

Independent Review of the Mission and Purpose of Further Education in Wales

A response to the consultation

NIACE Dysgu Cymru

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Independent Review of the Mission and Purpose of Further Education

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NIACE Dysgu Cymru is happy for this response to be published.

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Introduction

About NIACE

1. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is the national, independent organisation for adult learning in England and Wales. As a registered charity, founded in 1921, NIACE both represents and advances the interests of all adult learners and potential learners – especially those who have benefited least from education and training. NIACE aims to improve opportunities for adult learners across all sectors with a particular focus on those adults who have not had successful access to learning in their initial education.
2. NIACE Dysgu Cymru (NDC) the Welsh arm of NIACE, conducts work in Wales supported by a Management Group, which is elected by NIACE members in Wales. The membership of NDC comprises almost all further education colleges, all Local Authorities, most higher education institutions, individuals, Careers Wales, TUC, Ufl and other representatives of a range of organisations whose focus is specifically on responding to the needs of adult learners.
3. NDC is pleased to contribute to this review and is happy to expand on any of the points made in this submission if required.
4. There are a number of specific points which we would like the review group to consider, however first we outline the context in which these points are made:

Context

5. NDC recognises the broad scope of this Review and the necessity to consider the major challenges further education will face in the future. We are particularly mindful of the changing nature of work and knowledge in an 'information society' and an increasingly globalised economy; the need to further raise skill levels and standards, the challenges and opportunities posed by migration and cultural diversity and the overarching commitment of the Welsh Assembly Government to achieving both economic prosperity and social justice. We are mindful too of the role that the sector (defined broadly) performs in providing community education for adults.

The future of further education will inevitably therefore be one which is characterised by flexibility, change and the need to respond to demand. In this response NDC will seek to clarify the role of education and training for adults in meeting these challenges.

The Importance of Adults

6. **Demography:** Demographic change, in terms of the ageing of the workforce, and the implications which flow from it is unavoidable and indisputable. Failure to recognise and address the challenges that demographic change presents would result in a further education system which will not be fit for purpose now or in the future. The falling birth rate and decline in 16-19 year olds in Wales, coupled with the raising of the retirement age and greater life expectancy mean that there will have to be enhanced learning opportunities for adults, including work-related education and training, if wider goals of economic activity and prosperity are to be achieved. We recognise that *Future Skills Wales* and the *Skills and Employment Action Plan* are central to shaping skills strategies in Wales, however we believe that current strategies fall short of what is needed to meet the challenges ahead. This is illustrated by, for example, the fact that the targets for improving basic skills in *The Learning Country: Vision into Action* fall short of those identified by the Leitch Review.

'Improving skills of young people, while essential, cannot be the sole solution to achieving world class skills. Improvements in attainment of young people can only deliver a small part of what is necessary because they comprise a small proportion of the overall

workforce. Demographic change means that there will be smaller numbers of young people flowing into the workforce towards 2020.' (Leitch 2006: 13)

The stark reality is that over 70 per cent of our 2020 workforce has already completed their compulsory education. Thus, if skills levels are to be improved, there must be at least as much emphasis upon the 'stock' of the existing workforce (whether working at present or otherwise), as upon the 'flow' of new entrants to the labour market. This will require planning for now, in the area of workplace learning, but also in shaping the future of the FE sector and its provision more broadly.

The FE sector already caters for learners of whom a majority are adults, and many of whom study on a part time basis. Thus any new system, or systems, which are developed as a result of the present Review should start from this position, rather than designing systems which are built around 14-19 year olds, and requiring adult learners and adult provision to 'fit in'. This has implications for the development of the workforce within the sector, in that skills in the education of adults should be the core of the skills of teaching and support staff. NDC recognises that there is a clear role for organisations such as LLUK in contributing to future developments in this area.

