, GH, SL, KT and HW) and a group of 5 contributed to report writing (GapG, AD, MD, RJ and HW) with the overall report authored by the project lead. Given the relatively large volume of data, its rich content and time constraints, 2 senior academics initially recruited as participants were also invited to join the data analysis and writing teams. A publication policy was produced and agreed early in the project's development to clarify roles and expected contributions in reporting and dissemination. Dissemination of interim findings within the project team was by MD and SL.

2.2 Recruitment and sampling

Ethical permission for the study was provided by Bangor University's College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and approved documentation was used to approach, inform and gain consent from participants. A topic guide was shared with participants, including broad questions to be covered, in advance of interviews in order to provide time for them to reflect on key issues ahead of the interview.

Members of the research group used their networks within their own institutions and access the sector in Wales and recruited participants using a purposive sampling technique and some snowball sampling. Participants were recruited from the following groups:

- Registrars or those with equivalent roles
- Heads of Quality
- Planning or Quality Officers
- Academics who had led programme development or the reapproval
- Students involved in programme validation and Students' Union leads.

We sought to recruit at least one participant per group from each HEI in Wales and from a body offering online and distance learning in Wales. We recruited participants from two major FE institutions offering HE provision respectively in the north and south of Wales. In total, we recruited and interviewed 34 participants from the sector in Wales.

We also recruited and interviewed 6 representatives of sector bodies from a UK context, including Wales and from at least one professional body in order to gauge and compare their views to those of actors more closely involved in day-to-day programme development and partnership working in Wales.

Once initial data analysis had commenced, and following discussion within the research group and in order to focus on some key areas of enhancement in more depth, we recruited a further 4 senior academics, 2 from the English sector and 2 from broadly comparable sectors in South Africa and Australia.

In total 44 participants contributed to the study.

A breakdown of participants by type of institution and role is included in Appendix 1. Codes were used to protect anonymity and refer to the institution and the broad role undertaken in enhancement. Given the variety of decision-making groups and job titles within the sector, some codes initially allocated, do not accurately describe each participant's function. These issues and a broad description of participant roles are included prior to each section of the results.

2.3 Interviews

All interviews were conducted on MS Teams by the project researchers (GapG) or the project lead (MD). Most were in English, but some were in Welsh according to the participant's preference. Given the policy-oriented nature of the work and the limited timescale, the team developed a pragmatic approach to interview questions, initially focussing on elements of validation (materials and actors) prior to considering what broader elements delivered enhancement value. AI was approached through questions on its implications for teaching and assessment and partnerships were explored through questions on barriers and facilitators. Early analysis of the data suggested that the very specific focus on materials and actors was not needed to ease participants into in-depth discussion on the enhancement value of current aspect or the process and resulted in some duplication.

2.4 Data analysis

Given the collaborative nature of the work, time constraints and the need to produce policy-relevant conclusions and recommendations, the research team chose to use a Framework Analysis approach to data analysis [7]. This method provides a structured approach to analysing qualitative data, making it useful for offering specific insights into particular groups and comparing within and across groups while maintaining a focus on areas of interest [8]. It is particularly useful for collaborative work as it involves creating and applying an analytical framework through five key steps:

1. Data familiarization
2. Identifying a thematic framework
3. Indexing all study data against the framework
4. Charting to summarize the indexed data and
5. Mapping and interpretation of patterns found within the charts.

Initially all those involved in the data analysis used the structure of the interview questions to tabulate key points made. Some quotations were also included to provide context. We sought to allocate interview samples according to participant groups (so one member of the team would consider QA officers for example). This served to help us understand differences and similarities across groups in the initial stage. No participant analysed their own interview.

Several research team meetings were used to develop the thematic framework with outlying issues considered in detail in order to ensure emerging areas were not ignored. As a result of these discussions responses relating to AI were considered in terms of validation and programme development and less frequently under partnership working and are not considered separately. At this point it was concluded that participants in the HE in FE group had sufficiently distinct views to benefit from being considered and presented separately. Data from interviews with academics outside the sector in Wales is also considered

⁷ Ritchie, J., & Spencer, L. (1994). Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In A. Bryman & R. Burgess (Eds.), *Analyzing qualitative data* (pp. 305–329). London and New York, Routledge

⁸ Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., O'Connor, W., Morrell, G., & Ormston, R. (2014). Analysis in practice. In J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. M. Nicholls, & R. Ormston (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers* (2nd ed., pp. 295–345). London, Sage.

independently. Steps 3-5 were undertaken by the project lead with analysis shared with the team as it became available.

Data is reported according to the thematic framework created by the research group, with sub-themes subsequently developed by the lead researcher and shared with the research group for their agreement. We have sought to emphasise points made by more than one participant in reporting the data, but points that serve to clarify more general views or that we judged to be useful are also included as bullet points. We have used participant codes throughout.

3. Overall results by group

This section reports the results structured using the Framework approach. Results are considered by participant group, so that differences and similarities can be traced, within and across groups. We have sought to focus on themes voiced by more than one participant in each group, but where more detail on a shared perspective is offered by a single participant or a useful new area is indicated, we have also included this discussion in bullet points.

3.1 Registrars and Quality Managers

Participants in this group had oversight of the validation process or managed or led programme approval. An international participant was responsible for coordinating a multisite set of programmes across 10 universities. Some participants focused on supporting programme teams designing, modifying or updating curricula, including offering pedagogical advice along with continuous monitoring for quality reviews and revalidation.

Others undertook more traditional administrative or quality assurance (QA) roles such as acting as a panel secretary, liaising with the academic office to enhance programme documentation and due diligence, ensuring professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB) requirements are met but also taking more creative roles such as streamlining and developing the approval processes.

3.1.1 What aspects of programme design and approval deliver enhancement?

Whilst our focus was on enhancement, participants whose focus was mostly on quality standards, tended to emphasise compliance with institutional and external factors such as the need to meet PSRBs' regulatory requirements, working within internal regulations and managing academics' expectations around timelines (AU1R1, AUPP1, AU2R1, AU2Q1).

There was a wide range of views on which actors in the process delivered greatest enhancement value. External experts, particularly where they had an insight into work-relevant teaching were perceived as bring particularly valuable perspectives (AU2Q1, AU4Q1, AU8Q2, AU9Q1).

Student participation on curriculum development or formal approval was seen as bringing useful perspectives, particularly on assessment and workload but was also seen as a regulatory requirement (AU2Q1, AU4Q1, AU7Q3). A participant's comment is illustrative of these views: *"You have to have them but some sometimes they really do surprise you and they see something, usually assessment that would be a real problem or have some unintended consequence otherwise..."* (AU4Q1).

Other actors mentioned who were seen as being valuable to the process were: programme teams (AU7Q1, AU8Q2), chairs of validation panels (AU2Q1, AU7Q3), PSRBs (AU2Q1), industry partners (AU7Q3) and the university's employability team (AU4Q10). In contrast, the role of peer reviewers across an institution had been abandoned at one institution as it was seen in some cases to deliver feedback that was subject-specific and to dilute the focus and effectiveness of the final approval process.

Across the Registrar and Quality Manager group, participants valued clear and logical programme documentation that captured the interactions between all the relevant parties: academics, industry experts and external examiners. Reflecting the centrality of external peer review for this group, participants found review reports for external examiners to be essential. However, reflecting the increased focus on student outcomes, some also perceived that employability reports were as useful as external review. Those participants whose focus was on enhancement and curriculum design also valued comparative research

on other courses, evidence of alignment with colleagues involved in university strategy, graduate outcomes, students, staff development and a clearly defined assessment strategy.

3.1.1.1 Alignment with strategic goals

Participants consistently highlighted the need for alignment with the university's strategic goals, ensuring that programme validation and curriculum design support broader institutional objectives. Discussions at validation or revalidation panels were reported to provide a key check to ensure that the use of AI was aligned to the university's strategic position (AU1R1, AUSPP4, AU7Q1).

There was particular interest in how AI may be aligned to the assessment strategy and delivering the university's graduate attributes (AUSPP4, AU7Q1).

Other institutional priorities that were delivered through validation or revalidation related to a reduction in the number of optional modules with smaller class sizes and the creation of a more streamlined portfolio of more relevant programmes (AU2PI, AU2Q1, AUSPP4, AU6R1). Validation and revalidation was also reported to be used to support reduction in assessment load and bunching to provide more time for reflection and reduce attrition (AUSPP4, AU6R1).

Additional specific points were:

- Validation panel discussions have been used to ensure better fit with the university's strategic goal in relation to promoting bilingualism, with Welsh medium equivalent modules developed (AU1R1).
- Formal discussions as part of an approval panel were reported to have led to an enhanced focus on inclusion, the BAME awarding gap and decolonizing the curriculum across a range of programmes. These were seen to: *"help the university go beyond baseline standards to deliver on emerging expectations"* (AU6Q1).

3.1.1.2 External expert input and industry feedback

External experts, industry partners and PSRBs were perceived to play a crucial role in providing feedback and particularly in ensuring curriculum relevance. Participants noted that involving externals earlier in the process added more value (AU9Q1, AU8Q1).

Industry feedback and external examiner comments were perceived to be valuable in defining the identity of the programme and its focus (AU7Q2, AU1R2). One participant reflected:

"...the good thing is with the external examiner, [is that] you do get ideas or feedback and advice looking at it [the programme] ... across other institutions. What is the practice? either as a competitor in higher education or our own neighbours... that that would be a very useful part of [the] review (AU7Q2).

3.1.1.3 Early involvement in discussions

Early involvement of external experts, students, quality teams, professional bodies, planners and stakeholders was seen as being crucial to develop better and more viable programmes (AU1R1, AU3PPE, AU8Q1, AU7Q3, AU9Q1).

Early involvement of QA officers, externals and experienced teaching leaders is needed to ensure consistency and engagement in best practice, for example in AI-ready assessment (AU4Q1, AU7Q3). Some felt that those involved in coproduction with programme teams should not then be involved in final approval (AU4Q1). Others envisaged that some of the same people such as the external and panel chair, would be the same throughout (AU1R2,

AU3PP4). Early and broad-based involvement was perceived to help ensure that the approval event was used as intended as a final check on the finished programme (AU3PP4, AU1R2). The value of holistic approaches at the school level and informally seeking staff views from other departments, was also emphasised (AU3PP4, AU1R2). These steps were seen to support effective peer-to-peer dialogue and a clearer focus on the student experiences that was possible during the later stages of validation. Further points raised were:

- Early business case discussions with the planning function are crucial in the current financial climate: “Will it pay for itself is more important than ever” (AU6R1).
- It is important to align early plans for new programmes with colleagues involved in diversity and inclusion functions (AU7Q2).
- Some issues such as those on student finance, delivering core professional skills and staffing requirements are better addressed through internal discussions (AU1R2).
- Early engagement with stakeholders led to the development of a “challenge module” where students would work in mixed teams on a project designed by third sector organisations (SS6).

