



Professional learning for early-career teachers in Wales

Introduction

In March 2026, the Welsh Government published their Strategic Education Workforce Plan for Schools (SEWPfS), outlining short, medium and long-term actions to support Wales' educational workforce (Welsh Government, 2026). The plan acknowledges challenges presented by significant educational reform such as the Curriculum for Wales and growing pressures within the sector related to teacher recruitment and retention, teacher wellbeing and increasingly complex learner needs (Welsh Government, 2026).

The SEWPfS highlights that consistent and career-long access to high-quality and evidence-informed professional learning is a crucial driver of the development and professionalism of teaching practitioners in Wales (Welsh Government, 2025a). Furthermore, the OECD's *'Future of Teaching in Wales'* report (OECD, 2025), which informed the development of the SEWPfS, noted the importance of professional learning and support for early-career teachers (ECTs). Dysgu, the new national professional learning and leadership body across Wales, will play a central role in supporting the delivery of the SEWPfS and ensuring the quality of teaching and learning more broadly.

To help strengthen professional learning in Wales, in 2025 the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) was asked by the Welsh Government to explore international approaches

to professional learning for early career teachers.

To do this, WCPP commissioned international experts to each produce a case study on professional learning for early career teachers from six countries or regions. In addition, WCPP hosted two workshops to gain further insight and enable discussion on the applicability of the international approaches to Wales' education system. Both workshops brought together key stakeholders from the Welsh Government, Dysgu and the Education Workforce Council, as well as the international experts and three Wales-based education experts¹.

This policy briefing presents an overview of the policy context as well as the findings from the case studies and the potential considerations for the Welsh Government, Dysgu, EWC and education system leaders.

What is professional learning and why is it important?

Professional learning (sometimes referred to as 'professional development') refers to 'the product of external and workplace-embedded professional development activities that assist teachers to acquire new knowledge and help them improve their practices in ways that will benefit student learning' (Bobis and Tripet, 2023, p518).

In Wales, professional learning activities include, but are not limited to: mentorship, INSET

¹ Professor Alma Harris, Dr Alexandra Morgan and Lucy Crehan were the three Wales-based education experts involved in this project.

days, engaging with a professional learning community, formal training days and engaging with Wales' online professional learning platform, Hwb (Welsh Government, 2024). In addition to this, the Masters in Educational Practice (MEP) 'has been a significant development in Wales providing an important link between initial teacher education and early professional development [...] having the potential to ensure that teachers' professional learning can be supported in a systematic way throughout their careers' (Furlong, 2015, p18). The Professional Doctorate in Education programmes and National Professional Qualification (NPQ) frameworks are also available to early-career teachers in Wales (Hodgkin et al, 2024).

There is ample evidence to suggest that effective professional learning is crucial to improving student outcomes. Previous research by WCPP found that continued professional development plays an important role in closing the attainment gap (Day, 2015) and supports teachers in meeting their learners' needs (Fletcher-Wood, 2022).

As well as being linked to improved student outcomes, evidence indicates that teacher professional learning may be associated with teacher retention, or with factors which may affect retention (Jerrim and Sims, 2019). The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) found through a series of rapid evidence assessments that high-quality professional learning and support may support the retention of teachers, especially newly-qualified teachers (Taylor et al, 2023). Based on evidence of the benefits of professional learning, modelling in England suggests that not only could effective professional development improve the wellbeing of teachers, but that it could lead to 12,000 more full-time equivalent teachers staying within the profession annually (Van den Brande and Zuccollo, 2021).

In Wales, professional learning is also essential to support teachers, especially those early in their career, to respond to significant recent

educational reform. For example, the Curriculum for Wales provides schools and teachers with more autonomy over the curriculum and requires teachers to have the confidence, knowledge and ability to design and deliver the curriculum (Evans, 2023).

The current provision of professional learning in Wales

Prior to the SEWPFs, the Welsh Government introduced a range of national professional learning initiatives to support teachers, particularly in the context of ongoing educational reform. Central to this is a dedicated professional learning area on Hwb, an online learning platform accessible to all schools in Wales, to provide a single point of access to high-quality professional learning, launched in 2023. This was supported by £12 million in additional funding allocated directly to schools during 2023-24 to enable collaborative professional learning across schools and networks (Welsh Government, 2024).

