



**Estyn**

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Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg  
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate  
for Education and Training in Wales

# The effectiveness of strategies for learner involvement in post-16 learning

## Interim report

May 2012



**INVESTORS  
IN PEOPLE** | Gold

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- ▲ special schools;
- ▲ pupil referral units;
- ▲ independent schools;
- ▲ further education;
- ▲ independent specialist colleges;
- ▲ adult community learning;
- ▲ local authority education services for children and young people;
- ▲ teacher education and training;
- ▲ work-based learning;
- ▲ careers companies; and
- ▲ offender learning.

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- ▲ provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others; and
- ▲ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence.

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## Introduction

- 1 In February 2010 the Welsh Government published guidance for post-16 providers on the implementation of learner-involvement strategies. The guidance helps providers go beyond undertaking surveys of learners' views to give learners a key role in taking decisions that affect their experience of learning.
- 2 The guidance sets out a framework for learner involvement strategies. It calls on all providers of lifelong learning and skills to make sure that their own strategies include:
  - a statement of commitment from the organisation's senior management to ensuring that learners have direct involvement in shaping their own learning experiences;
  - clear strategic aims for consulting with learners and for enabling them to participate in decisions affecting their learning and environment;
  - arrangements for learner involvement, both formal and informal;
  - arrangements for gathering the views of learners through structured systems, using them to improve the quality of learning, and feeding back to learners so that they can see how their views have made a difference;
  - arrangements for seeking the views of 'hard to reach' learners;
  - procedures for the recruitment and training of learner representatives so that they can fulfil their role effectively;
  - arrangements for integrating learners' views into quality assurance systems, including self-assessment and quality development planning; and
  - arrangements for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the implementation of the strategy and its effectiveness, including ways of informing learners of action taken in response to their feedback.
- 3 This report is published in response to a request in the annual ministerial remit letter to Estyn for 2011-2012
- 4 In this report, we evaluate the extent to which post-16 providers use learner involvement strategies and whether these are having an impact on learner outcomes. The project will run until December 2013 and this is the first of three survey reports to be published.
- 5 As part of this survey inspectors have collected and evaluated a range of information. We have carried out work with providers in the following sectors:
  - further education institutions;
  - work-based learning providers;
  - adult community learning providers; and
  - Welsh for adults centres.

## Background

- 6 Prior to the publication of the Welsh Government's learner-involvement strategy document, a number of other Estyn remit surveys and Welsh Government initiatives promoted the importance of involving learners in taking decisions that help to shape their learning experience.
- 7 The 'Merging the Boundaries in Adult Community-Based Learning' report (Estyn, July 2008) identified a range of ways that adult community learning providers involved learners in shaping their learning experience. The report recommended that adult community learning partnerships should have clear mechanisms for involving learners in decision-making and curriculum planning.
- 8 The 'Listening to the Community' report (Estyn July 2009) identified that only a few adult community learning partnerships involved learners in planning the curriculum. The report recommended that the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (now the Department for Education and Skills) should work with other Welsh Government departments to clarify how community learning providers can improve service delivery by consulting more effectively with local communities.
- 9 In the same period (February 2008), Estyn reported that almost all secondary schools were complying with the requirements of the Schools Councils (Wales) Regulations 2005. The regulations were having a positive impact on learners' decision-making in most schools in Wales and had strengthened the status of school councils.
- 10 The Welsh Government also published a review of governance arrangements in further education institutions in May 2010. The review called for further education institutions to take a proactive role in promoting, supporting and sustaining learner involvement in governance processes – including participation on the governing body. Integral to this is the need for an effective association representing students at the institution, which can play its part in promoting learner engagement.
- 11 Later in 2010, the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills provided funding to the National Union of Students to set up student representation structures and learner involvement in further education colleges throughout Wales. The student representation project worked with seven colleges in the first year. The project has provided training for student governors and class representatives to help them to fulfil their role. This project has recently moved into its second year and includes a further five colleges.
- 12 In addition, the Children and Young People's Participation Consortium for Wales has been working with the Welsh Government to improve the process of children and young people's participation in decision-making. The consortium has developed participation standards to measure the quality of the process of children and young people's participation against agreed indicators (the National Children and Young People's Participation Standards [www.participationworkerswales.org.uk](http://www.participationworkerswales.org.uk)). These standards are directly relevant to those post-16 providers working with 16 to 25-year-olds.