3.1.1.4 Role of students

As indicated above, student involvement in validation panels and feedback processes was emphasised, despite some perceived challenges. Student contributions were perceived as being variable in terms of detail, relevance and engagement (AUSPP4, AU8Q1, AU9Q1). An illustrative quotation is that student reviewers are: “too hit and miss” (AU9Q1). Some practical challenges of training student reviewers were reported to relate to releasing their time alongside their studies and increasingly alongside paid work or caring (AU8Q2, AU9Q1). Other challenges related to payment for training time or for participation in validation events (AUSPP4, AU8Q1). Other issues raised were:

- student reviewers may not be representative of the wider student body nor that targeted for the new programme (AU8Q1).
- where support is neglected, students might be blamed for their lack of an effective voice: *“people who say students don’t contribute are not preparing them properly. It’s a great way for them to understand how the university works”* (AU8Q1).

3.1.1.5 Continual monitoring and review

Ongoing monitoring and review by course and module leaders and other relevant bodies were seen as essential for maintaining content currency and effectiveness (AU1R1, AU2Q1, AU4Q1, AU7Q2). The rapid development of AI in particular was viewed as an area which could only be viably addressed through continual monitoring (AU1R1, AU2Q1, AU7Q2).

- Course and module leaders have primary responsibility for continuous monitoring and reviewing their content (AU7Q1).
- The involvement of senior learning and teaching development directors, as well as external and industry advisors, is important in the review process (AU4Q1).

3.1.1.6 Inclusive design

Other significant themes included the importance of inclusive design. For example, participant AU8Q1 maintained that professional services expertise around inclusive education should also be included early in the design process particularly where it was expected that the course would have a high proportion of students with additional learning needs. Some schools have 50-60% of students with a declared disability.

3.1.2 Effective partnership working in Wales

Good practice in partnerships was seen to involve alignment and collaboration, sharing expertise and resources, robust professional support, active engagement in course design, strategic and geographical considerations, and practical benefits for students. These elements contribute to successful and effective educational partnerships. Participants also judged that the HE sector in Wales was an ideal size to enable collaboration (AU6Q1, AU1PP1, AU1R2) with some emphasising that further developing a shared understanding of the enhancement approach across Wales would help support collaboration further (AU6R1, AU2R1).

- The responses of international participants are consistent with the sample from Wales with good practice associated with being able to pool resources and offer new programmes (IAU2) and the perception that large-scale collaborations are effective where they develop strong shared governance structures and function to share and promote best practice (SS6).

3.1.2.1 Alignment and collaboration

Participants reported that successful partnerships hinged on partners' alignment of expectations and working styles (AU7Q2, AU8Q1), and the close collaboration between quality teams (AU7Q2).

An additional issue was raised by an international participant involved in the development of shared programmes across multiple national sites:

- Successful partnerships need to develop a strong quality culture enabling open, collegiate discussions. Hierarchical structures and resistance to evaluation among some senior academics have to be negotiated (S6).

3.1.2.2 Pooling resources and expertise

In considering restructuring and likely reduction of academic staff across many institutions in Wales, many participants perceived that pooling resources and expertise among institutions might enhance their educational offerings, particularly in vocational subjects or specialised fields (AU1R2, AU6Q1, AU7Q3). A positive example provided was the MA Education (Wales) which has jointly delivered resources and teaching (AU1R2, AU6Q1).

Further areas suggested were:

- The potential for building collaborative FE/HE partnerships across a heavily populated region of Wales might be used to expand access to health and social care top-up degrees (AU7Q3).
- Partnership working to support Welsh medium teaching or minority subject areas may become essential following funding changes and current financial challenges (AU1R2).

3.1.2.3 Supportive professional services

Participants reported that in order for partnership to flourish, a broad range of professional services need to collaborate fully. Robust support from a range of professional services, careers, and alumni teams was seen as being essential for effective partnership operations (AU7Q2, AU1R1).

- This might include almost daily contact and shared documents (AU7Q2).

3.1.2.4 Engagement in programme design

The active engagement of academic staff, students and partner institutions in course co-design was seen to ensure the quality and relevance of programmes offered through partnerships in Wales. Good practice cited by participants included course co-design workshops with staff and students at FE college partners to facilitate collaborative curriculum development (AU4Q1, AU7Q2).

3.1.2.5 Strategic and geographical considerations

Strategic partnerships, especially in regions with fewer institutions, were seen to have the potential to address geographical challenges and enhance educational access (AU2R1, AU6Q1, AU8Q2). While some participants in this group were wary of the size and perceived energy of the FE sector, others recognised that larger FE colleges could act as equal partners to universities offering strategic advantages and agility in responding to regional needs and Welsh Government policy priorities (AU2Q1, AU8Q2).

- Local partnerships between FE and HE institutions were seen to make higher education more accessible and affordable for students. For example, strategic alliances with FE colleges for HND or Foundation degrees ensure local, accessible education options for students (AU7Q1).
- Top-up degrees in some subject areas offered by FE and HE institutions were seen to work well, enabling students to gain degree level qualifications who would be unlikely to do so otherwise (AU7Q3).

3.1.3 Barriers to Effective Partnership Working

Key barriers that hinder collaboration in Wales are perceived competition between universities and increasingly with local and regional FEIs. Local variation in quality processes and in the understanding of how the UK Quality Code should be applied have also deterred partnerships and led to detailed, and in some cases incomplete, work. The need for more uniformity in the academic approach taken to placements and industry engagement was also highlighted alongside issues such as developing a shared understanding of students' roles in validation and oversight and standardised training. Underlying these issues was a perception that developments in partnership working in Wales would rest on the release of additional funding and sustained political support. Some cautionary notes relating to the importance of the careful design, implementation and roll out of new partnerships were also voiced.

3.1.3.1 Perceived competition

Without a doubt, the most consistently voiced opposition to collaborative working was that of competition for students – or the perception of competition within the university (AU1R2, AU3PP3, AU3PP4, AU8Q1, AU7Q2). Examples of these concerns and their effect is provided by the following participant comments:

“Competition for students and funding creates barriers, with institutions getting reluctant to share too much information” (AUSPP4), and

“...competition and recruitment pressures disincentivize partnerships, especially when institutions have to share approval processes with competitors” (AU8Q1).

3.1.3.2 Placement and industry engagement

Where non-educational partners are involved in student learning, discussion around the academic content of placement learning, student support and assessment may be complex. These issues were seen to be magnified where programmes including placements were offered through partnership arrangements (AU2R1, AU2R1).

In addition, the rural nature of much of Wales requires additional supporting arrangements to be put in place to support partnership learning which might not be appreciated in other regions leading to difficult discussions on resources and student support (AU1R2, AU2Q1, AU6R1).

3.1.3.3 Standardisation of frameworks and QA processes

Establishing clear frameworks and standards was perceived to be essential to maintain quality and consistency in collaborative efforts. Reflecting on the recently validated MA Education (Wales), participants reflected that aligning regulations and standards across institutions for pan-Wales programmes is challenging but was fundamental to ensure consistent quality and an equivalent student experience (AU4Q1, AU1R2, AU6Q1).

3.1.3.4 Student involvement and training

While student participation in collaborative validation processes and ongoing oversight was viewed as being essential, variable approaches and processes to student involvement across institutions in Wales was reported to be a disincentive to collaboration, necessitating in-depth discussion in each case (AU7Q1). Student reviewers' confidence and commitment to participation in validation and oversight was judged to be variable (AU1R2, AU2R2) requiring more investment in training.

3.1.3.5 Funding and political support

Participants considered that further partnership working across Wales would require additional funding in order to release the time and staff resource required to develop and oversee partnerships. Institutions were also perceived to be unlikely to pursue the partnership agenda unless senior management figures were assured that collaborative partnerships would remain central to the Welsh Government agenda for some time (AU2R1, AU6R1).

3.1.3.6 Implementation and roll out

Effective implementation and careful roll out of initiatives were perceived to be crucial to avoid negative impacts on the student experience (AU3PP4, AU4Q).

- The careful planning of the student journey, including access to student services is essential to ensure students do not “fall through the cracks” (AU2R1).
- Prior negative experiences of misaligned expectations and processes underlined participants' awareness of the need to validate partnership programmes with particular care (AU4Q1).

3.1.4 Other issues

3.1.4.1 AI in early coproduction of new programmes

AI was seen to have the potential to reshape assessment methods and enhance teaching practices. While policies, frameworks and support had not been developed consistently, its role in validation processes and quality assurance was being explored by some (IAU2, AU6R1, AU6Q1). Others were more equanimous regarding AI, stressing the factual and administrative nature of the paperwork but emphasising the need for some continued “human involvement” in decision making (AU8Q1, AU2Q1).

AI was seen as supporting tasks such as aligning assessment to learning outcomes for programme developers and validators (AU6R1). A group of participants from one institution reported on a pilot scheme where AI was used to generate basic initial documentation and to generate new ideas which then formed the basis of initial school-based discussion (AU6R1, AU6Q1).

3.1.4.2 Supporting programme proposers by creating professional service teams

Supporting academics to teach and develop good quality programmes was also seen as a long-term challenge in more research-intensive universities (AU1R1, AU3PP1, AU3PP2, AU6Q1). In this context, an international participant, from a research-intensive university referenced an ongoing project that sought to convene teams of people from the Quality Office and the Learning and Teaching Centre to support academics developing new proposals.

3.1.4.3 Additional professional services collaborations

Noting the steep rise in students’ need for wellbeing and learning support services together with budgetary constraints on expanding professional services teams, a participant noted that developing collaborative recourses in collaboration might offer more flexible services. The participant reflected that confidentiality constraints would limit the scope of these services but reflected that shared resources, information and peer support would help meet those needs (AU3PP4).

3.2 Quality and planning officers

Due to the highly varied structure of QA teams across Wales, in some cases the responsibilities of participants in these groups merged with those in the Registrar and Quality manager group. Participants had operational responsibility for validation or partnerships or partnership oversight. Some liaised with academic schools developing new programmes and provided operational and technical advice alongside organising validation events (AU2P1, AU2P2, AU7P1, AU7P2). Only one participant had a clearly defined role in the planning process, overseeing the first stage of approval before handing programmes on to QA teams for academic validation (AU1PP).

3.2.1 What aspects of programme design and approval deliver enhancement?

Possibly reflecting their deep engagement within existing validation processes, most participants identified documentation used in existing validation practices as having particular value in enhancement. Documents mentioned by most or all participants included:

1. Module and programme specifications
2. Annual programme review forms
3. External examiner reports
4. Professional body handbooks

5. QAA subject benchmarks
6. Placement guidelines and
7. Reading lists

Institutional strategy documents, assessment frameworks, subject benchmark statements and marketing synopses were also judged to be valuable (AU2P1, AU5P1, AU7P1). Since enhancement in Wales is understood as going *beyond* baseline expectations, it is not entirely clear to the researchers that these documents deliver enhancement, but rather support meeting strategic expectations using external reference points. Possible exceptions are the use of business cases and competitive data, which participants in this group found useful in defining the programme's identity and its particular strengths (AU5P1, AU7Q2). A participant noted:

“...The MBA team did an amazing job. They researched 56 universities across the UK delivering MBA courses, then came up with their own summary of the comparison and how it could be different or improved in their proposal for the revalidation.” (AU7Q2).

Validation panels consisting of external and internal reviewers, students and QA staff were viewed holistically and a wide range of professional services including library services, student records and student wellbeing services were perceived to bring value to the process (AU2P1, AU7P1). External stakeholders such as local FE partner colleges, were also viewed as valuable actors (AU2P1), as were alumni and PSRBs (AU2P1, AU7P1).