A further aspect of demographic change is migration, which is not addressed by *Learning Country: Vision into Action*. The arrival of migrant workers from the EU accession countries has created a rapid demand for adult learning provision (from ESOL¹ and Basic Skills to higher level qualifications), which will need the urgent attention of providers, funders and employers.

7. Widening participation and social justice:

In addition to the need to up-skill, if we are to achieve the ambition of the Welsh Assembly Government of becoming a 'small clever nation' we must also continue to widen participation, increase access to education and learning and remain committed to social justice. Too narrow a reliance on conventional structures of formal education will not meet the challenges Wales faces in a global economy.

We endorse the Welsh Assembly Government's consistent emphasis on these issues. However NDC believes that the future mission and purpose of further education should include a renewed emphasis on this agenda, in addition to a more acute awareness of the needs of the economy, employers and local communities. **Achieving the correct balance is crucial** and it will require, where appropriate, the establishment of clear linkages between FE and the voluntary sector, and between FE and such Welsh Assembly Government initiatives as *Communities First*, *Communities@One* and *Community Focussed Schools*. We wish to see closer links between FE and HE in this area in order to create and develop learning opportunities and progression routes for adults.

NDC is aware that some provision for adults is underpinned by ESF funding, particularly in the area of widening participation and combating economic inactivity. We believe that an audit of such ESF funded provision is necessary, in order to ensure that there is not a steep and sudden decline when the Convergence and Competitiveness funding regimes replace the existing Objective 1 and Objective 3 funding streams.

We are mindful that the role of the Workers' Education Association (WEA) falls within the Review. The WEA (North and South) performs valuable work in the area of widening participation and NDC wishes to see this work continue, on a more secure and long term funding basis.

¹ See NIACE's Committee of Inquiry into ESOL at <http://www.niace.org.uk/Projects/esol-enquiry/documents/ESOL-Inquiry-ExecutiveSummary.pdf>

A key element of developing the economy and skills of Wales, but which also addresses widening participation and social justice issues, is that of Basic Skills provision, and the wider Basic Skills strategy of the Welsh Assembly Government. We support the all-age strategy of the Welsh Assembly Government and note the recent announcement of the Minister for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills that the work of the Basic Skills Agency is to be 'taken in' to the Assembly Government in due course. We believe that this gives an opportunity for a review of the learning in the area of basic skills which can take place in wider learning contexts, whether via formal provision or in non-formal settings such as in volunteering. This 'embedding' of basic skills in wider learning contexts should form a part of the strategy, and funding should reflect this.

8. Community engagement and civic participation:

Careful consideration needs to be given on how to best engage with adults in the community. For example, if older learners are to be encouraged into schools, consideration must be given to practical issues such as access and furniture. Furthermore, for many adults, 'school' is synonymous with 'failure' and bad experiences. There is a need therefore, for significant breaking down of barriers to encourage adults in the community back into learning. At the same time, there is considerable potential for collaborative work in the area of family learning, which brings together initiatives for children and young people (such as 'Flying Start') with adult learning. Research shows that individuals engaged in learning are more likely to be involved in other valuable community activity, such as volunteering.

Similarly there is a strong correlation between learning and civic participation. The Home Office Citizenship Survey (2003)² shows a strong correlation between qualification level and community and civic participation. Those with lowest qualification levels are least likely to engage in community or civic activity. Groups particularly unlikely to engage include: those in lowest paid occupations, the unemployed, lone parents and some minority ethnic groups.

We are aware that structural reform of the sector may be considered by the Review. Should any recommendations be made regarding larger colleges or systems, NDC wishes to emphasise that in any new structures it will be important to maintain the local and community based strengths of the sector. These are strengths, made manifest in the many outreach centres of existing FEIs, which assist accessibility for adults, and ought to be maintained regardless of any proposed changes to governance and structure.

