



## **Welsh Assembly Government review of Adult and Community Learning -**

### **A perspective from NIACE Dysgu Cymru**

#### **Background**

As part of its review of adult and community learning in Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) commissioned NIACE Dysgu Cymru to host a consultation event for practitioner partners within the Adult and Community Learning (ACL) sector. In addition, NIACE Dysgu Cymru consulted with its Learners' Network and facilitated a dialogue with users of its website.

The report's recommendations have been further informed by discussions about earlier draft papers at NIACE's main Policy Committee and NIACE Dysgu Cymru's Management Board, together with meetings with individual learners and providers.

Given the wide range of organisations delivering ACL, the report uses the generic term 'providers' to include Further Education Institutions (FEIs), Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), Local Education Authorities (LEAs), museums, libraries and others delivering of ACL provision, including voluntary sector bodies.

Most of the recommendations set out in this report are targeted at the WAG, as the elected body with the power to effect change. It should be noted, however, that many within the ACL sector have expressed a desire to assist the WAG in developing and implementing appropriate solutions.

#### **Consultation event for practitioners**

A total of 54 delegates attended the consultation event, which was held on 4 September 2007. Those attending welcomed the opportunity to inform the review of ACL. In general terms, there was strong support for the aims of the review, in particular the need to build on strengths within the sector rather than start from a zero base, and to identify synergies across a range of WAG strategies. The recognition of the value of learning for personal fulfilment and enjoyment was also commended. Delegates were, however, concerned that the WAG should be seen to respond more actively to input provided than has been perceived to be the case in some previous consultation exercises. In this respect, NIACE Dysgu Cymru would be pleased to work with the WAG to disseminate its response to the recommendations set out in this report.

Three workshops were held during the consultation event, covering:

- community learning policy and practice;
- quality and data; and
- funding & structures.

Delegates were asked to identify priorities for: the WAG; providers; NIACE Dysgu Cymru and other support agencies; and local partnerships. A summary of the recommendations from the consultation is set out at **Annex A**. The views of delegates are elaborated below in the section on recommendations to the WAG.

### **Learners' Network consultation**

In addition to the practitioners' consultation, NIACE Dysgu Cymru also consulted its Learners' Network via an email questionnaire. A summary of the views of learners is set out at **Annex B**. These views have also informed the recommendations below.

### **Recommendations to the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG)**

The recommendations below are made to the WAG by NIACE Dysgu Cymru. They have been informed by the consultation process described above and cover: the definition of ACL; the integration of strategies; WAG funding; the European Social Fund (ESF); data collection; collaboration and planning; quality; and cost saving investment.

#### *Definition of ACL and clarification of its impact*

The ACL sector in Wales is characterised by a diverse range of provision delivered by a wide range of providers, including many outside the mainstream institutions of formal post-school education. These include museums, libraries and various voluntary and community-based organisations. Because of this, we suggest that the WAG should, as a precondition to developing a strategy for the sector, better define and clarify exactly where and why the boundaries of the sector lie, and more clearly articulate the public policy outcomes that it expects the sector to deliver. Although it may not be appropriate to over-compartmentalise all adult and community learning, the WAG should be aware that ACL is an umbrella term encompassing different types of educational activity, each contributing to policy agendas in a unique way. We draw the attention of the WAG to existing NIACE work on typologies, set out at **Annex C**, which may be of assistance in this respect. In summary, NIACE has identified the following different strands of ACL:

- First Steps work;
- Skills for Life, (including embedded basic skills);
- Skills for Independent Living;
- Skills for Work;
- Learning for interest, personal fulfilment and for well-being and health; and
- Learning for active citizenship and/or community development.

In clarifying the outcomes expected of the sector, we believe that the strategy's effectiveness will be enhanced if it were to recognise and build upon the unique role of ACL in widening participation and contributing to greater equality of opportunity, by taking provision to learners rather than expecting disadvantaged learners to come to the provision. It is also important to recognise the role of informal, non-formal and non-accredited learning which form key parts of ACL provision; developing key skills and building confidence to participate in wider society, as well as often being the first steps to additional learning, qualifications and skills.