3.2.1.1 Alignment of teaching and assessment with the university's strategic goals

Participants viewed validation as having a clear relationship with the delivery of the university's strategy. Validation processes were reported to ensure that student employability and the attainment of graduate attributes are built into teaching and assessment (AU2P2, AU5P1, AU7P1). Validation processes were seen to be potentially useful in incorporating AI into teaching and assessment to support strategic commitments to work-relevant teaching and appropriate assessment (AU2P2, AU7P2, AU5P1, AU2P1). While participants commonly linked employability with AI literacy, it is not clear that current validation processes support those discussions formally (AU2P2, AU7P2, AU5P1, AU2P1). A participant comment is illustrative of this position:

“We've got graduate attributes that we push, employability is quite high [on the agenda], so if we want career ready graduates, we're going to have to embrace AI. [But] AI is not a specific prompt within the revalidation paperwork” (AU7Q1).

Areas in which panel discussions were recognised to deliver strategic benefits were:

- Encouraging and advising on the development of teaching that is relevant to local needs (in fields such as sustainable energy and heritage) help to deliver strategic commitments to civic engagement (AU2P2)
- Widening access, particularly in the case of partnerships with FE colleges and private providers (AU7P2).

3.2.1.2 Early involvement in discussions

QA officers did not actively volunteer views on early collaborative engagement in validation. Nonetheless, a range of initiatives was reported in relation to supporting FE partners in programme development.

- A collaborative programme development process is used in the case of degree apprenticeships, where programme proposal teams in both partners contributed to the design and communicated in an iterative process (AU7P2).

- The university provides an academic reviewer from an early stage to enhance partners' programme proposals (AU5P1).
- A planning officer works with a QA officer, academic schools and partners' relevant teaching staff in a "team around the programme proposer". Working within that team, the QA officer at the university comments on draft proposals from partners, adding additional value and streamlining the formal process (AU2P2).

The sole planning officer participant perceived that early engagement of QA officers and programme teams was essential to advise on the right level of approval needed (as the university uses a risk-based approach to validation) (AU1PP). Discussions with QA officers were also seen to enable sharing best practice and avoiding pitfalls in programme design and process to support a "smoother process" (AU1PP). The value of early peer-to-peer discussions in fostering innovation and enabling challenge was also emphasised:

"Internal panel discussions across faculties and departments bring new ideas up that the proposer may not have thought about and also help to avoid mistakes other proposers had made in the past" (AUPP2, AU1PP).

3.2.1.3 Role of students

Students were understood to be a necessary feature of validation in Wales but they were also valued for the new perspectives they offered, particularly in terms of course structure and cohesion (AU2P2, AU7P2, AU5P1, AU2P1). A participant explained: *"Only students see things from the perspectives of students. They understand what it's like to move from one module to the next"* (AU2P2).

An exception to this pattern was the planning officer participant who viewed student involvement in panels and approval as being variable. Where the student suggestion of creating a Wales-wide student reviewer pool was raised, they judged that it could be viable but foresaw inconsistencies in payment across institutions (AU1PP).

3.2.1.4 External expert input and industry feedback

Dialogue with external expert reviewers was viewed as being a regulatory necessity (AU2P1, AU2P2, AU7P1, AU7P2).

"The externality is something that's key. We can't have a validation event unless an external panellist is present or has an opportunity to speak to the paperwork" (AU7P2).

Reports from industry partners and graduate employability outcomes were seen to add value to academic validation process in terms of ensuring work-related learning was integrated across programmes (AU7P1, AU2P2).

Participants perceived that new programmes must meet market needs, and while these issues are discussed in the strategic approval of programmes, they were also routinely revisited in validation process and panels (AU2P2, AU7P2, AU2P1). Indeed, discussions on the alignment of course design with market needs, and employability were seen to be central to validation and offer enhancement value (AU5P1, AU7P1).

3.2.2 Effective Partnership working in Wales

Good partnerships were understood to involve clear and concrete steps in order to ensure alignment and practical collaboration. Partnerships were also viewed as having a range of strategic benefits resting partly on the anticipation that Medr might lead to more standardised expectations and approaches.

3.2.2.1 Alignment and collaboration

Much effort in early programme discussion discussed above was focused on FE-HE partnership working and served as evidence of collaboration and alignment. However, participants were also aware of the importance of effective communication in formal and informal settings in order to support partnership working (AU2P2, AU7P2, AU2P1). The use of MS Teams enabled almost daily informal contact between partners (AU2P1, AU2P2).

One participant also noted that QA staff from the partner college sit on the university's quality assurance committee (AU7P1).

3.2.2.2 Strategic and geographical considerations

Partnerships with FE have the potential to increase access to underrepresented groups through FE expertise and experience in widening access and participation (AU2P2, AU7P1, AU5P1). Additionally, the advent of Medr was seen to offer an opportunity to promote university collaborations with FE by promoting more consistent working practices, and expectations (AU7P1).

One participant also perceived that developing more strategically-focused regional partnerships might enable parties to avoid overlap and direct competition (AU2P1).

3.2.3 Barriers to effective partnership working

Key barriers identified by this group of quality and planning officers related to competition with FE, operational and institutional disconnects that posed challenges to working effectively with industry and the wide variation in QA processes across Wales which was seen as problematic in the case of university-to-university collaboration. A range of operational disconnections discovered in the roll out of partnership programmes, including unanticipated demands for capacity building and other calls on staff time were felt to deter partnership working.

3.2.3.1 Perceived competition

Participants in this group reported that their FE partner was effectively already in competition with the university for students (AU2P2, AU7P2, AU5P1, AU2P1). Equivalent programmes taught at FE colleges and approved by a university might be completed faster and be cheaper unit for unit than at the university (AU2PI, AU5P1). Participants were aware that universities could not afford to cut course costs given universities' higher staff salaries (compared to colleges) and their research allocations (AU2PI, AU5P1).

3.2.3.2 Placement and industry engagement

Participants were enthusiastic about partnerships with industry (AU7P2, AU5P1, AU2P1). However, they noted that professional body accreditation was complex and time-consuming (AU2P2). It was also noted that student records systems, including enrolment processes were not flexible enough to support the widespread development of micro-credentials (AU7P2) other specific issues raised in the context of microcredits were:

- Access to the university's learning platform and resources was unclear (AU7P1)

- 'Stacking' micro-credentials was challenging given the small numbers of courses currently offered (AU2P2).

3.2.3.3 Standardisation of frameworks and QA processes

Negotiating different validation processes across Wales, in the case of partnerships with other universities, was time-consuming and was not felt to promote better programmes or an enhanced student experience (AU2P2, AU5P1, AU2P1). However, variations in QA processes and paperwork were not always seen to reflect important differences in the principles used or basic alignment with the UK Quality Code (AU2P2, AU2P1).

3.2.3.4 Implementation and roll out of programmes offered in partnership

Unanticipated operational challenges were reported to be routine in partnership working (AU2P2, AU7P2, AU5P1, AU2P1). This was noted particularly in the case of programmes offered across institutions where students are taught by one partner and then move to the other within a single course of study (AU2P2, AU5P1, AU7UP).

Specific issues identified include:

- The use of different learning platforms resulting in missing resources and additional time within the partner in loading content (AU5P1)
- No shared access to timetables where students move across sites (AU2P2)
- Delays in registering students and ensuring their access to services (AU7P2).

As partnerships were rolled out, demands for capacity building from the university were felt to increase but often to be unrecognised and insufficiently costed (AU2P2, AU2P1, AU5P1). These included unanticipated demands for training, QA consultation and academic engagement with continuing professional development (CPD) (AU2P2, AU2P1, AU7P1). Even in these cases, concerns with competition were voiced. A participant comment that is indicative of these views:

“...It's a massive aspect, our strategic partners within the region. We work closely with the partners, we've got a director of strategic alliances who works tirelessly with the partners, and within each faculty there are link officers. In relation to courses there are also good practice links, who will go out to the partners and share good practice with them. So they're valued, we work with them closely, fairly and consistently to check there is no overlap or direct competition” (AU7P1).

3.3 Student leaders and student reviewers

This student group includes student reviewers, who were involved in validation and revalidation events and Students' Union leaders who were involved in the oversight of validation through central teaching and learning or QA committees.

3.3.1 What aspects of programme design and approval deliver enhancement?

Elements of programme approval that the student group felt added enhancement value were:

- the role of panels in asking broad questions relating to the university's values or strategic aims,
- the early involvement of students in programme design.

A valuable aspect of students' involvement is around their experience of assessment. However, student involvement was not always felt to be effective, and clarity on expectations of students, training and the development of a considered uniform approach was perceived

to be needed. An additional area where students perceived they brought value to the process was around querying how well teaching might support the needs of neurodiverse students.

3.3.1.1 Alignment with strategic goals

Where validation panel discussions support the appropriate use of AI they will also support innovation, leveraging technology and preparation for future trends (AU3UL1, AU9UL1). Illustrative of these comments, a student leader commented on the role of validation panels in: “*Ensuring key institutional principles like global citizenship and interdisciplinary learning are included in new programmes*” and also went on to explain how the Welsh Language Strategy was used effectively to question programme proposers and ensure progress within that strategic area (AU7UL1)

- Only one student participant referred specifically to the role of validation processes in ensuring the alignment of proposals’ with strategic goals. However other students perceived that strategic goals and institutional values were upheld or promoted through validation discussions.
- Panels’ roles in ensuring that employability and graduate outcomes were effectively built into new and existing provision were also seen as being valuable.
- Employability should be central to programme development, clearly communicating distinctive features and key benefits to students.

3.3.1.2 Early involvement in discussions: students, external experts and stakeholders

Students had a clear understanding of the benefits of early co-production and viewed external expert voices and industry stakeholders as being valuable, alongside those of current students. More comprehensive student consultation was understood to be needed at the beginning of programme development to ensure the relevance of the programme to their needs and aspirations (AU2S2, AU2S1, AU7UL1, AU9S1). Student and external expert involvement in early design can help the team rethink its approach to the overall programme design before detailed plans have been produced (AU2S1, AU9S1).

The involvement of stakeholders and PSRBs was seen to be crucial to ensure that proposed programmes promote students’ employability (AU2S2, AU7UL1, AU9S1). Further specific themes identified were as follow.

- If AI is involved early in programme design (a suggestion from the registrar group), the focus of early round table discussion could be on wider issues such as ensuring foundational knowledge, cultural inclusivity, practical relevance, and emotional support for students (AU2S1).
- Stakeholders should be involved in adapting assessments to include AI early in the process (AU7UL1).

Nonetheless, student reviewers balanced their support for early co-production with students with their commitment to peer review at the end of the process (AU2S1, AU3UL1). Early student feedback, addressing broad issues such as focus, or general approach was distinguished from panel discussion which offered much more detailed scrutiny of how the programme would coalesce in practice and be experienced by students.