9. A Culture of Learning?

Lord Leitch talks of embedding a 'culture of learning'. NDC welcomes this concept if it is a culture which encompasses the needs of those currently excluded from the labour market as well as those in work or engaged in learning or volunteering. Such a culture could also be a powerful combative tool to the many and significant challenges facing Wales in the social, environmental and cultural spheres, as well as in the area of the economy. Migration and the opportunities and challenges of a developing multicultural society (with both Welsh and English as official languages) are examples. Developing a culture of learning, through adult education can offer citizens the knowledge and skills to understand the changing world around them, inform them in exercising democratic choice, and in ethical and political decision-making. Adult education also enables people to be intelligent consumers, which will benefit our economy, society and environment. In seeking to promote and sustain a culture of learning, the role of 'first steps' into education must be central, especially for those who are socially excluded.

10. Balancing the needs of the individual, society and the economy:

In attempting to define the current and future mission and purpose of further education we must ensure that the right balance is struck between the needs of the individual, society

² <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors289.pdf>

and economy. Too narrow a focus on one will surely result in a system that is not fit for purpose.

10.1 Economy

NDC welcomes the current recognition of the role of the further education sector in meeting the future needs of the Welsh economy. We welcomed the Leitch Review of Skills and its recognition of the importance of adult education in meeting this goal of world class skills. However we are concerned that there may be too narrow an understanding of the both the role and capacity of the further education sector to meet the needs of the economy.

In particular we have concerns about the over-simplistic definition of a 'demand led' system where clarity is required in framing the nature of 'demand' in the sense of whether this refers to employer demand or learner demand, or both. In considering employer demand, there are clear issues around the ability of micro, small and medium sized enterprises (the majority of Welsh businesses) to identify demand in a meaningful way. Similarly, whilst we are very supportive of the role of Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) we have concerns about their ability to be fully representative of the diversity of employers in Wales, particularly given their current limited capacity in Wales. In considering learner demand we also have concerns about meeting the needs of those individuals whose demands are not heard, and the ability of the system to respond to those individuals who do not make demands, yet for whom learning opportunities are crucial.

There are numerous examples of employer led initiatives from across the UK, however their success to date is limited. We advocate a partnership approach in which providers, employers and the Welsh Assembly Government work together to articulate and meet demand. A system where competition prevails would be unhelpful. The trade unions also have an important role to play in articulating and meeting demand. We would also like see closer links between FE and HE in the area of work-related training, and we support the proposals made by Leitch regarding the role of HE in this area.

In light of our earlier observations about demography (particularly the decline in numbers of young people), we are also concerned that there is sometimes an overestimation of the capacity of new entrants to the labour market being able to meet the needs of the economy. The engagement of adults in learning is crucial if we are to meet these needs.

While the proportion of older people of working age is growing, there is still not a good understanding of the different needs of adults. The retirement age is being raised and some will wish to continue to work on a flexible basis. The pace of technological change will mean that individuals will require training – and indeed career changes in many cases – into their sixties. At the same time increased life expectancy means that learning opportunities for older adults that are not related to work is a significant and growing issue.

Furthermore, many adults still lack basic and key skills, experience social exclusion and lack the confidence to improve the quality of their lives. NDC believes that learning is an extremely effective way of engaging with adults who have been isolated from both the labour market and other aspects of wider society, and further education has a crucial role to play here, not least in the area of combating economic inactivity.

10.2 Individuals

It is important to recognise that even those who engage with learning but do not go into active employment, or are learning in areas not straightforwardly related to their employment, contribute to their communities in other important ways – such as improved civic political engagement and better health (including mental health).

Practical examples are: classes that teach and encourage adults to cook, can also be useful in improving diet and nutrition; learning activities which engage adults in their local environment can empower them and increase economic, civic and political engagement.

The wider role of adult learning, and the wider benefits (to individuals and communities) which can accrue from it, is of importance in its own right. This goes further than widening participation, and relates to individual and community well-being. A further concern for us is that community based adult learning appears to be seen in the main as a 'stepping stone' into other forms of learning, rather than having a role and worth of its own. NDC would like to see this kind of provision, which by its nature should have learner demand at its centre, expanded. We recognise that providers may wish to see a more sensitive system of fees for learners, in which those that can afford higher fees pay more, in order to ensure continued provision, and that places are available at low cost for those who can least afford to pay.