**NIACE Dysgu Cymru recommends that the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) develops a comprehensive definition of ACL in collaboration with other departments, particularly Cymal, and that it defines the outcomes it expects ACL to make to various WAG priorities.**

**It is recommended that the WAG undertakes further research into the wider benefits of ACL and the contribution it can make to better health and to community regeneration and cohesion.**

**It is recommended that the WAG considers the development of a programme of secondments between itself and the ACL sector in order to promote the sharing of expertise. In particular, it is strongly recommended that the WAG seconds a practitioner from the ACL sector to assist in the development and implementation of the strategy on ACL. NIACE Dysgu Cymru would be pleased to facilitate such a move.**

#### *Integration/rationalisation of WAG strategies*

Adult and Community Learning contributes to the delivery of a wide range of WAG strategies and priorities across such departments as health, social services and culture as well as education. Whilst this demonstrates the broad and positive impact of ACL, it has led to a position whereby approaches risk fragmentation and the consequences of under-coordination. As a result, ACL providers perceive unnecessary bureaucracy and duplication of processes, and have difficulty in their strategic planning. Providers within the ACL sector receiving funding from the WAG highlighted different:

- funding application processes (with different criteria);
- conditions of funding;
- monitoring arrangements and data collection systems; and
- funding periods.

In addition to the perceived bureaucracy overload, differing funding criteria and periods make it particularly challenging for providers to develop and implement long-term strategies. In order to secure funding, which may seldom be available beyond an annual cycle, providers often have to stretch their mission statements to accommodate the latest initiative. It is also reported that initiatives are

developed on a cumulative basis, with new ones being added to old ones rather than replacing them, leading to 'initiative overload'.

Many providers believe that individual funders are rarely cognisant of the broader impact of ACL, leading to a risk that decisions are made without a full understanding of the consequences. For example, a small cut in funding from one particular department, such as DCELLS, might make provision unviable and lead to negative and disproportionate consequences in terms of health or social regeneration outcomes.

Whilst it is clearly for the WAG to determine its approach to working across departments, NIACE Dysgu Cymru suggests that a project management approach to ACL may be appropriate. We feel that there would be merit in such an approach being led by DCELLS.

**NIACE Dysgu Cymru recommends that the Welsh Assembly Government reviews, across departments, the various strategies which impact upon ACL with a view to identifying synergies and/or rationalising policies and delivery and monitoring mechanisms. It is critical that this happens across the entire WAG and not just across DCELLS. Given the ageing population in Wales, it is particularly important that any enhanced ACL strategy complements the Strategy for Older People (and vice versa).**

#### *Review funding arrangements*

The issue of funding was a recurring theme at the consultation event, with particular emphasis on DCELLS funding. Many delegates urged the WAG to review the funding arrangements for ACL in order to better recognise the informal elements of provision and the true costs associated with engaging hard-to-reach learners. It is perceived that the WAG's National Planning and Funding System (NPFS) had not been designed to accommodate easily the kind of small 'bite-sized' learning activities characteristic of informal learning. In particular, it is believed that the time taken to set up community venues and the small class sizes are not well reflected in the Subject Area Weights applicable to ACL provision. Furthermore, there is a perception that many adult and community learning programmes attract insufficient Credit Equivalent Units (CEUs) due to the application of the CEU moderator to informal learning programmes. Apart from a paring-back of provision, some providers were concerned that funding levels might be so low as to jeopardise employers' ability to ensure the safety and security of staff working in challenging environments. Although it was acknowledged that the deprivation factor within the NPFS is meant to reflect some of the additional costs faced by ACL, it is felt that this factor:

- only contributes to shortfalls in 'core' levels of funding;
- is often unfunded in reality as providers exceed their funded level of CEUs; and
- does not always deliver resources to the areas it is intended to reach.

Although many legitimate issues have been raised in relation to the NPFS, such as those above, it is also clear from some of the points raised through the consultation that there is considerable misunderstanding of the funding model.

The ILA Programme has been cited as a potentially useful source of support for learners, although it is felt that the administrative arrangements should be reviewed to ensure they do not exclude ACL providers and their learners.