3.3.1.3 Role of Students in current validation processes

Students also reflected on the value of student participation in general and considered how this might be enhanced. Being involved in the validation process was seen as being an enriching experience, which broadened their perspectives as learners in their own subject areas (AU2S2, AU2S1). Student involvement was thought to enhance programme design, bringing valuable perspectives and insights to the programme design process (AU2S2, AU2S1, AU9S1). For example, panel discussions were believed to be enhanced by students' exploration and testing of the assessment strategy, ensuring a greater diversity of assessment methods including authentic approaches and engagement in creative discussions on AI (AU2S1, AU9S1). However, an alternative perspective was offered by a student reviewer who warned that students might lack the necessary experience in teaching and assessment design, limiting their contributions (AU3UL1).

Student reviewers felt that they should be informed of the changes made to the programme as a result of their participation, through the Quality Office or by the panel chair (AU2S2, AU2S1). Co-production, in particular, was seen as being underdeveloped (AU3UL1, AU2UL1, AU7UL1).

Student leaders and student reviewers reflected on the need to develop a shared approach and shared expectations of student reviewers' roles and the roles of student leaders in core committees (AU2UL1, AU232, AU231, AU7UL1). It was suggested that a lack of a clear and consistent role might result in student involvement being tokenistic. One reflected that *"More groundwork [in engaging students] at school and faculty level is needed"* (AU7UL1).

Course representatives were reported to be presented with the entire programme paperwork with very little direction on what their contribution should be (AU7UL1, AU2UL1). In these cases, students' time and other priorities would necessarily take precedence (AU7UL1, AU2UL1). A further specific point made was:

- Clear guidance on the appropriate use of AI is also needed to support students to engage with this issue which they perceived as being central to assessment (AU9UL1).

Generally, students felt it was important to support student participation in validation and programme design in a structured way, based on an understanding of their expertise and experience and recognising their other priorities.

3.3.1.4 Programme viability and the student journey

Panels were valued because they enabled a full discussion of the alignment between programme aims and content (including assessment) with the programme team present. Participants indicated that the two-sided nature of the discussion would ensure that the issues were understood (AU2S1, AU2S1, AU7UL1).

As a result of discussions in validation panels and equivalent groups, students were able to envisage the expected gradient of learning between modules and to assess how student support was scaffolded across the programme (AU2S1, AU2S2).

Another key area where students felt validation panels were crucial was in enabling a full and candid discussion of staff resources and staff skills (AU2S1, AU7UL1). While this practice is not current in all institutions, it was felt to be particularly valuable in appraising the viability of collaborative programmes to ensure that students were sufficiently supported (AU7UL1).

Panel discussion enabled students to check and ensure that the information in student handbooks was correct to support future cohorts (AU2S1, AU7UL1).

3.3.1.5 Inclusive design and student support

Discussions around understanding diverse student backgrounds and needs, and meeting these through careful programme design also happened through validation panels (AU2S2, AU2S1). Additional comments made by students focused on the value of panel discussion in ensuring that programmes remained inclusive. The ability to raise issues in relation to student support, particularly in the case of programmes where placements were integral, was highly valued. Panel discussions were seen to offer a space to have discussions around appropriate and adaptable assessment in a focused and productive way (AU2S2, AU2S1, AU7UL1). An additional point made was:

- Assessments need to be agile and inclusive, particularly for students with neurodiversity. The intelligent use of AI could improve accessibility of assessment and might also be used to provide bespoke study support for neurodiverse students (AU7UL1).

3.3.2 Effective partnership working in Wales

The student group had relatively little involvement with partnerships in Wales. Their contributions focused primarily on their awareness of good practice and their commitment to student engagement in programme design, which was perceived as being particularly important where students might move between institutions.

3.3.2.1 Pooling resources and expertise

An important benefit of collaborative working across Wales for students was the potential for shared resources and expertise. Partnership in Wales might provide a useful platform to share good practice (AU3UL1, AU2UL1). A Wales-wide student reviewer pool might enable more effective and efficient training and a better experience for students (AU2S1, AU7UL1). A further specific point made was:

- Wales-wide student reviewer training might focus on areas such as AI, where institutional guidance might be lacking (AU2S1).

3.3.2.2 Engagement in programme and partnership approval

There was an awareness that studying through partnership arrangements could be challenging for students and that existing teaching would not always fit the new context. Students involved in collaborative programme approvals would help ensure a coherent programme structure was maintained to avoid disconnects in the learning journey (AU3UL1, AU9S1). Student involvement in collaborative programme approvals helps partners understand how students would experience the programmes. A participant reflected that it was: *“really important that students are involved in the design of partnerships from the outset to stop student experience being clouded out”* (AU3UL1).

Similarly, students' awareness of the role of support services in the student journey was seen as important in understanding possible overlaps, repetitions, and differences and managing these effectively (AU7UL1, AU9S1). As such, students were seen to have a crucial perspective to offer in partnership approvals and reapprovals. More broadly, student involvement in partnership approval was also seen as key to help ensure the aims of partner institutions aligned to meet student expectations (AU7UL1, AU9S1).

3.3.3 Barriers to effective partnership working

Students were aware of a number of key challenges to partnership working in Wales. These related to competition (AU3UL1, AU7UL1) and a lack of Standardisation of frameworks and QA processes (AU3UL1, AU7UL1). In terms of the implementation and roll out of partnership programmes, students felt that student experience in partnership arrangements might easily be overlooked (AU3UL1, AU9S1).

3.4 Registrars and college-based Quality Managers

Participants in this group were involved in the design, approval and ongoing oversight of HE courses offered in a college setting. Their day-to-day involvement in programme design varied according to seniority but all had been involved in programme design or validation within the last 5 years.

3.4.1 What aspects of programme design and approval deliver enhancement?

External reviewers, particularly those with expertise in college-based HE and students who understood the setting were perceived to offer fresh perspectives and valuable feedback. However, while students were seen as playing a valuable role, this was mostly in relation to early feedback, rather than as formal members of validation panels. Students' effectiveness in the latter role was seen as being undermined by unmet training needs, particularly regarding the different nature of HE delivery in universities and colleges, and by expectations and perceptions that were rooted in their own subject areas. Where college students were engaged early in the process, their contribution was focused, constructive and relevant (AAU1b).

The documentation required by university-driven validation processes aligned to the university's needs but included aspects useful to colleges such as linking to external benchmarks. Academic peer reviewers (university staff members in other subjects) provide process-based advice, rather than the rich subject-based and strategic advice offered by external experts. In some cases, where they might have subject-based pre-conceptions or fail to understand the nature of college-based HE, the advice of academic peer reviewers was seen to be actively unhelpful. College-based HE staff suggested that where university partners shared examples of recent successfully validated programmes, they could spend more time considering course design and student experience (AAU2).

3.4.1.1 Alignment of teaching and assessment with college partner's strategic goals

Participants had a clear understanding of the potential of the validation processes supported by the awarding institution to address strategic issues. It was felt that validation processes should embed partners' strategic goals such as digitalization and UN sustainable development goals (AAU2, AAU1a). Validation enables programmes to align with industry practices and the college's strategic employability goals (AAU1a, AAU2).

- Discussions on resource availability, planning, and programme feasibility are critical for validation (AAU2).
- Supporting college-based academics meet to meet HE requirements ensures a smooth student journey and alignment with university standards. These aspects were felt to be covered in validation but were not central to it (AAU1a).

3.4.1.2 Early involvement in discussions: students, external experts and stakeholders

Early discussion with external experts and students was perceived to be particularly valuable in enhancing new programmes. Engaging students early in programme design, using focus groups and informal discussions, was seen to generate valuable feedback (AAU1a, AAU1b).

- Early involvement of an external assessor in an iterative (paper-based) dialogue with the programme team delivered well-designed and relevant programmes (AAU2).

3.4.1.3 Role of students

Student involvement was seen to offer value by this group. However, there was some distinction between early informal student engagement and the more formal role of the student reviewer (from the awarding institution). While students provide fresh ideas, their effectiveness varies based on the support they are given and their own contextual knowledge (AAU1a, AAU1b).

Informal discussions and structured workshops with the college's own students were judged to be more effective than formal panel involvement in the approval event for new programmes (AAU1b, AAU2).

- A more proactive approach to student coproduction might include asking students to begin the discussion of areas such as assessment. A participant considered: *"Why wouldn't we approach students and ask them to present some views around what assessment methods should be like or... how we should be responding to artificial intelligence in terms of assessment methodology"* (AAU1b).
- Continuous feedback from current students, including testing proposals for revision of existing teaching, is particularly valuable (AAU2).

3.4.1.4 Programme viability and the student journey

College-based participants perceived that a valuable aspect of programme design and validation was its use to appraise the student journey and viability of the proposal.

- The focus on resources and the staff skill base that was built into validation events was useful in ensuring these issues were considered before the programme was developed (AAU1a).
- Discussions on managing risks in placements were perceived to have been valuable in the programme delivery (AAU1b).
- Ensuring student input throughout the validation process addresses potential disconnects between academics and students that might otherwise become problematic in a new programme (AAU1b).
- Panels consistently encouraged non-traditional, flexible assessment methods which helped support diverse student needs and focused attention of the need to teach higher level skills (AAU1b).

3.4.2 Effective partnership working in Wales

Good practice in partnerships was seen to involve alignment and collaboration, sharing expertise and resources, and robust professional services support.

3.4.2.1 Alignment and collaboration

Partnership working was perceived to deliver mutual benefit where both institutions were well aligned and relationships were strong (AAU1a, AAU1b, AAU2). Recognising the professionalism of those working in college-based HE, where partners were ready to

acknowledge the equivalence of standards and practices rather than imposing identical procedures, released energy for more creative working (AAU2, AAU1b).

Regular management and operational meetings fostered ongoing alignment and collaboration (AAU1a, AAU2). Longstanding partnerships with HE institutions are beneficial to FE colleges due to aspects such as access to supported CPD qualifications in higher education, access to research skills and strong networks, often on a local or regional basis (AAU1a, AAU1b). A further point made was:

- Trust, time investment and goodwill are crucial for successful partnerships, making them more than just transactional arrangements (AAU1b).

3.4.2.2 Pooling Resources and Expertise

A major benefit of collaboration across Wales was the sharing of sometimes scarce resource and expertise. Partnerships with colleges enable universities to access students recruited through widening participation that would not otherwise access their provision (AAU1b, AAU2).

College-based educators and planners have the expertise to focus on skill development rather than knowledge acquisition alone and make those skills available to university partners where they collaborate on this (AAU1b, AAU2). Other specific points made were:

- Partnerships with universities enable college-based staff teaching in higher education to access scholarly activities (AAU2).
- It was also noted that the regulatory environment in Wales offers potential advantages for pooling resources, although this is not yet fully leveraged (AAU2).

3.4.2.3 Supportive professional services

Positive aspects of partnership working included the relationship with the university's external moderators who provide oversight of the provision. However, this was also seen as an area that should be enhanced further (AAU1a, AAU1b, AAU2). Further points made were:

- Regular contact with the university's QA team was also seen as a key factor in supporting frictionless partnerships (AAU1a).
- The provision of a team around the programme proposer comprising of QA, planning and marketing staff was perceived to be particularly helpful (AAU1a).

3.4.3 Barriers to effective partnership working

The views of the FE-based participants on barriers to partnership working closely mirrored those of other groups. These related to perceived competition, an unhelpful diversity in QA processes and calls for additional funding and political support.

