

## **Delivering Skills that Work for Wales**

Reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training in Wales

Consultation response

**NIACE Dysgu Cymru**

Delivering Skills that Work for Wales

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

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## Introduction

### About NIACE

- i. 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.
- ii. NIACE Dysgu Cymru (NIACE DC) 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 NIACE DC 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.
- iii. NIACE has a dedicated Young Adults Team, which exists to research, develop, manage and disseminate effective approaches to learning and personal development with young adults (aged 16-25), particularly those on the margins of education, training and employment and at risk of social exclusion. The Young Adults Team works within the areas of education, training and employment to support young adults in recognising their abilities as young workers, parents and citizens. The team also works closely with practitioners in the field to assist them in sharing and developing effective and innovative practice, and to build capacity to create exciting and engaging learning opportunities for young adults.

### Context

- iv. NIACE DC is pleased to respond to the NEET consultation paper and recognises the major challenges of reducing the proportion of young people NEET in Wales. We are happy for this response to be published and to expand upon any points if necessary.
- v. NIACE DC broadly welcomes the preventative methodology presented in the consultation paper, particularly as young people are the adults of the future. NIACE DC recognises that if responses to young people NEET are not effective now, life chances in adulthood are seriously affected, and experiences of social exclusion compounded. Effective interventions to support young people NEET, and prevent young people from becoming NEET from an early stage, are critical features of a just and equitable society.
- vi. We respond to some of the specific questions, outlined in Annex A, below.

#### **1. Do you welcome the broad policy direction set out in this document?**

- 1.1 NIACE DC supports the aim to make sure the right systems, provision and support is in place to motivate young people to remain in and consider more flexible post-16 learning options in Wales.

1.2 In particular, we **welcome** the:

- recognition of the impact of parents' educational experiences and attainment has on young people's own experiences and attainment;
- use of the term 'young people NEET' rather than 'NEETs', which only serves to negatively label young people;
- proposals to improve the collection of data on young people NEET;
- proposals to support movement into sustainable employment;
- decision that there is no compulsion to stay on in school after the age of 16, but rather focus on increasing the quality and quantity of options;
- strong focus on learning and personal support;
- early identification of 'at risk' young people;
- emphasis on information sharing at a local level;
- inclusion of young peoples' voice;
- focus on financial inclusion and education;
- recognition of the need to help parents of young people NEET engage in learning themselves;
- proposal for basic skills entitlement post-16, although we are concerned that this entitlement appears to have been 'watered down' in the overall Skills that Work for Wales strategy;
- extension of Want2Work programme to target families; and
- the review of financial support mechanisms.

1.3 We do, however, have **concerns** that:

- the emphasis on individual categories of young people NEET may exclude some young people who are motivated, don't have behavioural problems or come from families with worklessness as an accepted norm, such as those young people who are carers or parents, or those with disabilities.
- too heavy a focus on negative categorisations of what young people are *not*, can overshadow recognition of the complex interplay of institutional, structural and individual factors affecting young people's lives;
- the focus on 16-18 year olds as a distinct group is unhelpful as this does not fully recognise the nature of transition to adulthood, which can extend far outside these age boundaries. In particular this focus does not recognise that many barriers to learning are likely to be present before the age of 16, nor does it recognise the difficult transition period through and beyond young adulthood;
- insufficient weight is given to the impact parent's educational attainment, and learning experiences (positive and negative) has on young people's own experiences and educational outcomes;
- although providers and agencies should aim to work in partnership, young people must be at the heart of procedures to support data sharing, recognising their concerns about confidentiality, independence and identity. Particularly vulnerable young people, such as young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, will need focused support to understand the implications of such data sharing.
- some young people NEET may need pre-entry level learning provision, for which there needs to be adequate funding and also recognition of the role of the third sector in such provision. In addition, effective progression routes must be available locally to support young people moving on from pre-entry provision;
- there is not enough recognition of the massive contribution that is made to young people's development through informal learning and the youth work methodology; and
- any additional collating of information, for example, the provision of information to schools about the destinations of former pupils, could become unnecessarily costly and bureaucratic.

## 2. What should be the priority actions if we are to deliver in line with our ambitions for reducing the proportion of young people NEET?