In the area of state investment in this area, we recognise the transparency which arises from the introduction of the NPFS, but have concerns about its rigid implementation within community adult provision. We must ensure that there is enough flexibility in the system to respond to external demands, both from individual learners and employers and we note the discussion on this issue between DELLS, NDC and Community Learning Wales. We will continue to seek solutions in this area which provide opportunities to enhance provision for adults, rather than restrict them.

We support premium funding for the recruitment and retention of learners from disadvantage communities.

We must ensure that the further education system also caters for the needs of those potential adult learners who are not yet convinced of the value of learning and /or employment, and who will not make demands on learning providers, but nonetheless are crucial to achieving the objectives set out in documents such as *Learning Country: Vision into Action* and *Wales: A Vibrant Economy*. We spoke of embedding a 'culture of learning' above, but remain concerned that such a culture must be driven as much by learners and potential learners themselves, as by the economy and policy makers. A recent paper from the IPPR³ argues that;

'a better balance needs to be achieved between the different objectives for adult learning. Improvements in labour market outcomes for individuals, together with other benefits of learning, such as better health or social integration, should be seen as the conditions for improving macro-economic and fiscal outcomes. The new framework for adult learning needs to start with the needs of individuals rather than the needs of employer bodies' (IPPR 2007:8)

While NDC welcomes the Welsh Assembly Government's engagement with the skills agenda, we must ensure that the emphasis is on investing in individuals, and not simply investing in 'skills' (narrowly defined). NDC contends that the divide between directly work related adult education and what is termed 'adult and community learning' (ACL) is not as clear cut as is often thought, in terms of outputs for learners. For example, generic communication skills and confidence are accrued from ACL; these are themselves attributes of 'employability'.

10.3 Society and Community

In his review of public services, *Beyond Boundaries*, Sir Jeremy Beecham made clear that the future of public services in Wales should be citizen centred. NDC believes that a prerequisite for such a system is informed citizens. NDC believes that this is

³ Institute for Public Policy Research: Delorenzi, S. (2007) *Learning for Life: A New Framework for Adult Skills*, IPPR

essential for individuals to make informed choices, and if individuals are to play an active role in their communities, and wider society.

Further education has a crucial role to play in engaging with those individuals with the poorest experiences of compulsory and 'formal' education, as well as with encouraging those adults back into learning who may be economically inactive, who have been dependent on benefits for a long time or who are most excluded from society.

NDC is keen that the Review recognises the wider benefits of learning to society, whether in terms of for example, improved health, reduced rates of offending or increased civic participation. Further education has a fundamental role to play in providing tentative routes back into learning for those individuals least likely to engage in 'formal' learning.

NDC endorses the Welsh Assembly Government's *Making the Connections* agenda and believes that a recognition of the wider benefits of learning is crucial to ensuring an effective system of further education in the future. However if we are to realise such benefits, we must ensure that further education is flexible to meet the needs of the diversity of individuals and employers.

NDC supports the development of Community Learning Plans, to be drawn up by providers, and community and voluntary groups, in the wider context of responsiveness to learner demand. We recognise that provision which follows from Community Learning Plans may be delivered by a range of providers, but that there has to be one accountable body (whether LEA or college, or a body based on a larger spatial plan area)⁴ to lead the planning and convening of Community Learning Plan groups which should comprise representatives from providers and stakeholders (including HE), community organisations, and, where possible, learner representation. NDC would welcome the opportunity to assist in the development of such systems.

11. Learning Pathways:

NDC welcomes the changes to the system of compulsory schooling in Wales that have occurred since devolution, and the recognition of the need for more tailored learning pathways for individuals (for example 14-19 Learning Pathways, Welsh Baccalaureate). It is important to recognise that learning is not a linear activity. In fact, various forms of learning can occur at different times of life. As such NDC would like to see greater recognition of the diverse ways in which adults learn.

