



Post-compulsory education and the Welsh language: the learners' voice

17 November, 2023

Key findings at a glance

- The vast majority of Welsh speakers over the age of 16 who were surveyed in schools and further education colleges are proud that they can speak Welsh, and see the language as an advantage for their career prospects.
- Opportunities to study through the medium of Welsh are important for Welsh speakers when choosing a place of study, as well as opportunities to use Welsh as part of everyday life at school or college.
- The vast majority of learners surveyed in schools and further education colleges state that their experience of Welsh-medium or bilingual education is good or very good.
- Of the Welsh speakers who intend to continue their education after leaving school or college, only 40% intend to stay in Wales. For Welsh speakers who intend to continue studying in Wales, the opportunity to study in Welsh or bilingually will be an important factor in choosing their next place of study.
- The research highlights differences between school and college learners, in terms of their perception of their ability in Welsh, the language medium of their education and their attitudes as regards the importance of the Welsh language.
- Learners' main reasons for not choosing to study subjects through the medium of Welsh were: the perception that their English language skills were stronger and that studying through the medium of English was easier for them; that a subject (or subjects) were not available in Welsh; that their further studies were likely to be in English or that there were better study prospects in English, in their opinion.

Introduction

The post-compulsory education and training sector plays a crucial role in ensuring linguistic progression for learners. This is the period that bridges statutory education and the world of work, and it contributes directly to the aim of creating long-term Welsh speakers.

This research was intended to learn about the views and experiences of post-16 learners in Welsh-medium or bilingual education in schools and further education colleges across Wales. The aim was to find out their reasons for choosing Welsh-medium education, their views on the provision and their intention in terms of their future education and careers.

Sample

Purposive sampling was used to obtain feedback from young people in schools and further education colleges that provide education through the medium of Welsh or bilingually. Schools and further education colleges were contacted in a cross section of areas and learners were interviewed via an online questionnaire in early 2023. 1063 individuals responded from 37 different education establishments, including five further education colleges and 32 schools. 637 respondents were Year 12 or 13 learners in schools and 426 attended further education colleges. Respondents were asked to note their ability in Welsh, on a five-point scale, and their response is shown in Figure 1 below.

As the purpose of the questionnaire was to gather the views and experiences of learners who were likely to receive some of their education through the medium of Welsh, the discussion below, in many cases, focuses only on the response of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh. This also allows for a fairer comparison between the outcomes of school and college learners.

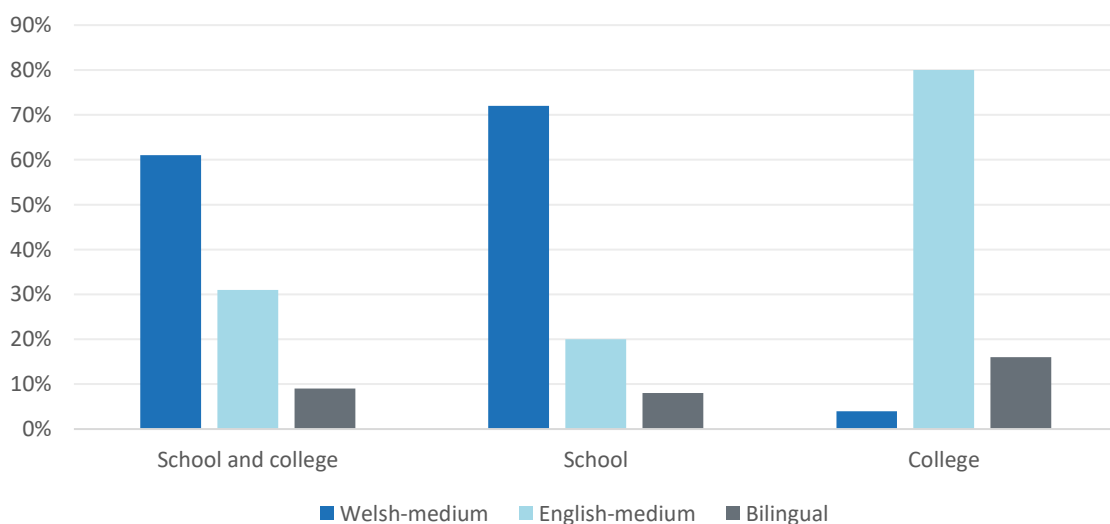
Figure 1: Learners' perception of their ability in Welsh

| | Total | School | College |
|------------------------------------|-------|--------|---------|
| I am fluent in Welsh | 70% | 93% | 35% |
| I can speak a fair amount of Welsh | 9% | 5% | 15% |
| I can speak a little Welsh | 8% | 0% | 20% |
| I can say just a few words | 8% | 0% | 19% |
| I cannot speak Welsh | 4% | 0% | 10% |

Language medium of study

Respondents were asked what subjects they were studying, and in which language they were studying those subjects.