3.4.3.1 Perceived competition

Competition for students was seen to be the most significant barrier to collaboration across Wales. However, this group also emphasised that this might be a misconception as much as a reality. Participants also suggested how actual or perceived competition might be addressed.

Perceived competition between institutions and particularly between universities and colleges in the same area hinders collaboration, with some universities reluctant to share expertise and support colleges through committing staff time (AAU1b, AAU2).

Partnerships in geographically distant areas are perceived as being less competitive and are easier to manage (AAU1a, AAU2).

- Careful strategic alignment between colleges and universities is necessary to address competition and conflict over student recruitment (AAU2).

3.4.3.2 Standardisation of frameworks and QA processes

Differences in regulations on fundamental issues such as varying assessment principles, were seen to create practical issues in partnerships, with multiple partnerships leading to engagement in a range of frameworks and interpretations of how the UK Quality Code for Higher Education should be understood (AAU2, AAU1a).

3.4.3.3 Funding and political support

College-based participants providing HE raised a number of issues in relation to the need for additional funding for HE in FE partnerships and called for political support to facilitate collaborative working across Wales.

Given the role played by college-based HE in widening access and supporting students from groups that are not well served by universities, an eventual review of the funding mechanism for this provision would be reasonable and align well with the priorities of Medr (AAU1a, AAU2).

- Incentives are needed to encourage collaboration on Welsh medium teaching (AAU2).
- Clearer definition and support for pathways leading to HE is needed with particular attention to working with employers to demonstrate how these pathways can be seamless (AAU1b).
- Developing a cross-Wales template for QA and oversight of partnerships in Wales would release staff time and also support more consistent student experience (AAU1a).
- With the advent of Medr, colleges and their awarding university partners should be encouraged to celebrate and reflect of their achievements (AAU1a).

3.5 Academics in Wales and internationally

Participants in this group were senior academics in leadership roles who had developed a range of academic programmes and supported others to do so, including through taking up roles as external experts on panels. This sample also included participants from two English institutions and one participant each from South African and Australian universities. We also included an academic who was working in a specifically designed role to support programme development in this sample due to their expertise.

3.5.1 What aspects of programme design and approval deliver enhancement?

Participants in this group emphasised broadly similar themes to those discussed above. They had considerably more positive personal experiences of early collaboration and a number of novel interventions to support early collaboration were outlined, particularly by international and English participants.

3.5.1.1 Alignment of teaching and assessment with the university's strategic goals

Validation was seen to provide a powerful tool to ensure the strategic alignment of new programmes, particularly in relation to priority areas. Participants viewed validation as being a key check to ensure that employability skills, such as leadership and resilience, were built into programmes, reflecting institutional priorities in Wales and elsewhere (AU2PP1,

AU1PP1, AU3PP1, AU3PP4). Validation also enabled the integration of authentic and continuous assessment to be assured throughout programmes aligning with broader teaching strategies (AU2PP1, AU1PP1, AU3PP1, AU3PP4, IAU1, EAU1).

The ethical use of AI in assessment methods, balanced with developing critical thinking is strategically crucial, particularly for ensuring student employability (AU2PP1, AU1PP1, AU3PP1, AU3PP4). Validation and revalidation against professional standards and evolving industry needs ensures programmes' relevance and supports students' employability (AU1PP1, SS4, IAU1).

Specific issues relating to the strategic value of current validation practices raised by participants outside Wales were:

- Validation is used to assess and enhance new delivery mechanisms such as block delivery which align with strategic goals around flexible learning (EAU1).
- Appraising the ethical use of AI in assessments, validation served to support strategic commitments to employability and inclusive learning (EAU1).
- It serves to promote authentic, real-world assessment and to challenges academics to consider good practice such as continuous assessment (EAU1).
- Validation is an effective tool to promote the ethical and informed use of AI (IAU1).

3.5.1.2 Early involvement in discussions

The early involvement of employers, students, and QA staff was seen as being crucial to identify potential design issues and ensuring alignment with strategic goals (AU2PP1, AU1PP1, AU3PP1, AU3PP4, IAU1, EAU1). Collaboration between learning and teaching teams, QA teams, and student representatives from the beginning of the programme design process ensures a cohesive development process and releases creativity (AU1PP1, AU3PP3, AU3PP4, IAU1, EAU1). Engaging external experts early, especially in new disciplines, was also perceived to be valuable as a sense check and to access subject-specific knowledge on teaching methods (AU2PP1, AU1PP1, EAU1).

Specific examples of the positive impact of early discussion were offered.

- A student workload allocation model was created in response to student feedback about excessive workloads. This model, developed with students and the central learning and teaching unit in the early stages of revalidation helped identify areas of high or low workload on a weekly basis. Content delivery could then be adjusted and targeted support from teaching staff built in (AU3PP).
- While programmes commonly align to programme outcomes that will only be achieved in the final year of study, following discussions with students and staff, intermediate learning outcomes for each year were introduced to clarify the expected student progress from year to year (AU3PP).
- An early discussion also led to the creation of a consistent set of marking criteria for assessments, selected from a menu, which facilitated consistency across the programme and was easy for staff to implement. This approach was effective for both large staff and student groups, and also ensured that students were familiar with the criteria used supporting assessment literacy (AU3PP).

Specific interventions to promote effective early discussion were described by participants outside Wales. Specific issues relating to the strategic value of current validation practices raised by participants outside Wales were:

- "Design sprints" involve a collaborative group led by the academic school, but including students and relevant QA and professional services staff. This group engages in intensive programme development over 2-3 days. A key element of this

approach is that the validation materials are produced collaboratively and during that period alone, without further revision. This approach was initially developed where the university sought to change its model of delivery but is now university-wide with exceptions only for professionally accredited programmes (EAU1).

- “Curriculum enhancement partners” are a group of students recruited and supported centrally who support the development of new programmes and also explore areas of emerging interest in curriculum design (EAU1).

3.5.1.3 Role of students

Students were understood to play a critical role, particularly in terms of providing feedback and ideally through co-creation processes (AU2PP1, AU1PP1, AU3PP1, AU3PP4, IAU1, EAU1). However, their involvement and contribution was seen to vary significantly between programmes and institutions (AU2PP1, AU1PP1, AU3PP1, AU3PP4).

Student input in validation may be more usefully gathered through focus groups than formal participation in panels (AU2PP1, AU3PP3). Student input is more valuable during the revalidation process or annual review as they know the subject area and have already experienced the existing programme (AU2PP1, AU3PP4). Additional specific areas raised were:

- Students will engage in coproduction if there is something in it for them. Payment would help but universities should make sure students can use the experience on their CV, perhaps by creating a more attractive title for the role (SS4).
- Co-production and co-creation with students works really well at undergraduate level, as they know the programme well, but is less successful at postgraduate level (SS4).
- A participant outside Wales noted that students at their institution played a key role in decolonizing a professionally oriented curriculum (IAU1).

3.5.1.4 Programme viability and the student journey

Ongoing review is essential for continuous improvement and prevents programme drift where the programme no longer delivers as intended (AU2PP1, AU1PP1, AU3PP1, AU3PP4, IAU1, EAU1). Continual review is needed to build in work-relevant assessment, particularly in the case of AI (AU2PP1, AU3PP4).

Participants outside Wales also offered examples of the use of annual or continuous review to ensure viability and to support students.

- Ongoing academic review and data tracking ensure dips in recruitment are identified and can be addressed (IAU1).
- Ongoing use and annual reporting of student engagement data promotes the use of new programme structures such as condensed (block) teaching to better support students (EAU1).

3.5.2 Effective partnership working in Wales

In common with other participant groups, academic participants reported that effective partnerships in Wales thrive on the close alignment of strategic goals. They were also seen to offer benefits in terms pooling resources particularly in specialised areas.

3.5.2.1 Alignment and collaboration

Effective partnerships in Wales was seen to rest on establishing common aims and ways of working despite organisational differences (AU1PP1, AU2PP1, AU3PP1, SS4).

- A specific area of good practice was identified in the case of degree apprenticeships - successfully aligning the curriculum and apprenticeship standards, ensuring that the programmes meet the needs of employers, professional bodies and universities and support affordable education for students (SS4).

3.5.2.2 Pooling resources and expertise

Participants suggested that pooling resources and expertise among institutions could enhance their educational offerings, especially in vocational subjects or specialised fields (AU2R1, AU3PP, SS4). Shared programmes and resources might also release research expertise, leading to richer, more research-led teaching (AU2PP1, AU3PP1).

3.5.3 Barriers to effective partnership working

Challenges were reported to include perceived and real competition, variations in regulations and processes, and funding constraints. This group also indicated that standardised frameworks would be helpful to streamline partnerships. Technological misalignment for example between key systems used and a lack of accountability were also seen to potentially complicate collaborative programme implementation.

3.5.3.1 Perceived competition

Competition between institutions, especially in disciplines with student number quotas, was reported to hinder collaboration. Concerns over the potential for partners in other universities in Wales or in the FE sector to become competitors was seen to be exacerbated by funding shortages and a reduction in student recruitment (SS4, AU3PP4).

3.5.3.2 Standardisation of frameworks and QA processes

Differences in regulations and quality assurance (QA) processes and in frameworks used in areas such as assessment or student or staff workload complicate partnership efforts (SS4, AU3PP1). There is a call for a more standardised approach to validation processes and documentation within Wales to streamline collaboration (AU2PP1, AU3PP1, AU2PP3, SS4).

3.5.3.3 Funding and political support

There was a recognition of the rapidly increasing demand for student wellbeing and support services in higher education. These services were perceived as being more well-established and better financed in colleges, leading to a potential fall-off of support where collaborative programmes entailed students moving from college to a university setting (AU2PP1, AU3PP4).

A participant noted the significant policy focus on flexible pathways to accommodate diverse student backgrounds (BTEC, A-levels, Welsh Baccalaureate), and understood that this development would require more individualised support but sought more clarity on Welsh Government expectations on universities.

3.5.3.4 Implementation and roll out of programmes offered in partnership

Issues in aligning regulations, QA processes, and administrative practices across institutions may be identified and addressed during the initial design stage but were seen to surface more often in the roll out of collaborative programmes (AU2PP1, AU3PP3).

Further issues identified related to:

- The misalignment of technology and communication, leading to delays in sharing materials and permissions (AU2PP1)
- A lack of follow-through on some decisions made collaboratively (AU2PP1).

3.5.4 Other issues

3.5.4.1 Academic staff time

Participants in Wales and elsewhere were concerned about increasing demands on staff as institutions face budget constraints and do not replace departing personnel. Additional demands included taking on a more administrative role in validation (AU2PP1, AU3PP1, AU2PP4, SS4, IAU1, EAU1). An agreed amount of time (leave) for staff to lead validation and revalidation efforts on the same model as research leave was suggested as a potential solution to this issue (AU3PP1, AU3PP3, AU3PP4).

3.6 Representatives of sector-wide bodies

Participants in this group had a broad oversight over validation or accreditation or were responsible for supporting the university sector in its approach to curriculum enhancement. Those with a regulatory or leadership role were also included in this sample.