### 2.1 NIACE DC feel that the priority actions should be:

- **A wider policy context.** There is a need to look at the issue of young people NEET within the wider policy context. In order to achieve ambitions of reducing the proportion of young people NEET, a whole family approach is needed that target all ages. This is of particular importance when examining the evidence of the impact on young people where parents have low educational achievements or negative experiences of education. An NRDC study examined a cohort of individuals and their parents' experiences of school. Those in the cohort with the poorest levels of skills, were most likely to have parents who left school with no qualifications<sup>1</sup>.
- **Basic Skills.** Raising the basic skills level of those young people who are NEET is of great importance. There should be a statutory entitlement to free basic skills learning for all post-16 learners and provision focused on this age group should be available in a range of formats, including discrete, embedded or contextualised and through informal learning provision in youth work settings.
- **Recognition of the contribution of informal learning and the youth work methodology.** Provision for young people in informal settings has been highly effective in (re)engaging young people NEET, supporting personal and social development, building basic skills, and developing emotional intelligence. Such provision is often not an *alternative* option for young people on the margins; it is the *only* option. Formal and mainstream, provision can learn a great deal from informal and non-formal provision, and from practitioners themselves, particularly in the way they engage (and retain) the hardest to reach and most marginalised individuals.

## 3. Is there anything missing from our analysis of young people NEET (see Chapter 1) which should help to direct our future policies?

NIACE DC makes a number of specific points in addition to the concerns outlined in 1.3

- 3.1 There is a recognition in the consultation document that current survey sample sizes are too small to complete any in-depth exploration of the statistics on NEET groups (see for example section 1.12, pg 7). Therefore, more extensive, further research should be conducted with young people NEET to fully understand the demographics, experiences and perspectives of this population. NIACE DC would be pleased to support the WAG in such research.
- 3.2 Although there is a recognition that greater numbers of 17 and 18 years olds NEET include those who are parents or have caring responsibilities or health issues, these groups of young people are not factored clearly enough in to the categories of NEET status. The first category of 'core NEET' identifies those young people who have 'social and behavioural problems or more complex needs' and the second category of 'floating or at-risk NEET' are those who 'lack direction, motivation and tend to have spells of being NEET'. Young parents, young adult carers or young adults with disabilities may not fit into either of these categories, particularly as they may well possess the motivation for education, employment or training and not necessarily have social or behavioural problems, but due to family circumstances or health issues feel unable to participate in current systems – in effect, the services themselves become "hard to reach"..

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<sup>1</sup> Illuminating Disadvantage, Bynner, J. and Parsons, S (2008)

Future policies should reflect the needs of those who fall between child and adult services, such as young adult carers, young adults leaving care, young adult offenders and young parents. These young adults, who often have the greatest needs, can find themselves isolated and unaware of support structures available to them, further exacerbating their experiences of exclusion.

3.2 Greater recognition is needed of young people's experiences of transition, including from primary to secondary school, compulsory to post-compulsory education, and to adulthood and independence itself. These transition points are often where support is most needed. In addition, certain groups of young people face particularly challenging transitions in relation to leaving care, moving from custody to the community, and into work and parenthood. Boundaries in relation to age and stage are unhelpful in providing these young adults with the support they need. Policy and practice development should take better account of these transitional experiences.

3.3 Reforms to formal and mainstream education only tend to benefit those who attend. Many young people are reluctant to be in school, college or other formal provision, so it is vital to devise and deliver quality programmes outside formal structures that are attractive, hold the interest of young people and stimulate them to achieve and progress. Such programmes extend beyond narrow educational objectives in order to achieve broader educational and social purposes and provide all young people with opportunities to develop more fully. Personal and social development is a vital component of such programmes, equipping young people to become more skilled at interpersonal relations, better self-starters, team-workers, problem-solvers and independent learners. These skills and qualities are also those which employers say are vital for in developing employability, and for getting on at work.