Figure 2: The percentage of subjects fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh study through the medium of Welsh, through the medium of English, or bilingually

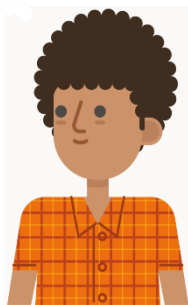
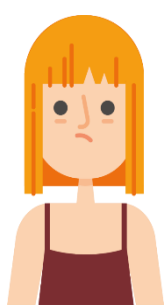


Considering all the fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh, we see that they studied 61% of their subjects through the medium of Welsh. When comparing school and college learners with each other, however, there is a big difference between the percentage of subjects that school learners studied through the medium of Welsh (72%) and the percentage that college learners studied through the medium of Welsh (4%). There was also a big difference between the two cohorts in terms of the percentage of subjects they were studying through the medium of English. 33% of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh studied all their subjects through the medium of Welsh. This equated to 44% of school learners and only 1% of college learners who responded to the questionnaire, which is another marked difference between the two cohorts.

Context for the above results is found in Welsh Government statistics on Welsh-medium and bilingual learning activities in post-16 education during 2021-22.¹ That year, 15.2% of school sixth form activities, and only 0.2% of further education institutions' activities, were Welsh-medium. When comparing activities labelled as bilingual, we see that 5.9% of school sixth form activities were in that category and 3.7% of further education institutions' activities.

The questionnaire asked fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh, who weren't studying every subject through the medium of Welsh, for their reasons for not doing so. Three main replies became apparent.

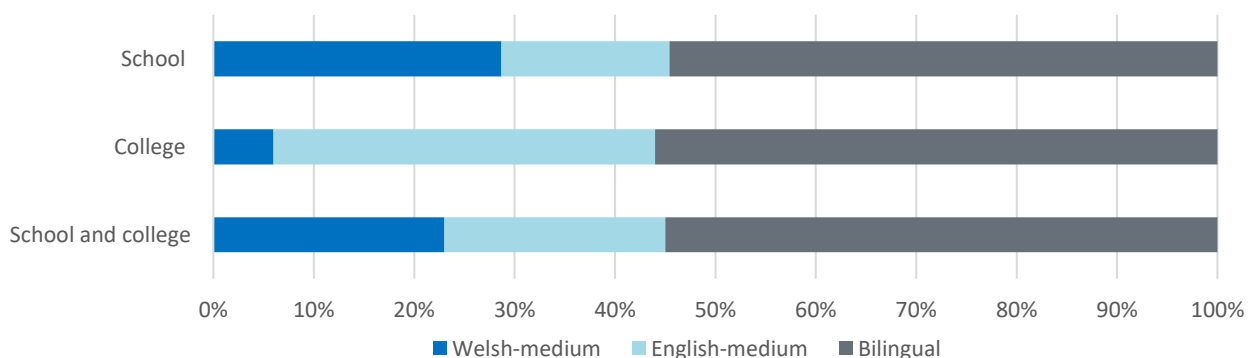
Figure 3: The three most common reasons why fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh do not study through the medium of Welsh



- A perception that their English language skills are stronger and that studying through the medium of English is easier for them
- Subject/subjects are not available in Welsh
- A perception that further studies are likely to be in English or that there are better study prospects in English

The fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh were asked whether they would prefer to study through the medium of Welsh or English or bilingually.

Figure 4: The ideal language medium of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh

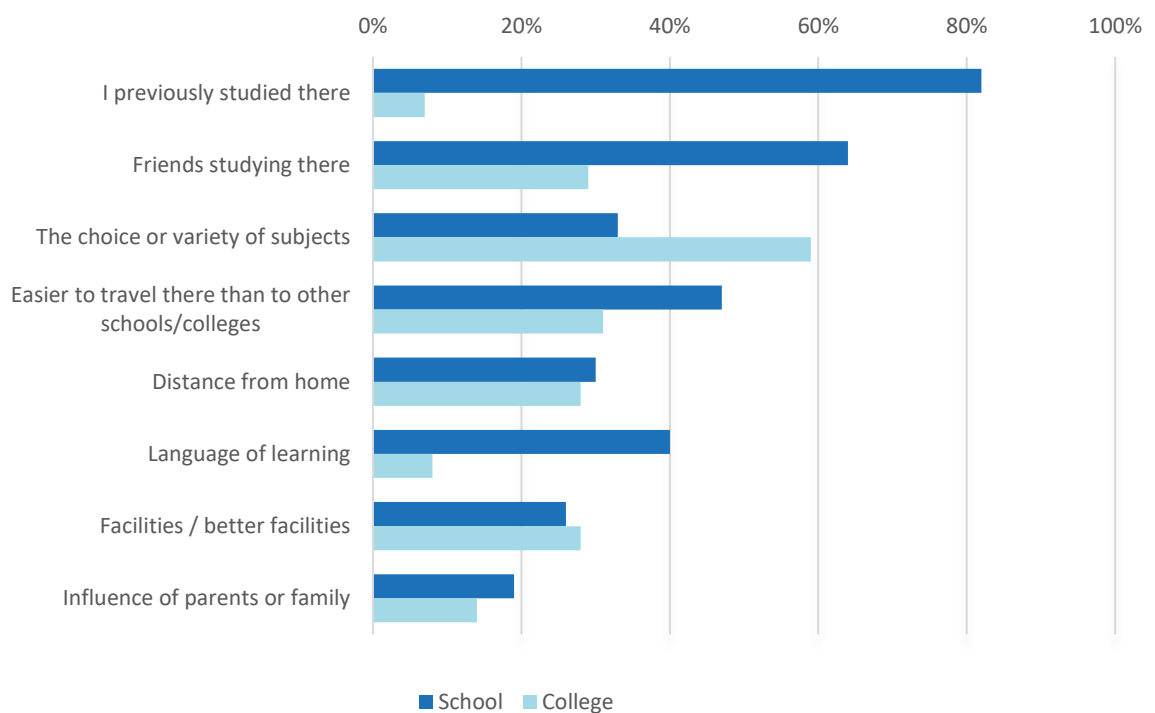


¹ [Ad-hoc statistical requests: 19 to 30 June 2023 | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/ad-hoc-statistical-requests-19-to-30-june-2023)

The fact that over half of the fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh state that they favour bilingual education raises further questions. For example, what does bilingual education mean to those learners? Bilingual education can vary considerably in terms of how and when both languages are used. The outcomes of that education can also vary considerably, in the context of learner attainment in both languages and the evidence that it is Welsh-medium education that is most likely to ensure that learners have strong skills in Welsh and English. It is important to consider these results in the context of learners' views on the importance of the Welsh language to them. These statistics must be treated with caution therefore and further research carried out with post-16 learners in order to establish what bilingual education means to them.

Reasons for choosing a place of study

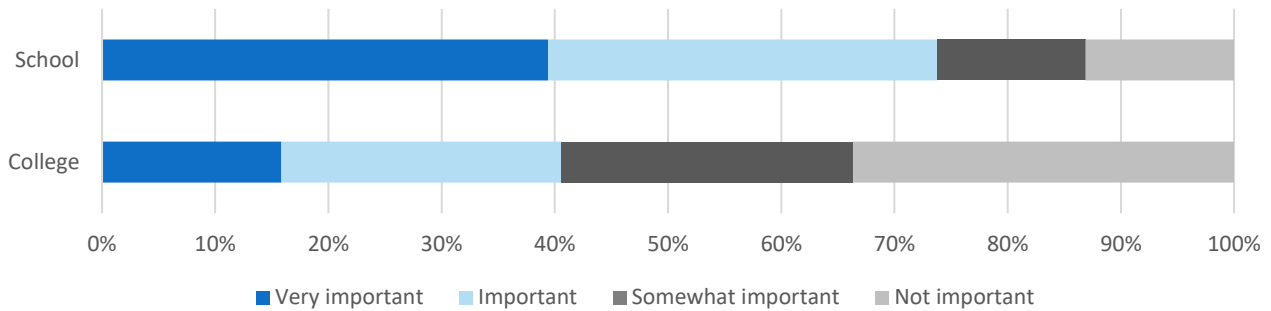
Figure 5: Learners' most common reasons for choosing their place of study



The figure above shows some interesting differences between learners at school and further education colleges, in the context of their reasons for choosing their place of study. For example, the language of learning is a factor identified by five times more school learners than college learners. In addition, the choice or variety of subjects is seen as a factor identified by over half of the college learners, compared to a third of the school learners.