Learning in one form may lead to learning in an altogether different form, and perhaps back again. Learning enables individuals to manage change in their lives. The more informal community based learning that offers a safe environment for a new learner is often seen as a 'first step', from which she or he can move on to further learning (although, as we point out elsewhere in this response, this is just *one* role of community based learning). In practice, as learners progress, some may need to revisit that safe environment from time to time as they broaden their horizons.

Whilst we believe that community-based adult learning offers more than taster provision prior to qualifications-based provision, it is important to recognise the role of informal, non-formal and non-accredited learning in providing key skills and building confidence to participate in wider society, as well as often being the first steps to additional learning, qualifications and skills. As discussed earlier in this response, the broad conception of 'skill' assists in breaking down what are often artificial boundaries between work-related and community learning. NDC also welcomes the development of the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (CQFW) for the flexibility it provides individuals,

⁴ See our earlier point in Section 8, regarding the need to maintain the community based nature of FE.

providers and employers as well as Welsh Assembly Government's recognition of the need for further research on the valorisation of informal learning⁵.

The further education sector has an absolutely crucial role to play in providing these diverse routes back into learning for adults. In light of the issues of demography outlined above, too narrow a focus on the learning pathways of young people, or too simple an understanding of the complexity of routes for adult learners will not result achieve the numbers of individuals required to meet the social and economic needs of Wales.

Furthermore, in terms of achieving parity of esteem between provision for adults and young people, NDC would welcome a review of current legislation under which the Welsh Assembly Government has a different legal responsibility for 16-19 year olds than adult learners. While there is currently a duty to provide *proper* facilities for those aged 16-19, there is only a duty to provide *reasonable* facilities for 19+⁶. NDC advocates a legislative change to address this anomaly, so as to ensure a wide, broad and consistent coverage of adult learning provision across Wales.

12. Building the evidence base

It is commonplace in Welsh policy making circles that the best policy is 'evidence based' and NDC supports this approach. However, it is our view that more research needs to be carried out in the area of the wider benefits of learning. Whilst there is valuable evidence available from the DfES funded Centre for Research into the Wider Benefits of Learning⁷, there is little Wales- specific research and evidence in this area⁸. We would hope that the Review team might recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government commission a well-resourced longitudinal research project in this area. This would tie in with the *Making the Connections* agenda, and with the notion of wider individual and community 'well-being' which is a wider goal of Welsh Assembly Government policy. NDC would welcome the opportunity to contribute to such a project.

13. Conclusion

We hope to have made clear the need to take very seriously the needs and potential of adults in your considerations. We believe that further education, broadly defined, has a clear role to play in addressing the social and economic needs of Wales. However if the future shape of further education is not responsive, flexible and adaptable to the needs of *both* young people and adults, then there is likely to be a decline in the number of adults in further education and community education. Given the demographic picture outlined here and by others including Lord Leitch, this would result in a system unable to meet the social and economic needs of Wales.

The role played by the further education sector in the provision of wide and diverse learning opportunities for adults, as well as young people is vital to the aspiration of not only a 'small clever country' with world class skills, but also for the aspiration of an educated, informed and fair society.

⁵ NDC is currently in discussion with DELLS about a research project looking at the Validation of informal and non-formal learning.

⁶ Learning and Skills Act 2000 Sections 31 and 32. This Act applied to the National Council/ ELWa but the powers were transferred to WAG from 1 April 2006.

⁷ <http://www.learningbenefits.net/>

⁸ There is of course much evidence of good practice and very many individual success stories, such as those highlighted by the NDC Inspire Awards. It is striking however, that whilst the notion of 'social capital' has informed Welsh Assembly Government policies in the area of Community Development (notably the 'Communities First' scheme) there is little Wales specific research exploring the contribution of learning to the building of social capital.