**NIACE Dysgu Cymru recommends that DCELLS reviews the application of the NPFS to adult and community learning provision and introduces three-year indicative funding to promote more effective planning by providers. Further work needs to be undertaken to increase understanding of the NPFS.**

**It is recommended that DCELLS reviews the appropriateness to ACL of current learner support arrangements.**

**It is recommended that DCELLS lead on reviewing the funding and planning arrangements for forms of ACL funded by other departments, with a view to improving coherence, efficiency and effectiveness.**

#### *European Structural Funds - Convergence Programmes*

NIACE Dysgu Cymru's consultations uncovered fears that the funding concerns described above may be compounded in future due to a perceived greater emphasis of the Convergence Programmes on employment-specific skills. The European Social Fund (ESF) in particular has been an important source of funding within the ACL sector for a number of years, underpinning much provision for adults, particularly in the areas of widening participation and reducing economic inactivity. Although the importance of ACL to economic growth is recognised by the European Commission<sup>1</sup>, there is significant concern across the sector that ACL related projects will be squeezed out of the ESF Convergence Programme. This concern is based on a widely held perception that WEFO will favour projects delivering vocationally-related qualifications. This is despite compelling evidence on the wider benefits of all types of learning (see [www.learningbenefits.net](http://www.learningbenefits.net)). Furthermore, there is concern that too narrow an understanding of the learning needs of the most excluded and marginalized in society will lead to a devaluation of ACL despite its catalytic role in stimulating demand for all kinds of learning amongst such groups. If these perceptions are not addressed promptly, there is a danger that many ACL providers will wind-down their operations leading to a loss of expertise and capacity within the sector which might undermine the implementation of the WAG's ACL strategy.

**NIACE Dysgu Cymru recommends that the WAG ensures the contribution of ACL to the Lisbon Agenda is more visibly**

---

<sup>1</sup> Communication from the Commission of the European Communities, *Adult Learning: It's Never Too Late to Learn* (COM (2006) 614));

**acknowledged in the interpretation of the strategic frameworks underpinning the new European programmes.**

### *Data collection*

Our consultation revealed a widespread hope that administration and much bureaucracy could be reduced by integrating/rationalising the various WAG strategies relating to ACL. Although the importance of data for planning, evaluation and accountability is understood, providers and others see considerable scope within DCELLS to reduce the volume of bureaucracy by reviewing the data collection processes applicable to ACL. Currently, DCELLS funded providers have to return a similar volume of data to the Lifelong Learning Record Wales (LLWR) for full-time learners and those doing a very short taster course. It is felt that a disproportionate amount of time (and therefore cost) is spent on capturing data for marginal benefit. Furthermore, many adult learners making their first steps back to learning are bemused by the range of questions that must be answered to complete the LLWR. There is a significant risk that the data requirements will also lead to dysfunctional consequences in relation to widening participation, as those from under-represented groups appear to feel most threatened at the data gathering stage.

Capturing data from various community venues and recording it on central systems presents logistical and administrative challenges. Many providers within the ACL sector have also cited the complexity of data collection since the abolishment of a programme area specific to general education. For example, under the predecessor to the LLWR, the Individual Student Record (ISR), providers could bundle together a range of OCN units under one generic qualification code relating to general education. Now, however, each individual unit has to be recorded separately under the relevant subject area. According to providers, this has resulted in an exponential increase in the administrative burden relating to learner-centred programmes, which runs contrary to the WAG's ambition for citizen-centred services.

**NIACE Dysgu Cymru recommends that the WAG considers introducing an abridged version of the LLWR for short courses or programmes which only involve a few hours of learning per week.**

**It is recommended that WAG considers reinstating a 'general education' subject area or that it explores options to minimise the data burden relating to informal bundles of bite-sized learning episodes/credits.**

### *Supporting collaboration and planning*

Most of the WAG's education strategies are based on a model of collaboration. This is widely supported by ACL providers and learners. However, partnership relationships take a significant amount of time and effort to establish and to maintain. It is felt that the WAG should be more proactive in supporting and

funding the development of collaborative activities and the sharing of good practice.