3.6.1 What aspects of programme design and approval deliver enhancement?

Contributions emphasised the importance of using validation to align teaching and assessment with wider strategic goals, particularly regarding the integration of AI in education.

Early involvement of quality assurance staff and students in programme design was considered to be essential in order to ensure relevance, fit with external requirements and as a check on the practicality of programme delivery. Students were understood to be integral to the validation process, though their participation was also seen to require adequate additional support. The role of professional services was also emphasised in addressing practical considerations and promoting inclusive design.

Participants were supportive of rigorous ongoing programme review to appraise content in relation to employability and alignment with industry or sector standards. The use of external advisory groups and student participation was viewed as being crucial in this ongoing evaluation.

3.6.1.1 Alignment of teaching and assessment with strategic goals

Sector bodies included organisations that accredited or oversaw universities' performance against professional standards. These oversight processes primarily appraised institutions against key indicators and student outcomes to assess the fit of those professional programmes with the sector body's strategic goals (SS1, SS2, SS3, SS5). Nonetheless, participants also maintained that validation should ensure programmes also met the institution's strategic ambitions, particularly concerning employability skills and ethical AI use. Participants in this group were more cautious about the misuse of AI than were other groups, calling for universities to develop a consensus on the use of AI in assessments to maintain academic integrity and transparency (SS1, SS5, SS7). A participant comment that exemplifies this theme is:

“..I think [AI] is a freight train that's going to come...and it is hitting us and we have to adapt. But doing that carefully and safely... we need to pull a lot of help and support into staff to enable them to be doing that right (SS2).

Developing adaptive validation systems was seen to include developing guidelines and support systems to help students and faculty navigate the complexities of AI and appreciate its risks and benefits (SS1, SS5, SS7).

Further issues raised were:

- Validation should ensure the coherence of teaching and assessment, particularly around innovative methods including but not limited to AI (SS5).
- Universities need to use validation to define appropriate and inappropriate uses of AI in teaching, emphasising the importance of transparency and ethical considerations (SS1).

3.6.1.2 Early involvement in discussions

Early involvement of QA staff, students, and external experts was seen to be crucial for successful programme validation (SS3, SS5, SS7).

Engaging these stakeholders early was reported to help identify potential issues, align programmes with industry and sector needs and regulations, and to help ensure a seamless journey from academic learning to practical application (SS3, SS5, SS7). The following quotation exemplifies these comments: *“...if you get the QA teams and students involved even before market scoping, you can make sure that practical and theory elements are integrated into every module in a coherent way that supports students” (SS7).*

3.6.1.3 Role of students in new and revised programmes

Students were perceived to play a vital role in universities' validation process, contributing through panels, student union representatives, and focus groups (SS7, SS5).

Students' views were understood to be invaluable to ensure programmes met student needs and bringing new perspectives to the process (SS7, SS3). However, additional and enhanced training and support were viewed as being necessary to ensure their meaningful participation.

Other issues raised were:

- Students are well placed to understand how learning is experienced and how modules need to build on each other across the programme meaning their contributions on coherence and programme structure are often the most perceptive (SS7).
- Students in university validations are often entirely new to the process and their contribution is not voiced effectively as they are unaware of how to approach the documentation or the event (SS3).

3.6.1.4 Inclusive design and student support

Participants stressed the importance of using validation to explore how students would be supported throughout their studies (S5, S7).

They emphasised practical considerations like transport and resource availability as professional courses may start while campuses are closed. Issues relating to academic and welfare support during placement learning were also voiced (S5, S7).

Other specific points raised were:

- Validation should be used to challenge teaching teams to develop appropriate teaching and assessment for neurodiverse students and others with additional learning needs (SS3).
- Student reviewers are often the ones who understand the practical issues and press staff on them during validation (S7).
- Professional services need to be involved in validation particularly given recent concerns about student welfare and student mental health (SS5).

3.6.2 Effective partnership working in Wales

Desirable partnerships in higher education in Wales were perceived in terms of collaboration between FE and HE institutions. These were viewed as being effective where they were used to pool resources, and to share expertise, particularly in specialised areas.

These partnerships were reported to be valuable where they enhanced access to HE and met regional development needs and strategic aims such as promoting bilingualism.

3.6.2.1 Alignment and collaboration

Partnerships in Wales were viewed as being productive where both partners understood and shared the same broad goals around meeting regional needs. Differences in individual ways of working were recognised and viewed as inevitable and not confined to the sector in Wales (SS2, SS7). Working around those differences was also seen as being achievable where discussions between partners at all levels were candid and focused (SS1, SS2, SS5).

3.6.2.2 Pooling resources and expertise

Sharing expertise, especially in specialist areas or Welsh medium provision, was viewed as being essential, particularly as institutions face financial stress (SS1, SS5). This approach might also support diverse student pathways and multimodality in course delivery (SS1, SS7).

3.6.2.3 Strategic and geographical considerations

Partnership working, particularly between HE and FE institutions was seen as a means to address some challenges related to geography as valuable programmes, offered in rural locations or where transport connections were poor, might fail to recruit traditional students (SS5, SS1).

An additional point made was that:

- Offering HE programme through FE colleges that are closer to where people live in rural environments is invaluable where they need or want to stay in their communities (S1).

3.6.2.4 Meeting unmet needs

Partnerships between HE and FE institutions were understood to provide access to HE to currently underrepresented groups (SS1, SS3, SS5). These might include people in rural areas or vocationally oriented students undertaking qualifications at level 3, 4 or 5, some of whom might then decide to take a top up qualification to attain a full degree (S1, S7).

3.6.3 Barriers to effective partnership working

Competition was perceived to represent a significant barrier to collaboration among this group, but solutions and further perspectives were also offered.

3.6.3.1 Perceived or real competition

Unnecessary competition, particularly at levels 3,4 and 5, was perceived to hinder collaboration (SS1, SS2). The focus on student recruitment within universities in Wales and financial pressures had thrown the issue into relief further undermining collaborative efforts (SS1, SS2, SS5). The underlying issue of the funding model for HE was cited by some sector bodies as being inevitably in tension with strategic commitment to collaboration (SS2, S7). A participant in this group explained:

“...I think Wales wants to be like Scotland, but actually it's set up more like England at the moment. And it's for the institutions in Wales themselves to decide that they're going to model the behavior and the trust and the collaboration of the system they actually want. Because it's a small system and in a way that England isn't. And a small system approach might work better for Wales, and it's just about the confidence to go into that more wholeheartedly (SS2).

Strategic level discussions were seen to be necessary to address both actual competition for the same student groups and the perception that FE colleges could be undercutting their strategic university partners with reduced tuition fees (SS1, SS2).

FE institutions might also see themselves as the whole answer, rather than as part of a coherent regional response, which should also include research-intensive universities (SS1).

3.6.3.2 Standardisation of frameworks and QA processes

Participants recognised that partnerships require careful planning and due diligence and perceived that issues such as the alignment of academic standards and credit transfers, should be addressed in a structured way during partnership set up (SS3, SS7).

Specific points made were:

- In college-HEI partnerships where the HE institution is the awarding body it is reasonable for the HE partner to expect alignment with their processes (SS1).
- Collaboration in Wales allows new providers to enter the HE market, and given what there is to gain, differences should be overcome relatively easily (SS3).
- Credit transfer and key processes should be outlined in initial contracts. This participant would expect to see these before approving a collaborative programme in their field (SS7).

3.6.3.3 Defining regional pathways into HE

While other participant groups were cognisant of the Welsh Government's direction on promoting clear regional pathways into HE, participants in this group perceived that the current lack of clarity served to hinder collaboration and also exacerbated real or perceived competition (SS1, SS2).

More specific points made were:

- Pathways into HE should be defined on a regional level (S1).
- Pathways need to be supported by coherent learning and logistical support for learners within regional education systems (S1).

3.6.3.4 Implementation and roll out of programmes offered in partnership

Intellectual property concerns and mistrust between partners were reported to undermine the roll out of successful partnerships (SS3, SS7). Sharing materials and innovative methods was not seen as being easy for academics and university cultures might well hinder this process further (SS1, SS2).

While cultural shifts towards openness and collaboration were challenges, they have been addressed elsewhere where ongoing relationship-building fosters a collaborative environment (SS2, SS7).

An additional point made was:

- It is crucial to appoint the right people in roles involving liaison with partners, particularly those roles that involve oversight. A participant reflected: “*The success of partnerships rests on these individuals... they are unsung heroes, but the wrong one can be the reason a partnership is failing*” (SS7).

4. Discussion

4.1 Early collaboration in curriculum design

Early collaborative discussion including a broad range of actors and stakeholders was felt to be essential in using validation as a mechanism for evidence-based enhancement.

Participants routinely named industry or professional stakeholders, external experts and students as those who brought the most value to discussions where the focus, shape and rationale of programmes were still open. While this study focuses on the validation of academic programmes, the widespread recognition of the valuable role of external experts and industry stakeholders in early discussions was often due to their ability to identify where programmes, sponsored or supported by senior colleagues, were unviable in terms of marketability or delivery.

Some institutions provided professional teams to support the programme proposer in developing the programme, however this appears to be limited to strategically important cases, such as partnerships or new forms of delivery. Examples of successful stakeholder and student engagement early in the design process, notably around degree apprenticeships, were highly valued but they were not common practices. QA-focused groups also cited the effectiveness of alumni in early collaborative discussions.

“Design sprints” reported here, whereby programme teams, students and professional services produced final programme plans in a two to three-day process might also support collaborative working. Equally, they might prove to be highly pressurised environments, and as staff struggle to produce clear documentation within the time set, the process may serve to consolidate existing power dynamics so that non-academic perspectives are not shared. More promising may be a scheme reported here and developed at a university in England whereby a cohort of centrally trained multidisciplinary students contribute to early curriculum design. This cohort was also relied upon by the institution to develop approaches to emerging issues in programme design.

An argument has been made that curriculum co-design should mirror product development, involving programme teams, employers, external experts and students from the start to set curriculum priorities and integrate experiential learning [9, 10, 11]. The initial development of degree apprenticeships exemplified this approach, requiring collaboration among universities, employers and professional bodies, and for example, introducing tri-partite reviews to ensure ongoing skill development as part of the curriculum [12].

The establishment of curriculum advisory boards, involving employers, industry experts, students, practitioners and, where relevant, professional bodies, fosters long-term collaboration and curriculum enhancement. Sheffield Hallam University’s Employer Advisory Board has been particularly effective, leading to enriched curriculum development and

⁹ Lowden, K., Hall, S., Elliot, D. and Lewin, J. (2011) *Employers’ perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates*. London: Edge Foundation. Available at: www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/employability_skills_as_pdf_-_final_online_version.pdf

¹⁰ Healy, A., Perkmann, M., Goddard, J. and Kempton, L. (2014) *Measuring the Impact of University-Business Cooperation: Final Report Creative Fuse North East: Initial Report of the Project View project Decentralisation and Local Growth View project*. Luxembourg: European Commission. Available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/8c3b24c9-2135-4436-993f-6d09ca87fc5f/language-en/format-PDF/source-196991702>

¹¹ Carlile, P.R., Davidson, S.H., Freeman, K.W., Thomas, H. and Venkatraman, N. (2016) *Reimagining Business Education*. 1st edn. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 1-97.