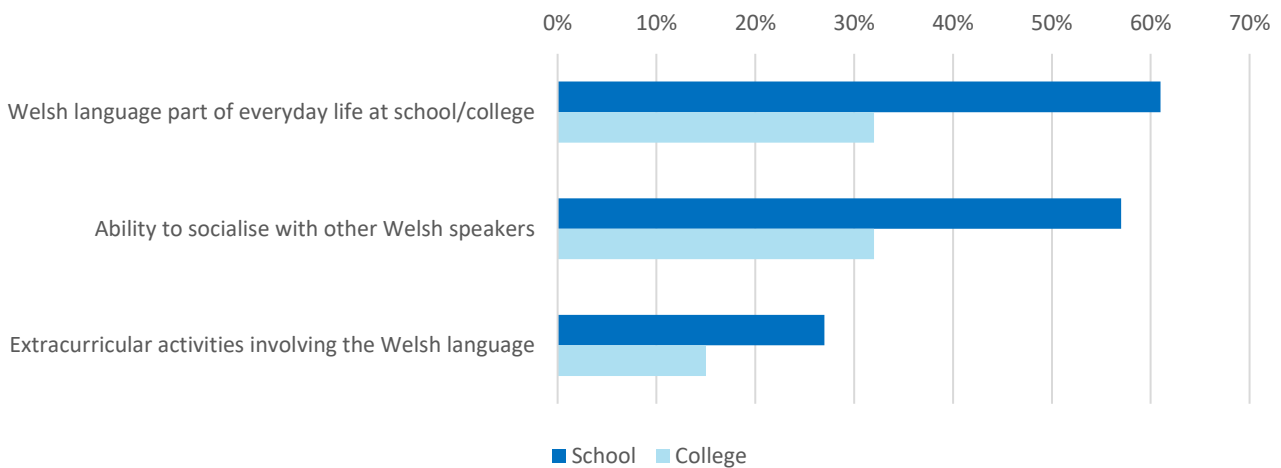
The sample was asked how important it was to them that the school or college they chose offered an opportunity to study through the medium of Welsh. For 65% of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh, the availability of Welsh-medium provision was important or very important when selecting a place of study. Among the school learners, this was true of 73% of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh, compared to the equivalent figure of 41% for further education college learners. Their response is shown below.

Figure 6: The importance of Welsh-medium provision to fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh when choosing a place of study



They were also asked about the importance of other opportunities to use the Welsh language and the learners' response is shown below.

Figure 7: The percentage of Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh who noted that the following matters were important to them when selecting a place of study



Experiences and opinions regarding Welsh or bilingual education

Learners were asked to describe their experience of studying through the medium of Welsh or bilingually, and their response is shown below.

Figure 8: The experience of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh in schools