In addition to funding and supporting the development of partnerships, WAG should review all its policies which impact upon ACL to ensure they encourage collaboration. For example, the concept of Community-Focussed Schools has general support, but it is felt that in many instances individual schools aim to develop their own evening programmes for adults rather than linking into other, already well established, ACL provision – leading to inefficient use of public funds. It is also felt that the NPFS may encourage unnecessary competition, as providers are funded according to the volume of provision they deliver.

It is recognised that a universal fees policy would not be appropriate, as some providers have greater scope to charge fees than others. NIACE in England and Wales has long argued for a mixed economy in adult learning, as a fees policy that relies only on the public purse will never be sufficient. We favour a high-fee economy (as this will secure a higher volume of provision) but also a generous policy of fee remission for people unable to afford fees. Providers feel that there is a policy vacuum in this area and it was reported that the WAG needs to consider more fully the impact of fees on widening participation and collaboration.

In relation to local versus national planning, the consultation revealed a belief that that consultation with learners may lead to the identification of different learning needs to those covered by national priorities. Local authority providers also feel that the role of elected members should be better recognised as important proxies for identification of community need. Where councils directly fund and often subsidise ACL, they will have a legitimate and informed view on local priorities. This needs recognition in funding and strategic planning arrangements which should include an appropriate degree of flexibility at a local level.

**NIACE Dysgu Cymru recommends that the WAG develops improved funding arrangements and infrastructure to better secure effective partnerships and joint planning; and that it reviews the impact on collaboration of its policies.**

**It is recommended that the WAG develops, in consultation with the sector, a clearer fees policy and considers options to increase the fee income from those learners and employers who can afford to pay.**

**It is recommended that the WAG extends the benchmarking project currently covering the Further Education, Sixth Form and Work Based Learning sectors, so that it includes ACL; and that the WAG ensures all participants in the project share data.**

**It is recommended that the WAG disseminates standard mapping reports based on available data to assist providers in planning.**

*Quality improvement*

The need for continuous quality improvement was recognised and welcomed by ACL practitioners, providers and other stakeholders throughout the consultation. High quality provision is identified as that which has the needs of the learner at the centre and where the learner experiences positive outcomes. A number of barriers to high quality provision exist and specific suggestions for alleviating these are outlined at **Annex A**.

Monitoring and evaluating ACL provision is complex due to the wide-range of provision, and made more difficult by the disparate nature of teaching locations and learners. Furthermore, the heavy dependence on part-time staff in ACL presents challenges in terms of securing Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

An important part of adult and community learning includes working with the hardest to reach learners and potential learners. Providers feel that recognition of the innovative nature of aspects of this work is seldom taken into account in evaluation and monitoring. 'First steps learning', engaging new learners, can often include an element of innovation and risk-taking, and a suitable definition of 'progression' may assist in better evaluating the effectiveness of this work.

**NIACE Dysgu Cymru recommends that the WAG set up a task group to identify and disseminate models of good practice in ACL.**

**It is recommended that the WAG develops and funds, in consultation with LLUK, a comprehensive programme of staff development for ACL practitioners in Wales and recognises the high proportion of part-time employees. In particular, we see considerable potential benefit in the WAG supporting training and dissemination of the RARPA toolkit (recognition and recording of progress and achievement in non-accredited learning).**

**It is recommended that the WAG continues its support for the Quality Improvement Fund.**

**It is recommended that the WAG improves the dissemination of LLWR data, to enable more accurate reports to be drawn down which would assist providers in their own quality improvement practices.**

#### *Invest to save*

The budgetary constraints within which the WAG operates are well understood, but the consultation discovered support for more central interventions on behalf of the sector where these would lead to cost savings. For example, were recommendation 12 of the WAG's consultation on its Strategy for Older People accepted, and more integrated local transport networks were achievable, then the impact for adult learners would be considerable.