Beyond these resources, the Welsh Government have established several structured programmes. For example, the Camau i'r Dyfodol project supports practitioners in building capacity for curriculum design, as well as a national endorsement process, led by a National Endorsement Panel, providing quality assurance for professional learning programmes. Higher education institutions also continue to play an integral role, with the National Professional Enquiry Project (NPEP) expanding professional enquiry capacity across the system.

For early-career teachers specifically, newly qualified teachers (NQTs) are entitled to a 20% reduction in their teaching timetable during the statutory induction period: 10% for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA), and a further 10% for professional learning activities such as peer observation and mentoring. Following induction, the National Professional

Learning Entitlement² promotes the support that all practitioners are entitled to, including six INSET days per school year and access to Professional Learning Passports to support reflection and self-directed development.



Wales has established a national infrastructure for professional learning, including defined entitlements, dedicated funding, and an expanding online resource base (Welsh Government, 2024). The ethos of collaboration embedded in the National Professional Learning Entitlement reflects the desire for an ambitious and coherent vision for the Welsh education system. It emphasises a research-informed approach and the school-as-learning-organisation principles, in which schools continuously develop their practice through collaboration and where practitioners engage in reflective enquiry and the shared use of evidence to inform practice (Welsh Government, 2025b).

However, the Strategic Education Workforce Plan for Schools acknowledges that professional learning provision remains inconsistent in its quality and impact. Once the induction period ends, responsibility for professional learning relies largely on the individual schools, leading to significant variation in the support that ECTs receive (Hutt et al, 2024). Additionally, research indicates that workload pressures often reduce the time available for practitioners to meaningfully engage with professional learning

opportunities (Welsh Government, 2016). This poses a particular concern for ECTs still establishing their practice. Challenges such as high workload and complex pupil needs are likely to be even more overwhelming for ECTs, potentially contributing to their high attrition rate (Admiraal et al, 2023). Therefore, there is a need to strengthen professional learning for ECTs in Wales (Welsh Government, 2026).

‘What works’ evidence surrounding professional learning in Wales

Teachers have a significant influence on pupils’ academic progress, yet the quality of teaching varies within Wales, as in the UK more widely. Research suggests that there is a positive relationship between being taught by a succession of high-performing and qualified teachers and students’ short- and long-term educational success (Lee, 2018). Evidence shows that well-designed professional learning does improve both quality of teaching and pupil learning outcomes (Day, 2015; Fletcher-Wood and Zuccollo, 2020), but the impact depends greatly on the design and delivery of professional development programmes. This raises to the question of what constitutes high-quality and effective professional learning.

A comprehensive framework for high-quality professional learning was produced by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in their ‘Effective Professional Development’ guidance report (EEF, 2021a). Through a systematic review and meta-analysis, the report coded papers discussing professional learning using a set of 14 ‘mechanisms’ that evaluated the effectiveness of each programme. The 14 mechanisms, defined as ‘empirically-evidenced general principles about how people learn and change their practice’, were grouped into four purposes key to effective professional learning:

- helping teachers gain new insights;
- pursuing new goal-directed behaviours;
- acquiring new skills or techniques;

² The National Professional Learning Entitlement has been discontinued

- embedding those changes in practice.

See Annex 1 for more detail on the 14 EEF Mechanisms for Effective Professional Learning.

The evidence suggests a clear relationship between the number of mechanisms incorporated into professional development programmes and impact on pupil outcomes. Programmes that incorporated no mechanisms had effect sizes close to zero, compared to two months of additional pupil progress in programmes that incorporated almost all 14 mechanisms. Crucially, programmes that include at least one mechanism from each of the four groups are more likely to result in long-term changes to practice.