¹² Nawaz, R. (2023) Degree apprenticeships: a great UK invention that needs better nurture. Available at: www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/degree-apprenticeships-great-uk-invention-needs-better-nurture

increased Graduate Outcomes metrics [13]. This model positions employers as lifelong partners in education, significantly benefiting students' readiness for the workforce.

4.1.2 Students as co-creators in early curriculum design

Early collaborations with students in curriculum design are seen as a promising way to make higher education more responsive, inclusive and effective [14, 15, 16]. Healey (2016) maintains that early student involvement leads to a more dynamic and relevant curriculum, while also enhancing student engagement, improving learning outcomes and fostering community [16]. Benefits of involving students in curriculum design include the potential to soften traditional power dynamics and lead to more inclusive educational environments [15]. Creating spaces where students feel their contributions are valued is essential for the success of student-academic partnerships in curriculum design [17]. Establishing shared goals and ensuring clear communication support these initiatives.

In terms of implementation, the inclusion of students as co-creators in curriculum and learning design in UK higher education is an evolving practice, often more aspirational than fully realized [17, 18].

Many institutions aim to engage students beyond traditional representation roles, integrating their feedback and perspectives into curriculum design [18]. Notable practices cited by MacNeil & Beetham (2022) include the University of Brighton's Co-Curriculum Design, which uses intensive workshops to train and support students for collaborative curriculum enhancement, and Kingston University's Student Curriculum Consultant Programme, which involves students in creating accessible and globally relevant curricula [18].

Despite these efforts, comprehensive student engagement in early curriculum design remains underdeveloped. Initiatives like the "Student as Producer" at the University of Lincoln, "Students as Change Agents" at Exeter University, and "Students as Co-creators" at the University of Westminster, also cited by MacNeil & Beetham (2022), highlight ongoing efforts to deepen student participation [18].

Successful staff-student partnership in curriculum design are supported by practices like mentoring, peer support and reflective writing, helping both students and staff navigate the challenges of collaboration (Healey & Healey, 2019).

4.2 Student voice and training

¹³ Norton, S. and Dalrymple, R. (2021) Employability: breaking the mould - A case study compendium. York: Advance HE. Available at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/employability-breaking-mould

¹⁴ Cook-Sather, A. (2020). Respecting voices: How the co-creation of teaching and learning can support academic staff, underrepresented students, and equitable practices. *Higher Education*, 79, 885–901

¹⁵ Healey, M., Flint, A., Harrington, K. (2016) Students as Partners: Reflections on a Conceptual Model, *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, 4 (2). <https://dx.doi.org/10.20343/10.20343/teachlearningu.4.2.3>

¹⁶ Matthews, K. E. (2017). Five Propositions for Genuine Students as Partners Practice. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(2), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ijasp.v1i2.3315>

¹⁷ MacNeill, S. and Beetham, H (2022) Approaches to curriculum and learning design across UK higher education. JISC and Universities UK, November 2022. Available at: www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/approaches-to-curriculum-and-learning-design-across-uk-higher-education

¹⁸ Healey, M. and Healey, R (2019) Student Engagement through Partnership – A Guide and Update to the Advance HE Framework (04), Advance HE. Available at: www.researchgate.net/profile/MickHealey/publication/338096919_Students_as_Partners_Guide_Student_Engagement_Through_Partnership_A_guide_to_the_Advance_HE_Framework/links/5e402bf2299bf1c9b91bd14b/Students-as-Partners-Guide-Student-Engagement-Through-Partnership-A-guide-to-the-Advance-HE-Framework.pdf

Student participation in validation and early curriculum design was both pervasive and polarising. It was regarded (often grudgingly) as a regulatory necessity, it was seen as being valuable in its own right, and almost universally it was seen as being in need of additional support. Students and student leaders in particular, pointed to a lack of clear expectations and role descriptors. They also described practices such as lecturers known to individual students presenting them with completed documentation with minimal guidance and little time before deadlines for validation panels. These practices, whether intended or not, would be likely to minimise students' useful input into curriculum design. Many staff stressed students' variability in commitment, training or experiences as panel members, with some college-based participants suggesting that students studying in traditional HE environments might not contribute valid experience at all.

A solution to some of these difficulties may be offered by Swansea University's approach to recruitment to its Student Reviewer Community; a model where recruitment materials make clear positive statements about the value of student engagement in curriculum development, approval and review, set out commitments to training and describes the areas of work [19]. Initial recruitment material also sets out how involvement in the Student Reviewer Community is likely to positively impact on the student's skills and career readiness and engagement in their learning which includes training and mentoring [20].

Another solution offered initially by participants in the student group but tested in subsequent interviews was to develop a pan-Wales student reviewer team. While practical issues relating to developing a shared infrastructure were raised, this concept was seen to offer benefits for minority subject areas and for types of provision such as college-based HE, Welsh medium and bilingual provision. Benefits were identified in terms of developing high quality training.

The Scottish Funding Council commissioned Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (SPARQS) to develop an enhanced Student Learning Experience (SLE) model in 2021 as part of its approach to developing a single tertiary approach to quality for colleges and universities. The model, which was launched together with training resources in October 2023, has 9 building blocks reflecting domains central to a good student experience and 10 questions within each [20]. Aspects of all domains are relevant to programme design for new or existing programmes, but the curriculum design domain is foundational to this process and to validation. As the SLE is integrated across Scottish universities and FE colleges offering HE, evaluation results may indicate that this approach can be adapted for use in Wales and across Wales. Extending this training resource to staff would promote shared understanding of key areas and help developing enhanced analytic and collective decision making.

4.3 Core aspects of validation and curriculum design that deliver enhancement

External experts, stakeholder, employers and student participants (when engaged) were seen to be essential and to add value to validation processes. Clear programme documentation recording collaborative discussions among the programme team and key actors, including externals has a clear value in enhancement discussions. So also did comparative research as it helped define the programme's identity and its particular offering to students. More detailed documents on the approach taken to assessment, emphasising

¹⁹ Swansea University (2024) Student Reviewer Community. Webpage. Available at: <https://myuni.swansea.ac.uk/student-opportunities/student-review-community/#what-do-i-get-out-of-it-is-expanded>

²⁰ Student partnerships in Quality Scotland (2023) Student Learning Experience (SLE) Model. Available at: www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SLE_model_digital_resource.pdf

its variety, its fit with the subject area and work readiness were also judged to add enhancement value alongside data on graduate outcomes, including employability.

However, documentation linking learning outcomes to content delivery and assessment and recording discussions with key actors was also judged to be essential as was the use of QAA benchmark statements to map the content to sector standards. While there is no doubt that these documents are the bedrock of validation in Wales, these comments made by the professional QA-related groups, raise questions about the extent to which the enhancement approach of using data to deliberately plan to improve student learning experiences is understood among those working daily in validation in Wales.

4.3.1 Harnessing student experience more effectively

Students perceived that their roles were key in several areas including assessment and the cohesion of the learning experience. In these regards, their expertise was recognised by other groups. The awareness of students' experience and expertise in considering the student journey and assessment reflects in part what is known about the changing learning styles of the current student cohort. 'Generation Z' students (those born between 1997-2009) value immediate access to information [21]. They use multiple technologies simultaneously to support their learning processes and expect their university processes to integrate learning support and wellbeing support into their core learning [22]. Since birth, Generation Z students have had constant and continuous access to digital technology and, as a result, they are reported to be very comfortable using AI technologies. Chan and Lee (2023) report that these students find that AI has potential to improve their efficiency, connectivity and access to information [22]. In addition, they favour visual learning and their experiences and technological skills make them successful at solving complex problems [23].

Areas volunteered only by students were around understanding the need for inclusive design for students with disabilities and neurodiverse students. There is clearly considerable untapped potential to use student reviewers and student leaders' expertise on their own learning more effectively to construct subject specific and institution-wide guidance and strategy.

4.4 Risks and affordances of AI

The project explicitly aimed to explore issues around AI. Nonetheless, during the analysis, the team reflected that it was more reflective of practice and more useful to consider contributions of AI in the context of using validation as an enhancement tool. Two main areas emerged:

- The use of validation or revalidation to align programmes with institutional aims relating to employability and leveraging technology for enhanced educational gain.
- The use of AI within validation processes to release academic and stakeholder time for more creative programme design discussions.

The introduction of tools like ChatGPT, Microsoft Co-pilot and DALL-E since 2022 has both captivated our imagination and caused consternation in some areas [23]. The adoption of

²¹ Seemiller, C., and Grace, M. (2017). Generation Z: Educating and engaging the next generation of students. *About Campus*, 22(3), 21–26

²² Chan, C.K.Y., and Lee, K.K.W. (2023) The AI generation gap: Are Gen Z students more interested in adopting generative AI such as ChatGPT in teaching and learning than their Gen X and millennial generation teachers? *Smart Learning Environments* 10, 60.

²³ Bozkurt, A., Xiao, J., Lambert, S., et al (2023). Speculative futures on ChatGPT and generative Artificial Intelligence (AI): A collective reflection from the educational landscape. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 18(1), 1–78. Available at: www.asianjde.com/ojs/index.php/AsianJDE/article/view/709/394

these tools has sparked a debate in education concerning readiness, ethics, trust and the added value of AI. This discussion also emphasises the need for governance, regulation, research and training to manage the rapid and widespread transformation of teaching and learning brought about by AI [24].

Academics and some Registrar and QA manager participants were engaged in future-proofing the curriculum to both address and harness AI, ensuring an appropriate level of challenge is maintained or improved. There was appetite for wholesale revision of teaching and assessment as the implications grow clearer. For others, and particularly for sector bodies, the balance of risk and benefit seems to have been different, with concerns about the integrity of the learning process being paramount. It was also clear that the provision and use of cross institutional guidelines on acceptable and ethical AI use was variable across HEIs and college-based HE providers in Wales.

A set of participant interviews and subsequent discussions indicated that AI was already being used to brainstorm new ideas and to pre-populate validation documents. Nonetheless, others, particularly those in operational QA functions, warned against the use of AI to collate business cases, which they perceived as being open to inaccuracy. We did not uncover evidence that there is currently widespread use of AI in generating documentation for validating new programmes across UK HE. A notable exception is at Swansea University which is currently leveraging AI to facilitate the creation of early drafts of new programme documentation to structure and spark early collaborative discussion in a specific subject area. The results of the trial are not yet available but will be of considerable interest both in terms of the use of AI and in terms of supporting early collaborate curriculum design.

However, there is evidence that AI is now being used more broadly in curriculum design. The University of East London uses AI to input into the design of approximately 250 modules that are validated for delivery to its degree apprentices [25]. Starting with the module learning outcomes, it assesses how generative AI can "fill in the blanks", for example by suggesting text for the role of employers in supporting apprentices' successful module achievement.

Tools and resources to address the challenge of AI in assessment are beginning to be developed and shared elsewhere. For example, recognising that academics need to ensure their assessments remain fit for purpose, the AI Risk Measure Scale (ARMS), has been developed and piloted by academic staff across various programmes in Greenwich University [26]. This categorises assessment tasks into five levels, ranging from very low risk to very high risk and serves to prioritize areas where future-proofing assessment is needed.