**NIACE Dysgu Cymru recommends that the WAG considers:**

- **procurement, on behalf of the sector, of ICT systems to assist providers in capturing data in a more cost-effective manner.**
- **increasing its investment in e-learning and using technology to enable people to access opportunities irrespective of their physical location and time constraints. In particular, the WAG should consider the role of experts in this area such as Ufi learndirect (and its network) and the Open University in Wales.**
- **investigating the scope to make savings by bringing together the various central procurement functions which exist within sectors delivering ACL provision.**
- **the scope for developing and supporting integrated local transport networks across health, social services and education – including ACL.**
- **encouraging public bodies to make their property holdings and/or ICT available for the delivery of ACL in a more systematic way.**
- **continuing support for national learning campaigns in order to develop a learning culture and minimise duplication of marketing efforts at a local level.**
- **further developing and raising the profile of the Learning Choices database. In particular, the database should be developed to include all learning opportunities and appropriate funding should be made available to ensure it is maintained.**

## **Conclusion**

NIACE Dysgu Cymru has welcomed the opportunity to consult with the sector on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government and would be pleased to undertake further work in support of the review of Adult and Community Learning. We would be pleased to elaborate on anything in this report. Please contact Richard Spear, Director, NIACE Dysgu Cymru, for further information.

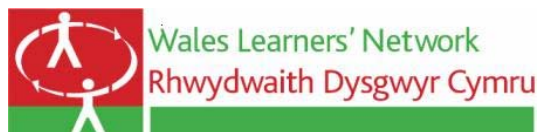
NIACE Dysgu Cymru  
35 Cathedral Road  
Cardiff  
CF11 9HB

029 2037 0900

[www.niacedc.org.uk](http://www.niacedc.org.uk)

**ANNEX A**

Recommendations for:	Policy & Practice	Quality & Data	Funding & Structures
<b>Welsh Assembly Government (WAG)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop national strategy for ACL</li> <li>• Make better connections across WAG Departments</li> <li>• Recognise need to fund/resource partnership development and outreach work</li> <li>• Better planning/coherence across funded sectors to avoid duplication of provision</li> <li>• Recognise wider benefits of learning and invest in programmes which are likely secure them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review appropriateness of current data collection systems</li> <li>• Extend Tribal benchmarking project to cover Adult and Community Learning</li> <li>• More secondments from WAG into ACL sector and vice versa</li> <li>• Investigate the possibilities of re-establishing learning networks.</li> <li>• Adopt Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) principles</li> <li>• Cymal to consider funding the mapping of learning outcomes in its sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review application of National Planning and Funding System to Adult and Community Learning and ensure fitness for purpose</li> <li>• Fund plans, rather than individual providers</li> <li>• Provide three year indicative funding</li> <li>• Recognise resources needed for community development work and outreach</li> </ul>
<b>Providers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinvigorate the curriculum offer</li> <li>• Improve accessibility and responsiveness to community needs</li> <li>• Involve learners more and find out what motivates them to attend programmes</li> <li>• Provide clearer evidence of outcomes, value for money and impact</li> <li>• Celebrate achievement/promote good practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater communication and sharing of data between providers and learners</li> <li>• Be more flexible/responsive to learner needs and WAG priorities</li> <li>• Engage in more collaborative ventures</li> <li>• Review staff development and training strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to develop greater understanding of their particular role and mission within a broader strategic framework</li> <li>• Develop a greater focus on planning in order to improve effectiveness/impact</li> </ul>
<b>NIACE Dysgu Cymru (unless other support agency is named)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide support to enable effective collaborative work</li> <li>• Collect evidence to demonstrate the value of Adult and Community Learning</li> <li>• Further lobbying on behalf of Adult and Community Learning</li> <li>• Map provision and learning routes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote wider benefits of learning</li> <li>• Provide support in relation to benchmarking and improved Management Information Systems</li> <li>• Promote Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) in non-accredited learning</li> <li>• Estyn to recognise RARPA and define progression</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influence funding policy to recognise value of Adult and Community Learning</li> <li>• Continue to advocate on behalf of learners</li> <li>• Welsh Language Board to play a role in promoting cultural importance of Welsh Language</li> </ul>
<b>Local Partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect and share examples of good practice</li> <li>• Work together to generate new and different programmes and remove unnecessary duplication of provision</li> <li>• Ensure consistency of quality assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up task groups to identify and share models of good practice</li> <li>• Establish collaborative approach to offering information, advice and guidance</li> <li>• Undertake joint work in curriculum development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop planning functions</li> <li>• Release staff in order to better engage in joint planning</li> </ul>



Wales Learners' Network has been developed by NIACE Dysgu Cymru in order to ensure that the interests of learners are represented throughout our work. The Wales Learners' Network currently has in excess of 500 members.