Case study findings

Our research involved supporting the Welsh Government to engage with evidence of policy and practice from outside of Wales to support reflection about how professional learning for early-career teachers could be strengthened in Wales. To do this, WCPP commissioned international experts to produce a case study on professional learning for ECTs from: Australia, the Basque Country, Finland, New Zealand, Norway and Singapore. In addition to this, WCPP hosted two workshops with key stakeholders from the Welsh Government, Dysgu and the Education Workforce Council, as well as the international experts and three Wales-based education experts to enable discussion on the applicability (or not) of international approaches to Wales' education system.

Many of the case study geographies share a similar profile to Wales, including in size, bilingualism or multilingualism, and significant levels of rurality. However, whilst this provides a useful perspective on approaches that might be effective within the Welsh context, it is important to note that the approaches in each case study are not intended to be directly replicated in Wales. Instead they highlight key features or aspects of professional learning for ECTs which system leaders in Wales may wish to consider or reflect upon.

The approaches outlined within each case study are diverse, however they do point to a number of high-level shared principles that international experts identified as likely to contribute to an effective professional learning system:

- Professional learning is most effective when viewed as a continuum, meaning a career-long process that begins during initial teacher education and continues throughout the early career phase and beyond;
- Several international approaches combine system-level structures that enable local flexibility through national or regional scaffolding with locally delivered programmes shaped by schools, local authorities and professional networks;
- Practice-based learning helps ensure that professional learning is embedded into day-to-day practices rather than relying primarily on isolated training events;
- Adopting an asset-based view of ECTs, recognising their contributions to school communities, may help them feel more valued and better supported.

In addition to these shared principles, the case study authors highlighted several specific practices that may be worthy of consideration in Wales:

- Paid and trained mentor provision was recognised as a key component of professional learning provision across a number of case studies. Wales could explore the idea of establishing a more formalised

mentoring programme rather than the high variable mentoring currently in place;

- Collaborative professional learning is another prominent feature among the case studies. For Wales, the case studies highlight that strengthening opportunities for cross-school collaboration, particularly within rural contexts, could support the sharing of expertise and professional knowledge across the sector;
- Structured reflection is identified as a key mechanism linking professional learning with professional judgement and classroom decision-making. Reflection could be further embedded within ECT's experiences and more consistently integrated across schools in Wales through structured reflective practices;
- Multi-lingual professional learning that is relevant to the classroom-context could strengthen Wales' bilingual and Welsh-medium priorities with a stronger focus on pedagogy and practical application rather than solely on language proficiency.

Within our **final report**, where applicable, we also highlight the EEF mechanisms relevant to these principles.

Implications for Wales

At a time of significant educational reform and growing pressures within the sector, evidence suggests that there is a clear need for high-quality professional learning for ECTs, within Wales. Whilst evidence suggests that the quality of professional learning is highly dependent on design and implementation (Hutt et al, 2024), the current provision of professional learning places considerable responsibility on the individual school once the induction period ends.

Identified within the international case studies are number of shared principles and practices which collectively may offer valuable insight into how to develop and support effective professional learning in Wales.

However, providing high-quality professional learning should not be regarded as a singular

solution to the challenges facing the sector. Indeed, addressing the broader structural and workforce issues facing the profession is essential if high-quality professional learning is to be developed, sustained and meaningfully engaged with throughout teachers' careers. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that well-designed professional learning can have a positive effect on pupil outcomes and teacher retention, or on factors that are associated with retention. Additionally, the introduction of the SEWPfS, the establishment of Dysgu, and the broader operating landscape for teachers determined by the Curriculum for Wales presents an opportunity for Wales to consider the current professional learning provision and consider how it can be strengthened and improved in the years ahead.

Annex 1: EEF Mechanisms for Effective Professional Learning

	Building knowledge	Motivating teachers	Developing teaching techniques	Embedding practice
Mechanism	- Managing cognitive load - Revisiting prior learning	- Setting and agreeing on goals - Presenting information from a credible source - Providing affirmation and reinforcement after progress	- Instruction - Social support - Modelling - Monitoring and feedback - Rehearsal	- Providing prompt and cues - Prompting action planning - Encouraging monitoring - Prompting context specific repetition

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