

## Expert Seminar on Lifelong Learning in Wales 17 April 2008

### Summary of key points

This note summarises key points from the seminar, and indicates policy messages and insights from the Wales context which could be further explored through the Scotland and Northern Ireland seminars where appropriate. These findings will feed back into the Inquiry's overall thinking about the features of a UK strategic framework.

- 1 'Sophisticate Leitch' for the Welsh context Wales has distinctive levels of need which are not fully recognised in the Leitch agenda: 50% of those with low / no qualifications are out of work; 25% of the adult population have literacy needs; 50% have numeracy needs. To achieve an 80% employment rate will require encouraging 150,000 people into the workforce. The Welsh experience also helpfully illuminates concerns about the lack of challenge to the economic consensus on which learning and skills policy is based, and sheds light on the economic differences between 'inner' and 'outer' Britain. There may be potential for the globalisation paper, which will underpin the Inquiry's thematic papers, to challenge these economic assumptions.
- 2 Welsh Workforce Development Programme. Developed as the alternative to Train to Gain, this programme was applauded for delivering what employers want and being clearly linked to businesses planning. As a result, employers are willing to invest in training. Individual employers are targeted through HR advisers / brokers; who identify exactly what skills needs their business has, and seek to meet them. No specifications are made around levels / volumes etc, and what is needed is mapped against the organisation's business plan. The initiative receives £2 million part funding from WAG – a low level of public investment. Employers pay up front and ultimately contribute between 50 and 75%. The satisfaction rate is 80%. However, the programme's success has been attributed primarily to the skills of the individual HR advisers, which raises questions about how effectively it could be delivered on a larger scale and standards be guaranteed.
- 3 'Bonfire of the quangos' The Department for Children, Lifelong Learning and Skills includes the equivalents of QCA and LSC. This arrangement requires officials to work more closely with stakeholders and providers. It was suggested that this greater proximity of policy makers to providers enables more responsive policy making.
- 4 14 – 19 learning pathways This approach is being introduced in Wales, but it is not proposed to include a statutory requirement to raise the leaving learning age to 18. The aim is to create an offer that will be sufficiently attractive to encourage young people to stay on. This approach raises questions about voluntarism vs compulsion.
- 5 Collaboration vs competition This theme was explored with reference to relationships between providers, and between providers and employers. The *Skills that Work for Wales* framework will seek to include strategies for predicting national and understanding local skills needs. However, it was

also suggested that the focus of policy should be on addressing basic / essential skills, rather than speculatively predicting future sectoral skills needs: 'Use money where you know it will stick.' The institutional funding regime is lagging behind the policy aspiration for collaboration and responsiveness. Could a funding model be found to foster collaboration and be sufficiently flexible to address both national priorities (eg teachers skills in Wales) and local skills need? Concepts of policy-based funding (e.g. supporting quality and partnership) and priority-based funding (e.g. for basic skills) were explored. The challenge is to develop creative partnerships that transcend traditional boundaries and silos, and that are innovative rather than reinforcing the status quo.

- 6 The rural dimension. In rural communities, people often have relatively high levels of formal skills, which cannot be directly utilised within the current rural economy. In this context, there is a need for lifelong learning opportunities to support entrepreneurship, volunteering, and new ways of living. 'Retireability' skills will also be important for the ageing population, and consideration should be given to how these could be built into the 45 – 50 health check.
- 7 ESOL & WSOL The provision of ESOL for migrant workers in a bi-lingual country raises interesting issues. There are some parts of Wales where it might be more useful and relevant for migrants to learn WSOL.
- 8 Learners and tutors in FE in Wales. It is questionable how far it is possible to generalise from the findings that were presented from this ethnographic study. However, the research reminded us that the Inquiry has yet to develop a strategy for hearing practitioner and learner perspectives to inform our thinking.
- 9 Innovative approaches to funding. On the margins of the seminar, the WEA described how their local volunteers are exploring credit unions as a way of funding collective learning in communities.

Inquiry Secretariat  
May 08