Questionnaires were sent to all Network members. Learners who had experience of learning in a community setting were asked to complete the questionnaire.

The following information was collated from 36 responses.

*1. How did you find out about learning opportunities in your local area?*

A wide range of responses were offered including:

- Local Newspaper
- Word of mouth
- Leaflets/Public notices
- Red Cross
- Brochures
- Local Libraries
- Opportunities first

*2. Did you find the classes easy to access and where were they provided?*

The majority of responses indicated that classes were easy to access with most being provided within walking distances of their homes. A small number of respondents indicated that they needed to use their own transport to access classes. Classes were mainly held in community halls, local schools, libraries and technical vehicles (such as IT buses).

Some respondents had experiences of classes being held in inaccessible buildings for people with mobility issues.

*3. Did you have to pay for your learning? If so do you feel that this was expensive or good value?*

Approximately half of the responses had to pay for learning but at a reduced fee. The majority of respondents felt that the learning was good value with only two commenting that it was over priced.

4. *What was the quality of teaching like in your experience?*

The majority of respondents commented that the quality of quality was good to excellent with classes enjoyable, taught at a suitable pace and with plenty of support.

A small number of respondents commented that classes were too short and there was lack continuity with changes of tutors.

5. *Did you experience any additional benefits as a result of your learning experience? (for example; meeting new people, increased confidence, better job prospects?)*

Many additional benefits were cited by respondents including:

- Pleasure/enjoyment in the course
- Increased confidence
- Meeting new people/ social skills
- Encouragement to get out and try new things
- Enhanced job prospects
- Gaining new skills

6. *In light of your previous or current learning experiences, would you like to continue learning in the community, or in another type of setting (for example a college, university or workplace). Please tell us the reason for your particular answer.*

All but one respondent said that they would like to continue learning. A high number of individuals wished to continue learning within the community, but a significant number expressed a desire to go on to learn at college or university. Some commented that they felt that they were 'too old' for college or university.

7. *What is the single best thing about learning in the community? (why?)*

Respondents identified a number of positive aspects to learning in the community. The most common were:

- Lack of pressure
- Individual encouragement to develop
- Mixing with others in the community
- Relaxed friendly atmosphere
- Flexibility to attend when you want to
- Supporting the local community and feeling part of the community's development
- Local provision requiring no need to travel
- Available to all

8. *What is the single worst thing about learning in the community? (why?)*

The main negative points listed included:

- Insufficient choice of subjects
- Transport not always run at times when classes run
- Too much time taken on administration
- Short duration of courses
- Perception of ageism - although this was seen as improving
- No set curriculum
- Classes cancelled due to insufficient numbers
- Unavailability of new technology
- Lack of continuity of subjects/tutors

A small number of respondents commented that they would have like to have received accreditation once they had completed the course.

9. *Any other comments?*

Many of the comments focussed on the enjoyment people got from learning and the difference it made to their confidence and purpose, although some commented that they now had to travel outside their community to reach classes which can be difficult and expensive.

## Adult Learning Descriptors (NIACE, May 2004)

Title	Definition
First Steps	Learning which is offered as an initial entry point into learning and from which learners are actively encouraged and supported to progress to other forms of learning.
Skills for Life, including Embedded Basic Skills	Learning for which, whatever the title of the course, the primary intention is to enhance the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and/or English language for speakers of other languages.
Skills for Independent Living	Learning which develops the knowledge, skills and understanding of adults with learning difficulties and disabilities for independent living in the community
Skills for Work	Learning which enables people to develop the skills they need for paid or voluntary work and which will enhance their employability.
Learning for Interest and Personal Well Being and Health	Learning for personal development, cultural engagement, intellectual or creative stimulation and for enjoyment, and for which there is no expectation that learners should necessarily progress to other learning.
Learning for Active Citizenship and/or Community Development	Community based learning developed with local residents and other learners to build the skills, knowledge and understanding for social and community action.