

Proposals for Wales Labour policies

Extending education and training to people and parts of Wales where opportunities have been fewest

The following proposals relate to adults and draw on many years experience in the Workers' Educational Association and the University of Wales, Newport's Community University of the Valleys initiative. They are founded on the recognition that adult education is a 'public good' both socially and economically, and as R.H. Tawney said in 1953, it is a 'vital element in the life of a self respecting democracy'.¹ This is because adult education:

- contributes to social justice
- offers learning opportunities for those who have had negative experiences of education in the first instance
- encourages tolerance of difference
- promotes health and well-being
- enables the fulfilment of potential
- stimulates creative expression
- encourages critical thinking and a capacity for democratic participation/active citizenship
- provides the opportunity for gaining new or updated skills
- impacts positively on the aspirations and motivation of the children & young in families with an adult learner
- inspires action and change resulting in both personal and community development

Moreover, in the words of Neil Kinnock in 1982, 'the self confidence bred by learning emancipates, and equips the individual socially, occupationally and intellectually'.²

The proposals also recognise:

- the Assembly's commitment to tackling disadvantage through Communities First and to supporting workplace learning through the Wales Union Learning Fund
- the high numbers of people lacking basic skills
- the uneven distribution of qualifications and participation in both Further and Higher Education
- the democratic deficit and disillusionment with the political process

Formal education and learning within big institutions is not appealing to everyone and people with few or no qualifications on leaving school or with low levels of self-confidence are less likely to engage with learning on these terms. This has been recognised by adult education practitioners for at least 25 years and there is a lot of good practice of community-based and workplace learning to build on for the future. Since the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act funding the funding mechanism has become increasingly constraining and the capacity for providers to be flexible and responsive to the needs of people who are the least likely to

¹ Cited in Kinnock, N. (1982) 'To achieve that noble goal', The Journal of the WEA South Wales District, 75th Issue, Cardiff: WEA.

² Op cit

participate in formal education has been severely restricted. The emphasis placed by policy makers on vocational skills, qualifications and accreditation has created new barriers to the participation of learners whose initial interests and goals do not coincide with such priorities. Acknowledging R.H. Tawney's belief that provision should be 'concerned not merely with the machinery of existence but the things that make it worthwhile to live'³, a broad curriculum should be funded in contrast to the growing tendency to privilege skills orientated learning.

Policy for adult education should be based on a dual commitment, that is, to both the economic and social purposes of learning.

The ability to provide childcare alongside learning for adults has been shown to be extremely effective in attracting parents of small children, especially women, within WEA over a twenty year period. ESF support has been the major source of funding and with the ending of the Objective 1 and 3 programmes the Association has been unable to sustain this support. This has had an especially detrimental effect on participation in classes in Communities First areas in particular.

Interestingly, in England the Learning and Skills Council allocates a proportion of its funding to a 'programme' called Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities. This funding can be used for capital and revenue purposes, is not conditional on learners gaining accreditation and is not paid out according to the numbers, postcodes, hours of involvement or achievement of the participants. This affords providers the opportunity to offer informal learning in a flexible and responsive way including the genuinely 'bite-sized' learning that has been shown to be so useful in attracting learners and providing a springboard for further learning which may in time, and at the learner's pace, involve accreditation.

Promoting literacy and numeracy skills

The advertising of discrete Basic Skills courses and recruitment of learners onto them has always been difficult; there is an understandable reluctance of people to admit to having low literacy and numeracy skills. WEA have addressed this in two ways – through working with Trade Unions and with a different approach of supporting learners within the general curriculum.

Trade Unions, through Union Learning Representatives, have a pivotal role to play in identifying people with basic skills needs and supporting them in accessing the learning they need. This is a fertile area for collaboration between a provider such as WEA, with well-developed links with Unions across Wales, and, subject to adequate funding being in place through a combination of additional DCELLS funding and WULF projects, considerably more provision could be made to address the problem.

By 'embedding' Basic Skills support across the curriculum and offering an OCN Basic Skills unit linked with each separate subject area, a larger number and range of WEA learners have been supported than through discrete provision. In this way the learner becomes aware that

³ Op cit

they could achieve more with their chosen subject by developing their basic skills.⁴ However, the 'main' tutor is not always able to support the learner fully either due to lack of time or skills and experience, so an additional specialist Basic Skills tutor is needed. This means the doubling of tutor costs with no increase in income, which is unsustainable.

Consideration should be given to provide flexible funding for this type of embedded support in order to raise general levels of Basic Skills, with a recognition that support may not be needed continually. Where discrete provision is made it should take place within communities that have been identified as having high levels of need - where people live and not where centres are based.

Providers need to be confident that Basic Skills support will be funded well into the future to plan provision and recruit staff with long-term objectives.

The emphasis in any policy must be on encouraging learners to '*want*' to develop literacy and numeracy skills not to suggest that they have a '*problem*' and they can get help.

Encouraging a return to learning in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and promoting progression to higher levels of learning

In recent years ESF support for community learning activity, especially through Objective 1 Priority 4 – Lifelong Learning for All, has enabled providers to remove a number of the well-documented barriers to participation such as cost, distance and dependant care. Projects have been resourced sufficiently well to provide free courses, employ skilled development workers to encourage involvement, negotiate curriculum and support learners' progression and provide free childcare alongside courses.