- 13 Since 2008, both Estyn and the Welsh Government have placed significant importance on involving learners in shaping their learning experience and offered examples of effective practice.

## **Main findings**

- 14 Providers in most post-16 sectors have made good use of the Welsh Government learner-involvement strategy in order to enable providers to develop and implement their own strategy or make sure that they are working to national guidelines.
- 15 Providers use a wide range of learner-involvement activities in most post-16 sectors. These include formal representative groups, questionnaires and surveys, learner advocates and consultations.

### **Monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of learner involvement**

- 16 No providers in the post-16 sector have set up systems to monitor and evaluate the benefits of learner involvement. Providers do not record how these activities improve outcomes for learners. No provider has implemented a system for monitoring and evaluating the impact of learner involvement activities on retention or on outcomes for learners, or for tracking the impact of learner involvement for individual learners. As a result, providers do not know what benefits or improved outcomes individual learners have gained as a result of their involvement.
- 17 Nevertheless, most post-16 providers, and learners, can describe the benefits of taking part in learner-involvement activities. Learners consider that they have improved a range of skills associated with their chosen learning activity, as well as improving their participation in community activities. Providers consider that learners improve their confidence, gain a sense of belonging and ownership of their learning, and develop a greater understanding of the learning processes. Learners also recognise the value of sharing their views and opinions. They develop communication and negotiation skills, learn to build relationships and improve their ability to work with others and to be innovative and creative.

## Recommendations

### **The Welsh Government should:**

- R1 review the requirements of the provider's annual self-assessment report to capture more fully the outcomes of learner-involvement strategies;
- R2 review the National Union of Students' further education student representation project to assess its impact for learners;
- R3 monitor the implementation of learner-involvement strategies at provider level;
- R4 implement learner-representation projects across the post-16 sector to train learners to act as learner advocates/representatives and secure the involvement of a wider body of learners; and
- R5 establish sector learner forums at a national level in order to enable learners to shape the nature and scope of their learning.

### **Providers in post-16 sectors should:**

- R6 set up systems for recording the range of outcomes achieved by learners, including personal and social benefits, as a result of taking part in learner-involvement activities;
- R7 improve the systems for monitoring learners in order to identify the impact of taking part in learner-involvement activities on individual learners; and
- R8 support learners to get involved in learner-involvement networks at a local and national level.

## Evaluating the impact of the guidance for involving learners in post-16 sectors

### Further education institutions

- 18 Eleven further education institutions out of the 23 surveyed responded to the questionnaire. Estyn carried out additional visits to four further education institutions.
- 19 All institutions that responded to the questionnaire have made good use of the Welsh Government learner-involvement strategy in order to help them either to implement their own strategy or to compare against their own strategy.
- 20 All 11 institutions say that they give a high level of priority to implementing learner-involvement strategies. The development of the learner voice has been a key area of work in all these institutions. Most institutions say that they integrate their involvement strategy with their mission, vision and strategic aims and plans. Generally, senior managers, or a variety of committees, monitor progress and the outcomes of learner involvement and report progress to governors.
- 21 Further education institutions have a variety of arrangements for implementing their learner-involvement strategies. In a very few cases, institutions have appointed a member of staff to support and co-ordinate learner-involvement activities. Generally, however, institutions delegate responsibility for promoting the learner voice to senior managers, the students' union or student support services.
- 22 Most institutions allocate financial resources to support learner involvement. The level of resource allocated varies between one and five per cent of annual revenue costs. These resources support staff costs, learner-involvement events, training for learners and staff, travelling expenses and operating costs such as stationery and catering.
- 23 All institutions have implemented a range of learner-involvement activities, including learner voice questionnaires and surveys as well as:
  - helping learners to act as course classroom representatives and learner governors;
  - setting up formal learner groups, such as learner panels; and
  - holding learner conferences.
- 24 These types of initiatives help learners to influence the strategic vision and mission of the institution, so that the learners' experience of teaching and learning improves.
- 25 For example, Merthyr College has set up a learner assembly. Course representatives elect delegates to the assembly. An annual learners' conference involves 30 learners in debate on a range of issues including health and wellbeing and course-specific issues that support the learner assembly.