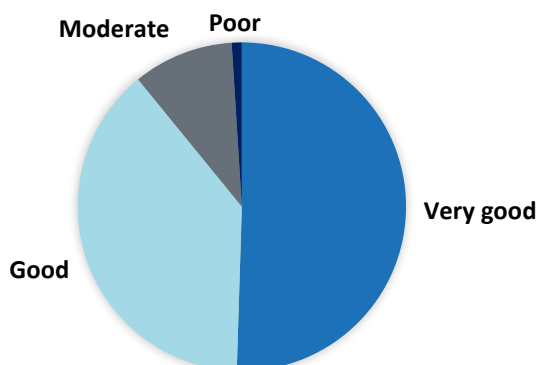
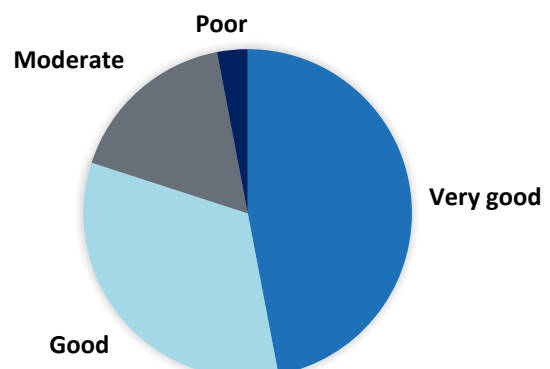
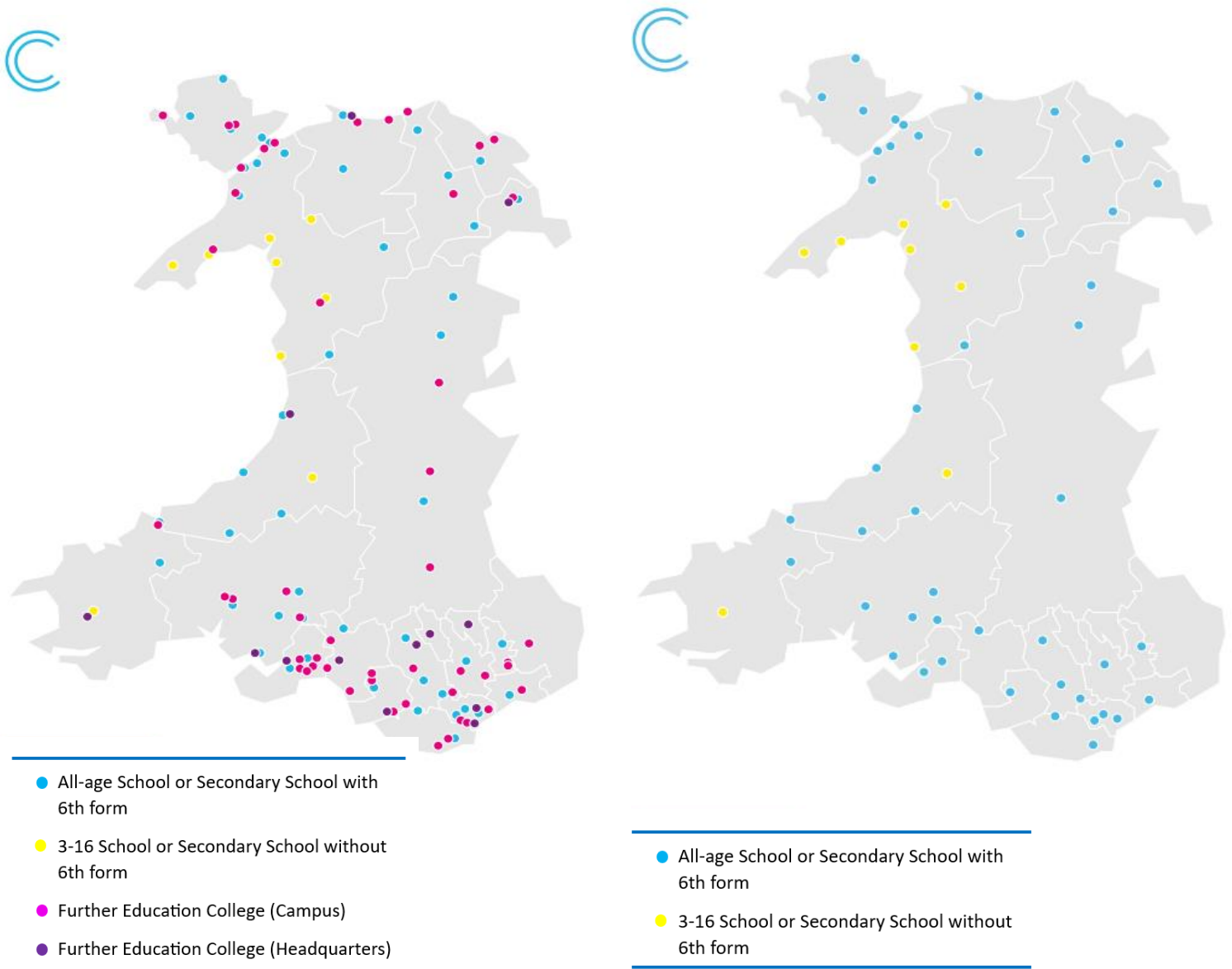


Figure 9: The experience of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh in colleges



90% of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh who attended schools said that their experience was good or very good. The corresponding figure for further education colleges was 80%. For learners at schools and further education colleges, the main reasons for noting that their experience was good or very good were good teachers, good support and that the education through the medium of Welsh was excellent.

Figure 10: Schools and further education colleges providing Welsh-medium or bilingual education, based on a mapping exercise in 2021



The questionnaire asked learners to what extent they agreed with the statement that there were sufficient opportunities to study through the medium of Welsh in their area. 60% agreed or strongly agreed. The proportion of positive responses varied according to the region where learners studied. In mid Wales 78% of learners agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, and it should be noted that the vast majority of responses came from the west of the region. In north Wales 68% of learners agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. In south-west Wales the proportion was 57% and in south-east Wales 47% of learners agreed or strongly agreed. The maps above show the location of schools and further education colleges in Wales that provide Welsh-medium or bilingual education. There is a clear lack of post-16 provision in several areas.

Using the Welsh Language in the future

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with a number of statements about using the Welsh language in the future and their response is shown below.

Figure 11: The percentage of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh in schools and colleges who agreed or strongly agreed with the statements below

| | School | College |
|---|--------|---------|
| I'm proud that I'm able to speak Welsh | 96% | 92% |
| Being able to speak Welsh will help in my career or with my job prospects | 87% | 80% |
| I am confident that I have skills to use Welsh in my career | 93% | 81% |
| I am confident that I will use Welsh in my career | 60% | 58% |

The vast majority of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh were proud that they could speak Welsh and considered their language skills to be advantageous to them in the context of their career prospects. A high percentage of them were confident in their Welsh language skills for their careers but, significantly, a lower percentage were confident that they would *use* those skills. This raises a question about learners' perception of opportunities to use the Welsh language in the workplace and suggests a need to discuss that and to raise learners' awareness of the opportunities that could be available to them in the future.