## Specific questions

### 4. What are your views on the systems we outline in Chapter 2?

#### In particular:

#### a) **Should one organisation have lead responsibility at operational level for young people who are NEET? If so, what should this mean in practice?**

NIACE DC welcomes the recognition that the WAG need to support better use of data, whilst minimising unnecessary bureaucracy. NIACE DC recognises the importance of aligning the work of the masses of organisations that work with young people who are NEET; particularly in order to reduce duplication and minimise the disruption to young peoples' lives and support the proposal for one organisation to have the lead responsibility. This is especially important for young people who have had bad experiences with those in authority, and services designed to support them, and feel that they have been 'let down' on several previous occasions. NIACE DC recognises that there is a need to collate good quality information on those young people who are at risk of being, or are, NEET in order to get a better picture of what is needed from services for young people and to better provide for this need.

NIACE DC is concerned that if the organisation to take operational responsibility has a remit for careers, the essential focus on young people's personal and social development could easily be missed. Many young people who are NEET may not be ready for employment or formal education or training. Research conducted by the Young Adults team at NIACE demonstrates that young people NEET respond best to informal learning in environments in which they feel comfortable, are not constrained and can build

relationships with trusted adults. The third sector has a very strong role to play in such provision.

NIACE DC is concerned that it may not be possible to achieve such a personalised approach should the focus of the organisational lead be on employment and more formal learning. It is crucial however, that such an organisation *is* involved with young people who are NEET, for those who are ready for such intervention or those who will be able to progress to this.

Considering that young people NEET are more likely to have a history of not attending school and/or underachievement, and are more likely to have a statutory statement of special educational needs (SEN), it is right that local authorities and schools play a large role in the early identification of young people who are at risk of becoming disengaged. NIACE DC also believes that there should be processes and protocols to ensure there are robust mechanisms for communication and data sharing, and for 'picking up' those young people who are identified as being at risk early on.

- b) What more can we do to embed KIT processes within local authorities?**
- c) Would there be value in enhancing the information provided to schools on the destinations of former pupils?**
- d) What more can we do to support information sharing between organisations?**

**5. What are your views on the provision for learners that we outline in Chapter 3?**

NIACE DC is pleased to see appreciation of the need for a flexible system that does not make it compulsory for young people to stay in education beyond the age of 16, but rather allows for more options and choice. NIACE DC is concerned however, that less attention is given to the contribution of informal and non-formal learning, that is so crucial in re-engaging the hardest-to-reach young people, who may not be ready for more formal education (whether vocational or academic).

One such example of this type of learning is Llamau's 'Learning 4 Life' programme. This programme is an informal, pre-vocational learning programme developed by Llamau. It improves young people's confidence, independent living skills, and motivates them to move their lives forward positively through work, training and education. They are empowered to take their first steps on the challenging road to independence. Learning 4 Life offers the opportunity to learn skills such as budgeting, cooking, and DIY. Self-expression is encouraged through arts and crafts and discussions covering world events and current affairs, as well as history. Group activities, such as trips, outdoor pursuits, and games are popular and take place regularly. There is access to the Internet, and music and film making facilities. The young people are encouraged to research areas that interest them and to gain IT skills. The project is also able to offer OCN qualifications to those who are ready to begin more standardised education. All Learning 4 Life staff are qualified teachers or trainers with experience of working with this client group and all activities are carefully planned to deliver useful skills and knowledge in a relaxed and informal manner.

This informal, 'first step' type of learning, is vital for those who have had negative experiences of education and have subsequently disengaged from education, employment and/or training. Where such programmes do receive public funding it is often on a short term project basis, which makes it difficult for providers to plan and often leads to a loss of expertise and momentum in the funding gap. NIACE DC is concerned that should there not be funding for activity of this type and focus is on only vocational and/or academic learning, those who are the most disengaged risk being propelled further to the margins.

**In particular,**

- a) What more can we do to support 14-19 Networks in developing learning provision for NEET and at-risk young people?**
- b) How can we best direct Cymorth Theme E in future?**
- c) Do the proposals go far enough in outlining changes to our national training programmes? If not, what more do we need to do to improve the quality of those programmes for vulnerable young people?**

NIACE DC welcomes the WAG's recognition of the need to increase the flexibility of approach to learning. NIACE DC is keen to see a flexible system that encourages young people to explore a variety of options open to them at age 16. Often, young people who are NEET have a set of complex, inter-related needs, therefore offering them a system of wider choices, and flexible study options that enables a good skills base with opportunities to progress, is very welcome.