- 26 Pembrokeshire College has set up a learner voice committee. As a result, learners have been able to provide feedback about courses. For example, the learner voice committee has been able to influence changes to induction and tutorial programmes, influence a revision of the college laptop policy and be involved in the refurbishment of the canteen. The college also makes good use of online systems to engage with learners.
- 27 Coleg Sir Gar has made good progress in developing learner-involvement strategies within the college. The college has increased learner representation on its corporate board. It has also set up learner panels on both the Ammanford and Graig campuses and trained learners to take part in the panels. This means that learners can raise issues which concern them. As a result, learners have been able to influence the way that canteens are run and managed, improve the availability of car parking and influence building design. The college has also improved support to student union representatives and restructured how the college delivers its student liaison function by allocating an officer to each of its campuses.
- 28 Deeside College has organised a campus council on each of the four main college sites. Learners undertake the role of chair and vice chair on each of these councils. The college considers that this increased learner involvement helps to identify and inform areas for improvements to the college's provision and facilities.
- 29 Coleg Morgannwg's Learner Parliament structure has campus-based parliaments consisting of class representatives who select three of their number to sit on the inter-college executive, which represents learners' views to college senior managers. The college also runs an annual learner conference where class representatives from all campuses participate in a high profile conference. Delegates debate a range of key topics. The college collates outcomes from the conference and produces an action plan, which it reports on at the next conference. As a result, learners have been able make an input into the programmes for updating information and communication technology facilities, making improvements to buildings, offering access to social media websites during lunch hours and improving facilities for recycling.
- 30 Generally, further education institutions deliver a wide range of learner-involvement activities. However, these providers have not set up any systems to monitor and evaluate the benefits of involvement for learners or to record how these activities improve outcomes for learners. As a result, education institutions do not know what benefits or improved outcomes individual learners have gained as a result of their involvement.
- 31 However, respondents to the questionnaire describe a range of personal and social benefits that learners gain from their involvement. These include:
- increased motivation and confidence;
  - improved citizenship skills;
  - higher level skills of reflection and evaluation; and
  - communication and social skills.

- 32 Respondents to the questionnaire also outline a range of benefits for the institution. These include helping the institution to improve the overall learning experience for all learners, and helping learners to understand that the college takes their views and opinions seriously and often acts upon them.
- 33 Importantly no institution has tackled how to monitor and evaluate the impact of learner involvement on qualification outcomes for learners. There are no examples of systems for tracking individual learners to measure whether their participation in the learner involvement activities **helps them to improve their outcomes**.
- 34 A few institutions stated that learner involvement activities had a positive impact on learners' completion, attainment and success rates. However, these institutions have no formal systems in place to demonstrate this.
- 35 The Welsh Government has commissioned the National Union of Students to support further education institutions to help learners to get involved in college governance as student governors or class representatives. However, this project has not tracked the impact of this work on learner outcomes.
- 36 Many institutions make use of the National Children and Young People's Participation Standards<sup>1</sup> to measure their work against the standards. Pembrokeshire College works with its local children and young people's partnership to develop its learner involvement strategies in line with national participation standards. Coleg Morgannwg has also worked with its local children and young people's partnership to implement its learner involvement strategies in line with good practice from elsewhere.
- 37 All institutions provide feedback to learners on the outcomes of learner involvement activities and integrate outcomes into the self-assessment process and quality development planning.