Respondents were asked whether they intended to continue their education after leaving their current place of study and whether they intended to do so in Wales.

Figure 12: The intentions of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh in terms of continuing their education after leaving their current place of study

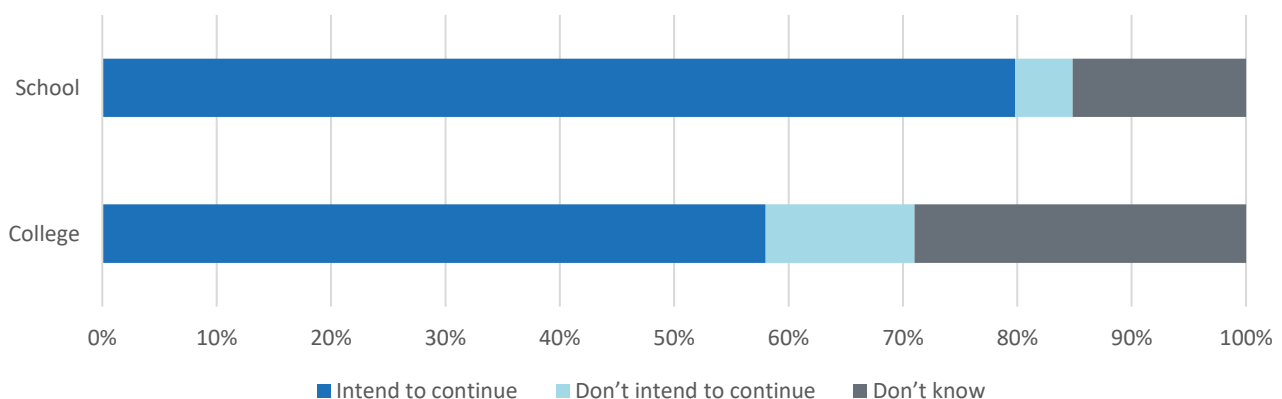
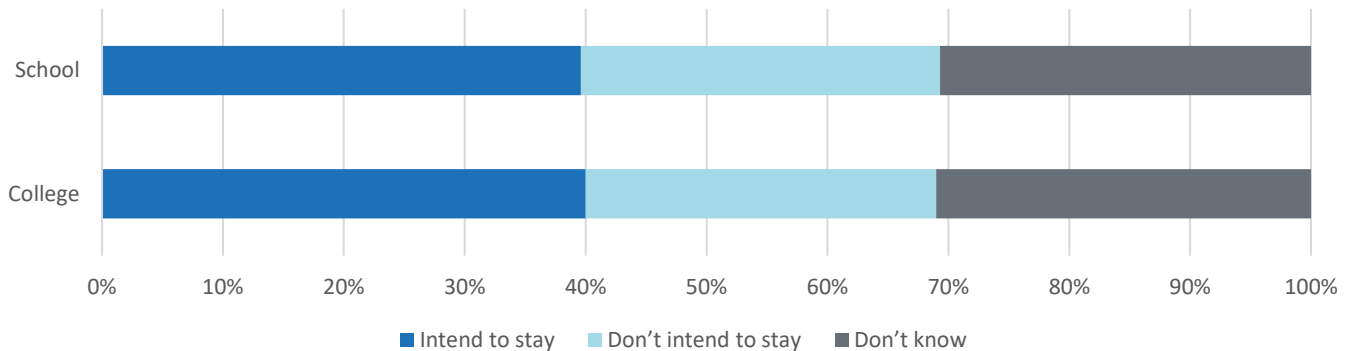