NIACE DC is concerned that a focus on entry level programmes will further exclude those individuals who are not quite at this level. Given the likely background of a young person who is NEET, and especially for those who are particularly marginalised, they are likely to require pre-entry level work, before being ready to attend and engage in an entry level work-focussed programme. Many young people NEET will have a number of complex needs that will require support before they are ready to engage with the labour market. Indeed, making the transition into work can be a distant goal for many young people, including those with profound or complex learning difficulties and disabilities, those with caring responsibilities and young parents. As well as pre-entry level support, many young people NEET will need work personal and social development.

Furthermore, equally important is the need to continue striving towards parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes. Whilst NIACE DC recognises the WAG's commitment to continue reforms to enable vocational qualifications to better match the needs of learners and employers, the need continues to exist to break down the gap between the perceived quality of vocational and academic learning routes.

## **6. What are your views on the support for learners that we outline in Chapter 4?**

NIACE DC welcomes the recognition of the complex support needs of many young people NEET, and of the importance of providing good quality information, advice and guidance (IAG). In particular, NIACE DC welcomes the focus on financial inclusion, since confidence and capability in managing money is so critical in making the transition to adulthood.

NIACE DC recognises the key role that Community Focussed Schools can have in bringing schools and communities closer together. It should be recognised however, that some adults, particularly those who are considered the hardest-to-reach, had negative experiences of education whilst growing up and associate the school environments with 'failure'. Therefore Community Focussed Schools need to make better links with the range of provision already on offer in local communities. This is particularly true of Adult and Community Learning provision, which is recognised as being key in providing adults with the 'first steps' back into learning.

Support for young people living outside the family home must also be a focus, since many young people NEET experience family breakdown and independent living at a young age. Similarly, looked after young people must also be supported to engage in initiatives for families and communities.

NIACE DC is particularly concerned that the Financial Contingency Fund (for FE), which supports individuals in hardship, has been significantly cut for 2008-2009 only a few months before the start of the academic year.

**In particular,**

- a) What more can we do to develop the Support for Learners element of Learning Pathways 14-19 for the benefit of NEET and potentially NEET young people?**
- b) Is the idea of financial parity across different types of learning for 16-19 year olds a good one?**
- c) What more can we do to ensure that learners are not swayed in their choices by unintentional financial incentives or disincentives?**

NIACE DC welcomes the idea of financial parity across the different types of learning for 16-19 years olds. Young people may make decisions about their learning based on short-term gains, therefore may choose an option that immediately benefits them financially, although it may not be sustainable or supportive of their longer-term goals. This highlights two important points; firstly, that financial parity across different types of learning is vital, in order that young people have access to equality of financial gain, and so less likely to make choices based on short-term gains. Secondly, the importance of young people being financially literate, in order that they are able to make well-informed choices that will benefit them in the long-term.

NIACE DC is pleased to see the recognition of the importance of financial education in the document. There is a need to explore how informal and non-formal learning can help to deliver this agenda for 16-19 year olds. Previous research from the Young Adults team at NIACE on this area has highlighted how practitioners in the informal and non-formal youth sector are ideally placed to introduce and explore issues around financial capability with young people NEET. These young people, who are often the most vulnerable and live on very low incomes, can experience even greater exclusion when they struggle with the skills important in managing their money.

NIACE DC have responded to the consultation on developing a Financial Inclusion Strategy and welcomes this. NIACE DC would be happy to work with the WAG on ways to further develop this area.

NIACE DC also welcomes the intended evaluation of the Education Maintenance Allowance scheme to see if it actually impacts on NEET status and would be happy to assist the WAG in exploring this. Anecdotal evidence from the Young Adults Team at NIACE suggests that a focus on incentives can overshadow the objectives of the learning programme itself, and can penalise those young people whose life experiences or caring responsibilities make regular attendance challenging.

- 7. We have provided draft guidance for local data collection at Annex C of this strategy. We would like to know whether:-**
- a) the two main categories of NEET are helpful to CYPP organisations for their data collection?**
  - b) there be any difficulties in implementing data collection on this basis within organisations?**
  - c) we could do more to encourage local organisations to collect data in a consistent way?**

NIACE DC is broadly supportive of the proposed guidance for local data collection, however we would again emphasise concerns raised in our previous comments, particularly in our response to questions 1.3 and 4a.