### Work-based learning providers

- 38 Seven out of 23 work-based learning providers responded to the online questionnaire. Estyn undertook visits to four work-based learning providers to follow up lines of enquiry from the questionnaires. These included one further education institution work-based learning provider and one local authority work-based learning provider.
- 39 All of these providers have a formal learner-involvement strategy. In all these cases, providers say that learner-involvement strategies inform the strategic mission of the provider.
- 40 Torfaen Training uses learner feedback well to arrange the specialist support needed by learners. For example, Torfaen Training has set up an effective support network

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<sup>1</sup> Providers can apply to the Children and Young People's Participation Consortium for an assessment of their performance against the National Children and Young People's Participation Standards. A Young Inspectors team may then undertake an inspection of the service and in turn award a National Participation Kite-mark. See <http://www.participationworkerswales.org.uk/standards/kitemark-inspection.aspx> for more details

to help learners with housing or domestic abuse issues and has provided learning aids for learners with additional learning needs – including digital voice recorders and laptops with the Dragon speech recognition software. Learners have also influenced how the company delivers apprenticeships. Learners identified that employers were not able to provide all the elements of work required for the qualification. As a result, the company introduced a shared apprenticeship scheme and collaborated with two or more employers in order to make sure that learners can complete all elements of their framework.

- 41 Babcock Training says that learner responsiveness is a key focus of its mission statement. As a result, staff regularly seek learners' views as part of the review process. All learners have the opportunity to provide feedback about their experience whilst on their programme or in their exit interviews. Learners can also leave feedback on the provider's website. Learners have brought about a reduction in the amount of written work that is required to provide evidence of their work. The company has extended the range of methods for recording evidence to include dictaphones, photographs and e-portfolios.
- 42 Providers make good use of the Welsh Government learner-involvement strategy either to develop their own strategy or to compare it against their own, in order to make sure that they are working to national guidelines.
- 43 In general, work-based learning providers use a narrower range of learner-involvement activities compared to further education institutions. The learner-involvement activities include the use of:
  - learner questionnaires;
  - course evaluations;
  - online provision such as Moodle, Twitter or Facebook to disseminate the outcomes of learner-consultation; and
  - meetings or question and answer sessions with senior staff and focus groups.
- 44 Work-based learning providers also used the different stages in a learner's learning pathway to canvass views and opinions, for example at induction and initial assessment and in individual learning plans.
- 45 A few providers employ staff to support learners' involvement. However, this is usually one of their more general roles within the organisation. For example, at Torfaen Training, a dedicated learning coach supports learners and provides a conduit between the learner, employer, training officer and parent/guardian if appropriate. At Aspiration Training, which is now part of the Vocational Skills Partnership consortium, an employee support co-ordinator gathers the views of learners. The employee support co-ordinator also visits learners in the community and at their work place.
- 46 Work-based learning providers have not implemented systems for monitoring and evaluating the impact of learner involvement on qualification outcomes for learners. Nevertheless, work-based learning providers consider that learners achieve improved outcomes as a result of being involved in shaping their learning experience. However, providers have no hard evidence to support this.

- 47 Notwithstanding the lack of evidence to demonstrate the benefits of learner involvement on the achievement of qualifications, all providers consider that learner-involvement activities enhance learner skills and attitudes. Participation in learner-involvement activities can help learners to build confidence and learn the value of sharing their views and opinions. Learners can develop communication and negotiation skills, learn to build relationships and improve their ability to work with others and to be innovative and creative. Participation in learner involvement activities can also:
- build motivation;
  - improve attendance and behaviour; and
  - raise aspirations.
- 48 Many providers use the Children and Young People's National Participation Standards to compare against their own strategy for learner involvement. However, no providers indicated that they would be seeking accreditation in order to achieve the participation standard.
- 49 While all providers allocate resources to learner involvement, only a half of providers were able to identify the percentage of annual revenue costs allocated to this work. In the other half, costs were included within the general work and resources of the organisation. The main resources allocated included staff time, the preparation of handbooks and literature and information and communication technology resources.