Funding criteria for the Competitiveness and Convergence programmes have become overly focussed on the skills agenda and work-related outcomes. These need to be reviewed so that activity can still be funded that encourages people of all ages into learning regardless of their economic goals. The move to a smaller number of larger partnership projects appears to have resulted in a concentration of resources with large bodies with the consequence that smaller providers are dependent on the willingness of these powerful organisations for a fair share of resources.

Organisations, especially those recognised by Estyn for their expertise, with a sound track record in promoting community learning need to be resourced adequately to fulfil their potential and to be freed to provide a mix of accredited and non-accredited learning that is negotiated with people in communities so that it addresses their interests and concerns. In other words a Community Development approach needs to be adopted. The Assembly's childcare strategy needs to be developed so that organisations such as Genesis work effectively with adult education providers ensuring that learners have access to free childcare alongside learning opportunities.

⁴ In the Estyn inspection in Neath & Port Talbot in 2006, Estyn concluded that WEA's embedded approach to supporting learners with Basic Skills was 'outstanding'.

People in receipt of benefits, and particularly those who are required to seek employment as a condition of benefit, need to be reassured that their participation in learning will not jeopardise their incomes. There is a tension between public policy on widening participation and the priorities of other agencies such as Job Centre Plus whose role is to get people into employment as fast as possible. Particularly in a recession when competition for jobs is high participation in learning should be encouraged and should be seen as a positive outcome for unemployed claimants. Indeed incentives such as the Assembly Learning Grants should be expanded.

Stimulating active citizenship and the growth of political literacy

Adult education has a role to play in supporting the Assembly in achieving its aim of promoting active citizenship amongst people of all ages. The potential for adult education in developing the skills and knowledge required for active citizenship and democratic participation has been demonstrated through the Active Learning for Active Citizenship pilot programme run in England as part of the Home Office's Together We Can initiative⁵. With appropriate funding, the third sector would be well placed to replicate this work in Wales.

In Wales, the emphasis for the citizenship curriculum in schools has been on Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC). Paradoxically, whilst the Assembly is promoting this vital curriculum in schools, it is not included amongst the curriculum categories used by DCELLS for planning and funding post-16 education. This should be reviewed as it is vital that adults have the opportunity to learn about the crucial challenges facing the planet in respect of Climate Change and how to engage with both public policy and opinion as to how to address these.

Developing the skills of the workforce through local delivery

The University of Wales, Newport's Centre for Community and Lifelong Learning with its base in the Heads of the Valleys area at Tredegar has demonstrated over the past two years that universities have a valuable role to play in providing local learning opportunities on a part-time basis for employees of Small and Medium Enterprises. Applying the lessons of community-based learning to the workplace, the University has offered day and evening classes both on and off employers' premises at times that suit employees and have developed an appropriate curriculum at first year degree level that addresses the expressed needs of both employers and employees through negotiation in subject areas such as Computing, generic Business and Management skills and specific sector related areas including the Social Sciences.

This is a model which merits being rolled out more widely in both the Heads of the Valleys area and other areas without a University on their doorstep. The Convergence Fund offers an opportunity for this to happen.

Widening participation in Higher Education through community-based learning

⁵ For further information see <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/152717.pdf> [accessed 29.6.08]

A number of universities in Wales have recognised the importance of providing degree level part-time education at community venues in disadvantaged areas. However, this has often been dependent on short-term funding from sources such as the European Social Fund or special funds from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, resulting in insecurity for both students and staff. It is to be hoped that the University of the Heads of the Valleys Initiative will be financed adequately to bring much needed stability to this kind of approach.

It has to be recognised that the process of setting up short courses and attracting and retaining learners who have low or no qualifications is labour intensive. Moreover class sizes tend to be small in Higher Education terms given the relatively small size of Valleys communities together with the poor transport links between valleys. As with other community-based learning, the provision of free childcare is a powerful attraction to parents of young children who would not otherwise be able to start to gain the qualifications that can transform their opportunities for the future. All of these elements mean that this provision is costly. However, a commitment to supporting this activity demonstrates a commitment to Social Justice, especially in the context of the historic and persistent inequalities of access to Higher Education in Wales that is epitomised in Blaenau Gwent which has the lowest level of participation in the country.

The points made above in relation to encouraging adults to return to learning are equally relevant for widening participation in Higher Education. It is essential to offer flexible and responsive curricula as a tool to engage learners who are culturally estranged from university level learning.

Not unreasonably, university widening participation initiatives have been criticised for not preparing adults for degree programmes such as Accountancy, Law and Medicine where working-class students are under-represented. The findings of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions make this task even more urgent.⁶ Universities need encouragement to experiment in this area whilst recognizing the difficulties involved.

Summary

1. Promoting literacy and numeracy skills, by embedding Basic Skills support across the curriculum and by offering discrete provision within communities and in workplaces with the help of Union Learning Representatives.
2. encourage a return to learning in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with adequate funding for specialist community education providers to offer informal learning and responsive curricula supported with free childcare, and through stronger alignment of the policies of the Convergence programme, Estyn and Job Centre Plus to support participation..
3. stimulate active citizenship and political literacy, by including citizenship in the curriculum categories for post-16 education and resourcing the third sector to replicate existing good practice.

⁶ Cabinet Office (2009) Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, [<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/227102/fair-access.pdf>] (accessed 2.8.09)

4. develop the skills of the workforce, through flexible delivery of Higher Education in or near workplaces particularly in areas with limited access to universities.

5. provide secure funding for widening participation in Higher Education through community-based learning, offering a flexible curriculum tailored to meet local needs whilst making new courses in the applied professions part of the core mission of the University of the Heads of the Valleys Initiative.