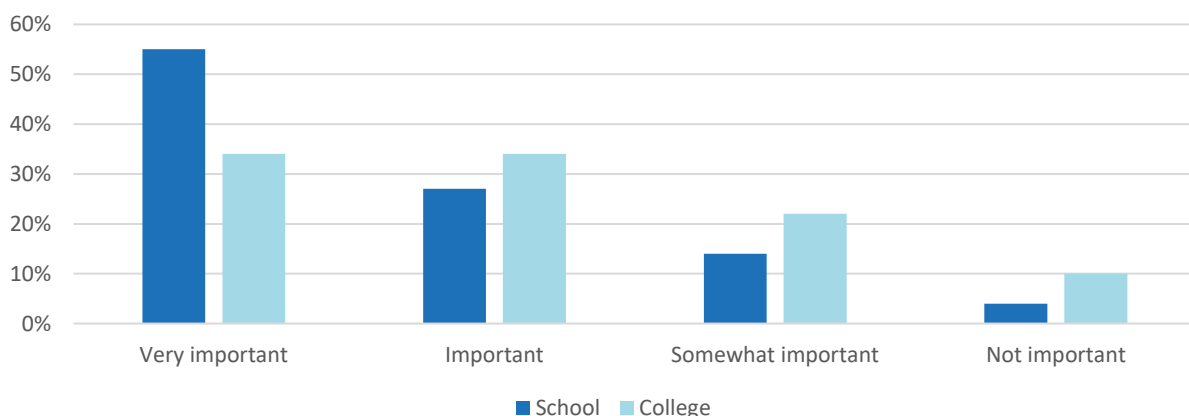
Figure 13: The intentions of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh, who wish to continue their education, in terms of staying in Wales



Only 40% of school and college learners who are fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh intend to stay in Wales. Context for this figure is found in Welsh Government statistics on the cross-border flow of students in 2020/21.² These statistics show that 62% of undergraduate and postgraduate students from Wales went to universities in Wales, while 37% went to universities in England. In the same year, 95% of students from England went to universities in England and 95% of students from Scotland went to universities in Scotland. This shows that a substantial percentage of students from Wales leave their country to study, compared with the situation of students from England and Scotland.

The questionnaire respondents who are fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh, and who said that they intended to continue studying in Wales, were asked how important it was to be able to study in Welsh or bilingually in their next place of study. 79% of school learners intend to continue their education after leaving school. Of the 40% who intended to stay in Wales, 82% of them, the vast majority, noted that being able to continue to study through the medium of Welsh or bilingually was very important or important to them. 58% of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh in further education colleges were planning to continue their education after completing their course. Of the 40% of these learners who intended to stay in Wales, 68% considered that being able to continue to study through the medium of Welsh or bilingually was very important or important to them.

Figure 14: The views of fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh regarding the importance of being able to continue to study through the medium of Welsh or bilingually in their next place of study



² [Cross border flow of full-time students by level of study \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/cross-border-flow-of-full-time-students-by-level-of-study)

Main findings and considerations

Importance of the Welsh language and education through the medium of Welsh

- The **results show very clearly the importance of the Welsh language to learners in Wales**. The vast majority of Welsh speakers are proud to be able to speak the language (Figure 11). They also note that opportunities to study through the medium of Welsh are important when selecting a place of study, as well as opportunities to use Welsh as part of everyday life at school or college and with their friends (Figures 6 and 7). These findings are significant in the context of future planning of post-compulsory provision.
- Also very positive was the clear message from the majority of learners across Wales that their **experience of Welsh-medium or bilingual education was good or very good** (Figures 8 and 9).

Differences in the situation of the Welsh language in schools and colleges

- The research highlighted **differences between school and college learners, in terms of their perception of their ability in Welsh, the language medium of their education and their attitudes as regards the importance of the Welsh language**.
- Differences in provision in both types of organisation must be taken into account when interpreting the above outcomes, and also when **developing future policies in post-compulsory education**.

Barriers

- **Learners' reasons for not choosing to study subjects through the medium of Welsh** need to be considered further. The **lack of Welsh-medium provision**, particularly in more vocational areas, is a difficulty that the post-16 sector needs to address. This will include ensuring that there is a **sufficient number of staff with Welsh language skills to teach the whole range of subjects** in this educational stage. It is important to recognise that the Cymraeg 2050 strategy³ and the *Further Education and Apprenticeship Welsh-medium Action Plan*⁴ aim to address these issues.
- As Figure 3 suggests, the **lack of confidence among learners in their Welsh language skills compared to their English language skills** is a matter for further consideration in the context of the linguistic attainment of learners within the education system in Wales. Linked to this is the perception of some learners that English language skills will be most advantageous to them for further study. This highlights a need to raise learners' awareness of the opportunities that are available to them to use their Welsh as they continue their education, and the advantages of doing so. It also underlines that which was indicated by the responses to the questionnaire, that is, that less than half of the learners who are fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh intend to stay in Wales (Figure 13).

Bilingualism

- The fact that over half of the fluent Welsh speakers and those who can speak a fair amount of Welsh state that they favour bilingual education raises further questions as to **what exactly is meant by**

³ [Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/cymraeg-2050)

⁴ [towardscymraeg2050.pdf \(colegcymraeg.ac.uk\)](https://colegcymraeg.ac.uk/towardscymraeg2050.pdf)

bilingual education (Figure 4).