#### **Adult community learning providers**

- 50 Nine out of 41 adult community learning providers responded to the online questionnaire. We visited two providers to discuss the outcomes of the questionnaire and to meet learners. Two voluntary sector organisations and five local authority community learning providers responded to the questionnaire.
- 51 All providers say they have made good use of the Welsh Government's strategy for learner involvement to develop and implement their own strategy or to upgrade their existing strategies.
- 52 Eight of the nine providers say they have a learner-involvement strategy. In general, the priorities of the strategies include making sure that learners are involved in shaping provision and raising the quality of provision. Providers raise awareness of the aims of the learner-involvement strategy and report on outcomes via newsletters, learner forums, staff meetings and handbooks.
- 53 Providers say that they use the outcomes from involvement activities to influence the quality of the learners experience, contribute to the raising of the quality of provision, and influence the curriculum offered to learners. In one local authority, officers report the outcomes of satisfaction surveys to cabinet and scrutiny committee.
- 54 In the Workers Educational Association (South Wales), learners are central to decisions about the mission of the organisation and how it should be implemented. Learners constitute the majority membership of the organisation's governing body. Learner representatives also participate on various sub-committees such as health

and safety, voluntary movement, and the learner experience committees. Learners also determine the curriculum via local branch committees, learners' forums and union learning representatives. A report on the quality of adult community learning in the Workers Educational Association (South Wales) was published by Estyn in 2008.

- 55 Adult community learning providers have a variety of arrangements to ensure the sustainability of their learner involvement strategies. Providers have sought to embed learner involvement within their provision, either through formal arrangements such as a learners' panel or learner representation on strategic groups, or by making use of electronic communication or on-line learner forums. A few providers provide payment for travelling expenses to learners in order to attend forums.
- 56 Generally, adult community learning providers have not allocated responsibility for learner involvement to particular staff. Nevertheless, most providers provide training to tutors to help them understand the importance of learner involvement and the need to respond to learners' evaluations of their course. However, providers usually offer training at induction. Only a few providers offer training that addresses the current strategic importance of learner involvement.
- 57 All providers claim to have implemented a range of learner-involvement activities. These include working with learner focus groups to seek the views of learners on the planning and delivery of courses and programmes. Many providers use course-evaluation questionnaires to prepare reports that highlight the views of learners and make good use of the outcomes of this process to improve the quality of provision. A few providers have set up formal structures such as learner forums, learner panels or centre committees in order to involve learners in shaping their learning experience.
- 58 In Swansea, the local authority works with a very active learner forum made up of representatives from a cross-section of curriculum areas: arts and crafts, information technology, music and yoga. Members of the forum meet termly in order to discuss provision. Forum members also act as learning advocates and promote the benefits of learning to other adults. The members also help to manage the enrolment process. The local authority has provided training to members of the forum. This includes how to run meetings and how to work in a committee. As a result of their involvement in the forum, a few members have been very proactive in establishing new learning activities in their own communities on a voluntary basis.
- 59 In Torfaen County Borough Council, learners are involved in managing their own learning clubs in the local authority's centres. For example, a group of men are very involved in running and financing a wood-turning club at a centre in Croesyceiliog. The club rents premises from the local authority and works with the local authority to recruit learners, purchase and maintain machinery, and manage health and safety. Another group of learners run a watercolour painting club and employ the tutor. Representatives from both of these clubs also take part in the centre's management committee and are able to influence how the centre is managed.
- 60 However, while all adult community learning providers deliver a wide range of learner-involvement activities, they have not set up any systems to monitor and evaluate the benefits of learner involvement. Neither do they record how these

activities improve outcomes for learners. No provider has implemented a system for monitoring and evaluating the impact of learner involvement activities on the qualification outcomes for learners.