The University of Greenwich encourages curriculum developers to use AI to generate ideas and drafts for curriculum design, module outlines, lesson plans and teaching activities [27]. Designing assessments such as quizzes, topics for group projects, considering essay and exam questions and providing sample answers at different levels are all areas in which the use of AI is permitted [27].

4.5 Delivering regional educational pathways in Wales

²⁴ Bond, M., Khosravi, H., De Laat, M. *et al.* A meta systematic review of artificial intelligence in higher education: a call for increased ethics, collaboration, and rigour. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education* 21, 4 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-023-00436-z>

²⁵ University of East London (2024) AI in degree apprenticeships. www.linkedin.com/pulse/ai-apprenticeship-curriculum-design-actual-examples-clark-hmqee/

²⁶ Greenwich University (2024) The responsible use of Ai in teaching. www.gre.ac.uk/docs/rep/information-and-library-services/responsible-use-of-generative-ai-in-teaching-and-learning

²⁷ Greenwich University (2024) The responsible use of Ai in teaching. www.gre.ac.uk/docs/rep/information-and-library-services/responsible-use-of-generative-ai-in-teaching-and-learning

There was increased awareness of the innovations brought by the Tertiary Education and Research Act (Wales) and the goals of Medr, particularly in promoting collaboration and flexible regional learning pathways, often reflected in the language used, tending to mirror phrasing from the Act or more recent strategic statements [1]. Participants generally expressed strong support for regional collaboration between HE and FE institutions, recognising its role in achieving strategic objectives like upskilling the workforce and addressing regional inequalities. However, structural challenges, particularly related to funding and specifically to the competitive model used, were identified as barriers to deeper partnership efforts. While addressing the competitive funding model for post-16 education falls outside the scope of this report, advancing HE partnership efforts in Wales will require strategies to mitigate these challenges.

Overall, discussions on partnership working identified more barriers than facilitators. Beyond perceived and actual competition, variations in quality assurance (QA) regulations and practices across Wales were frequently mentioned as obstacles to collaboration or as resource drains once partnerships are established. It is expected that the CPW Phase II report, to be submitted alongside this project, will reveal greater commonality in QA systems, processes, and principles than our findings initially suggest [4]. Additional challenges such as technological misalignment, reliance on small staff groups and differing academic start dates were also highlighted. Given the prominence of issues related to competition, it is likely that these operational challenges stem from the underlying problem of the funding model, which undermines strategic support within universities in Wales.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Current validation practices in Wales do add enhancement value

Across HE in Wales, aspects of current validation processes that have real value in terms of enhancing teaching include the involvement of diverse stakeholders, robust documentation, continuous monitoring and the use of validation to ensure alignment with strategic goals and values. Employability and the use of technology figure prominently in strategic discussions during validation but validation also helps drive forward positive agendas on bilingualism, sustainability, respect for diversity and innovative teaching.

A range of elements are essential in enhancing programme design and validation. These include actors such as external experts, students, employers, alumni or other stakeholders and professional bodies. External experts are particularly valued for their work-relevant teaching insights, while students offer valuable feedback from a learner's perspective, particularly in relation to assessment, work-relevance and the coherence of the programme as a whole. Nonetheless, effective student involvement necessitates adequate support structures, such as training and clear role definition, to empower students to contribute meaningfully.

During the initial stages of this project, we asked Quality Officers and Registrar and quality managers groups to consider what documentation brought additional enhancement value to validation and programme development. Clear and logical programme documentation, capturing interactions between academics, industry experts and external examiners was reported to be crucial. Such documentation includes module and programme specifications, annual programme review forms, external examiner reports and professional body handbooks. It is difficult to identify aspects of enhancement rather than compliance with the sector standards in these responses. In contrast, comparative research on other courses, evidence of alignment with university strategies, and graduate outcomes and employability were clearly used as additional data to improve the student learning experience.

5.1.2 Pan-Wales guidelines on AI based on institutional practice

Considerations regarding the impact of AI on learning and teaching were a significant focus of this research. While there was confidence around institution-wide position in some cases, awareness of institutional guidelines differed and, in some cases, cross university guidelines were not yet available.

Recommendation 1: Medr and QAA use individual institutional guidelines currently being published to oversee the production of pan-Wales principles and guidelines for HE or FE institutions on incorporating discussion on the ethical and effective use of AI into programme development and validation.

Recommendation 2: This work should be supplemented by a good practice guide for AI in teaching specific subject areas to which institutions could submit their best practice.

5.1.3 Standardising student training and clarifying roles

A recurring theme is the necessity of standardising student training and clearly defining their roles in the validation and programme design processes.

Recommendation 3: A consortium of sector representatives is invited to develop a pilot scheme for pan-Wales student training based on evidence of best practice in HE in Wales and comparable systems, including Scotland.

Recommendation 4: QAA Cymru initiates discussions with institutions on developing a Wales-wide pool of students in specialist subject areas or within particular knowledge of modes of delivering such as college-based HE or Welsh medium and bilingual study.

5.1.4 Exploring sector perceptions of the enhancement approach

Our initial 'warm up' question on documentation revealed some slippage between the understanding of 'enhancement' in Wales and baseline compliance with the UK Quality code.

Recommendation 5: Using the first set of QER reports, QAA Cymru shares good practice specifically in enhancement areas across the sector to promote a clearer understanding of the use of range of data to deliberately plan to improve student learning.

5.2 Early collaborative discussions

Early collaborative discussions involving quality assurance staff, students, academics, professional services and professional bodies, where relevant, are pivotal in the design of relevant and viable programmes. These discussions facilitate the alignment of teaching and assessment methods with broader institutional strategies. More specifically, these early discussions are used to explore and test how AI and other technologies can be integrated into work-relevant programmes. Engaging students early in this process is essential, as it ensures that programmes are not only academically rigorous but also practical and relevant to student needs.

5.2.1 Facilitating early collaborative discussions

While early collaborative discussions are valued across institutions, they may be confined to pockets of good practice.

Recommendation 6: To develop a pan-Wales checklist on the basis of this work describing how the contributions of internal and external actors may enhance early programme design and at what point.

Recommendation 7: In Wales, HEIs and FE colleges delivering HE work to systematically identify interventions supporting early collaborative curriculum design, focusing in the first

instance on industry and student engagement and using this work as an initial resource. Potential schemes could be appraised against quality criteria to produce a useable compendium of best practice.

5.3 Towards more collaborative regional HEI-college partnerships

HEI-college partnerships are instrumental in pooling resources and sharing expertise, particularly in specialised fields and in promoting bilingual provision across Wales. They also play a crucial role in enhancing access to HE, particularly in rural areas and addressing regional development and employer needs. The size of the HE sector in Wales is seen as conducive to collaboration, with an emphasis on developing a shared understanding of the enhancement approach across institutions.

Effective HEI-college partnerships were seen as requiring strategic alignment, resource sharing and support services in HEIs to support college partners. Overcoming the barriers to effective collaboration, such as competition and cultural resistance to sharing resources, is essential for fostering a more cooperative and diverse educational environment. Transparency in defining regional roles and pathways into HE is crucial, as is the need for senior-level engagement in strategic discussions around potential and real competition.

Overall, the shared commitment to enhancing programme quality and the collaborative potential within the HE sector in Wales provide a strong foundation for addressing these issues and fostering a more cohesive and effective educational environment.

5.3.1 Fostering a Collaborative HE-FE Culture

The advent of Medr, which aims to promote tertiary collaboration in Wales to further develop regional education promises to have transformative impact on the sector. One of its major initial tasks will be to develop clear pathways into HE.

Recommendation 8: Existing regional college and HEI partners begin to define a range of viable student pathways into HE so that this discussion is sector-led and is grounded in knowledge of the region and institutional capacities.

Recommendation 9: Partnership working in Wales is influenced by wider cultural and competitive issues. These should be explored in more detail through further commissioned research work.

Recommendation 10: Given the prevalence of concerns regarding competition within and across regions, senior level discussions between HEIs and college partners should use existing fora to prioritise candid, evidence-based consideration of potential and actual competition.

Recommendation 11: HE staff providing capacity building support for college-based staff are recognised and rewarded for these efforts.

Recommendation 12: A list of best practice points on partnership working (including on credit transfer and RPL) is drawn up from this study on a pan-Wales basis to support partnering institutions in working together.

5.4 Other recommendations

5.4.1 Professional Services collaborations to support student wellbeing

There is an increasing recognition of the need for 24-hour specialist wellbeing support and access to services such as learning support for neurodiverse students. Where confidentiality can be maintained, there may be potential for institutions in Wales to collaborate or support

external resources to offer these services as exemplified by the Myf.Cymru (<https://myf.cymru/>) resource for Welsh-medium mental health support.

Recommendation 13: HE and FE institutions explore non-academic collaborations, including peer-to-peer support and enhanced resources in areas including but not limited to student wellbeing and specialist learning support.

5.4.2 Harnessing student expertise and experience in new areas

Students are best positioned to understand the emerging needs of their peers. Immersed in the learning experience, they may also offer new perspectives where they have no prior conceptions on priorities and solutions. Students in this study perceived that their value in enhancing programmes was partly around raising issues of inclusion in the case of students with disabilities and neurodiverse students.

Recommendation 14: HE and FE institutions consider working with their Student Unions to understand current students' study patterns, preferred study styles and learning needs and engage them in broader horizon-scanning activities in relation to trends in curriculum design. These activities might in time lead to the creation of student-led guidelines produced in collaboration with staff and stakeholders. In particular areas such as neurodiversity, student leaders and student representatives may have a particularly useful contribution to make.

5.4.3 Resource constraints and academic staff time

Concerns about increasing demands on staff, amid budget constraints and a lack of replacement personnel, are prevalent.

Recommendation 15: Institutions consider introducing mini-enhancement sabbaticals or allocations for staff with teaching leadership responsibility to explore relevant, subject-based curriculum design developments and lead validation and revalidation efforts, on a similar basis to research allocations.

Appendix 1: Sample and Analysis Grid. 26.07.24

KEY	Group categories
AU1 Academic Institution 1 – Traditional University in Rural Area	R - Registrars or equivalent
AU2 Academic Institution 2 – Traditional University in Rural Area	Q - Head of Quality
AU3 Academic Institution 3 – Research Intensive University in Urban Setting	P - Planning (includes all QA officers following redesignation)
AU4 Academic Institution 4 – Post-92 University	PP - Programme proposers (includes senior academic and senior teaching and learning staff with academic experience)
AU5 Academic Institution 5 – Distance and Online Learning Provider	S – Student Reviewers involved in programme validation
AU6 Academic Institution 6 – Research Intensive University in Urban Setting	UL - Student Union Leads
AU7 Academic Institution 7 – Post-92 University	
AU8 Academic Institution 8 – Post-92 University	
AU9 Academic Institution 9 – Post-92 University	
AAU1 Affiliated Academic Institution 1 - Regional Further Education Provider	
AAU2 Affiliated Academic Institution 2 - Regional Further Education Provider	
IAU1 International Academic Institution 1 -Australia	
IAU2 International Academic Institution 2 - South Africa	
EAU1 England Academic Institution 1	
EAU1 England Academic Institution 2	
SS Stakeholders and bodies of UK-wide significance	