- The above matters must be considered in the context of **learners' perception of the importance of the Welsh language to their careers and the extent to which different language models of education are likely to develop the skills needed by employers in Wales**. As noted above, the outcomes of bilingual education can vary greatly in the context of learner attainment in both languages, and it is known that it is Welsh-medium education that is most likely to lead to strong skills in Welsh and English. It must be ensured that the linguistic attainment of all learners is supported robustly and practically at every stage of their education, and **Welsh language provision in the post-16 sector needs to be strengthened in order to achieve that**.

Supporting progress and progression

- The Welsh Government's Cymraeg 2050 Strategy states that 'young people will need to be aware of the benefits of continuing to develop their Welsh language skills for the workplace and the importance of using the language regularly in order to maintain fluency and confidence'.⁵ **Increasing the numbers studying post-16 qualifications through the medium of Welsh will be vital in order to ensure effective progression from statutory education to further education and the world of work**.
- It is clear that Welsh speakers see their Welsh language skills as an advantage to them in the context of their career prospects. A high percentage of them were confident in their Welsh language skills for their careers but, significantly, **a lower percentage were confident that they would use those skills** (Figure 11). As discussed above, this suggests a need to discuss learners' perception of opportunities to use the Welsh language in the workplace. The responses also highlighted the **importance of continuity of Welsh-medium or bilingual provision as learners progress to further studies** (Figure 14). These results emphasise the importance of increasing opportunities to use the Welsh language in the workplace, which is one of the Welsh Language Commissioner's strategic priorities. Consideration should also be given to whether providing more opportunities to study through the medium of Welsh would be a means of increasing the numbers who choose to continue to study in Wales and reduce the numbers of skilled young people who leave the country.

Strengthening the position of the Welsh language in the post-compulsory sector: looking to the future

- The results raise **significant questions about how to strengthen Welsh language provision in the post-compulsory sector and what the direction of public policy will be** in this area. These questions are extremely timely, considering that the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research is currently being established. An important development took place in 2017 when the *Review of the Activities of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol* was published.⁶ The report recommended that the Welsh Government extend the role of the Coleg to become a recognised national strategic body for the development of the Welsh language across the higher education, further education and work-based learning sectors. Following this the *Further Education and Apprenticeship Welsh-medium Action Plan* was published in

⁵ [Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/cymraeg-2050-a-million-welsh-speakers)

⁶ [review-of-the-activities-of-the-coleg-cymraeg-cenedlaethol-the-task-and-finish-group-s-report-welsh-language-and-welsh-medium-education.pdf \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales/review-of-the-activities-of-the-coleg-cymraeg-cenedlaethol-the-task-and-finish-group-s-report-welsh-language-and-welsh-medium-education.pdf)

2019. The plan is based on the vision that all learners should be enabled to maintain or develop their skills in the Welsh language. The plan places clear responsibilities on a number of partners over the short, medium and long term in relation to six key strategic areas, including increasing staffing capacity, improving provision and expanding resources. The Coleg has established a Post-16 Strategic Board which includes representatives from further education institutions, apprenticeship providers and employers, and ensures that learners' voices are also heard. These developments are very welcome and the Coleg needs to be supported in its efforts to bring about far-reaching changes in the provision of post-16 Welsh language education.

- In general terms, the post-16 education sector must act positively to support the development of the Welsh language skills of young people in Wales, at all levels of proficiency. In order to do this, it **will be necessary to address some of the obvious barriers that prevent some learners from studying through the medium of Welsh** and ensure that there are opportunities to study through the medium of Welsh in all types of post-16 education institutions.
- As well as strengthening provision in the further education sector, careful consideration must also be given to how to support and build on the provision where it is currently at its strongest. In most areas of Wales, **that provision is at its strongest in schools, and national consideration needs to be given to the role of Welsh-medium and bilingual schools in the post-compulsory education landscape of the future.** This should include planning and collaboration at a regional level between schools and further education colleges to ensure that adequate provision is available and is being promoted in order to increase the number of post-16 learners in Welsh-medium education across Wales. It is vital that this strategic planning takes place in the interests of the Welsh language, and reinforces the strong provision that currently exists in schools.
- Finally, there is a need to consider the **messages conveyed to learners about the value and importance of Welsh language skills** and how to support learners to make the most of the provision available. As part of this, it should be ensured that any bilingual provision and Welsh language provision fully support the linguistic attainment of all learners, and it is essential that this **is considered in the context of developing the language skills of the workforce of the future.**