- 61 Nevertheless, both providers and learners can describe the benefits of taking part in learner-involvement activities. Learners consider that they have improved a range of skills associated with their chosen learning activity, as well as improving their participation in community activities. For example, in Swansea one learner has set up two jewellery-making classes in their own community, whilst another runs knitting classes in local community centre.
- 62 Providers consider that taking part in learner-involvement activities benefits individuals by raising their confidence, promoting a sense of belonging and ownership of the learning, and promoting a greater understanding of the procedures associated with adult learning. Adults also develop a greater willingness to listen to others and an understanding of the importance of everyone having a voice. Adult learners also improve their communication and negotiation skills and come to understand that their voice counts.
- 63 Adult community learning providers also value the benefits of involving learners in shaping the learning experience. Learner involvement activities help staff to plan and deliver learning to meet the needs of the learner more effectively. Managers also value the quality of the information provided by learners and make good use of this information to improve the quality and range of provision. For example, in Caerphilly County Borough Council the outcomes of learner involvement activities have led to the development of new classes and new opportunities (workshops) for learners.
- 64 All providers offer feedback to learners on the outcomes of learner-involvement activities and integrate outcomes into the self-assessment process and quality development planning.
- 65 Inspectors found during the last inspection cycle (2004 to 2010) that a few adult learning providers had trained adult learners as learner advocates. These roles involved learners in promoting adult learning to other adults in their communities to help shape the curriculum at a local level. For example, the Workers Educational Association (South Wales) and Cardiff Council worked well together to train voluntary community learning representatives in adult guidance. Their role involved promoting adult learning in their local area and influencing the development of new courses. (A report on the quality of adult community-based learning in Cardiff was published by Estyn in December 2007.)
- 66 In the report on the quality and value of the education and training funded through the Wales Union Learning Fund, May 2009, inspectors also found that union learning representatives acted as learning advocates. Union learning representatives worked with employees to encourage and support them to undertake education and training. They also worked effectively with employers to promote the benefits of further education and training of the workforce and the benefits that this would bring to the employer, such as improved self-confidence and motivation of employees. However, while the Welsh Government funds this approach through the Wales Union Learning Fund, similar financial arrangements are not available in either the adult community learning or Welsh for adults sectors.

### **Welsh for adults language centres**

- 67 The Welsh for adults Centres' self-assessment reports for the Welsh Government demonstrate that the centres are making progress in implementing learner-involvement strategies. The North Wales centre has a formal learner voice strategy, which sets out how the centre intends to involve learners. However, learner involvement is not as well developed in this sector, compared to the other post-16 sectors.
- 68 In general, the centres deploy a range of learner-involvement activities to help shape the curriculum and courses. These include learner questionnaires, learner panels/ focus groups and meetings with staff. Most centres use the outcomes of learner-involvement activities to make amendments to courses and as part of the process for improving quality.

## Appendix 1

### Evidence base

We carried out this work by evaluating responses to an online questionnaire, by visiting providers, by using information gathered on inspection and by evaluating the annual self-assessment reports providers prepare for the Welsh Government.

In total 11 further education institutions, seven work-based learning providers and nine adult community learning providers responded to the online questionnaire.

We undertook visits to:

- Cardiff and the Vale College;
- Coleg Morgannwg;
- Coleg Sir Gar;
- Pembrokeshire College (including work-based learning);
- Aspiration Training;
- ISA Training;
- Torfaen Training;
- Torfaen County Borough Council Adult Community Learning; and
- City and County of Swansea Adult Community Learning.

We also reviewed a range of Estyn publications and Welsh Government policy documents and evidence from the 2004-2010 inspections of adult community learning.

## Appendix 2

### The remit author and survey team

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