

EDUCATION AND TRAINING POLICIES TO IMPROVE RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND COMPETITIVENESS

INTRODUCTION

1. This submission has been co-ordinated by Mid Wales Training and Enterprise Council in consultation with leading individuals from Higher Education, Further Education and Schools sectors. It will be supplemented by a short presentation at the Committee

2. The Paper aims to bring a sharp focus to the contribution education and training makes to rural development and how this contribution can and must be improved. It aims to add value to and prioritise the many new education and training policies included in key National Assembly documents such as the report of the Skills Taskforce and the European Structural Fund programmes. Also it is written in the context of the new National Council for Education and Training for Wales/Higher Education Funding Council's emergent structure, which will integrate all post-16 publicly funded education and training in a way unique to Wales. It draws widely from the Mid Wales Partnership's Integrated Skills Action Plan.

KEY MESSAGES

3. Our three Key Messages are:

(i) Learning and Skills (investment in people) must be at the centre of a new strategy for improving the competitiveness of Rural Wales.

(ii) A fully integrated approach to education and training is essential.

(iii) A treble track approach is needed

- to raise demand for participation in learning and skills acquisition,**
- to raise employer appreciation and value of training, and**
- to improve the provision of education and training.**

ACTIONS BY THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

4. Our recommendations for the National Assembly are:

- i. To rethink the conventional approach to rural development policies...to genuinely put education and skills acquisition, especially for young people, as the driver for rural progress.
- ii. To demand that new education and training policies are based on evidence not myths. Blind spots should be exposed.
- iii. To ensure that all education and training provision reflects emergent jobs and occupation profiles (even for so-called traditional jobs) and that skill shortages and skills gaps are identified.
- iv. To give non-cognitive skills greater recognition, especially those associated with enterprise and entrepreneurship. Education and training policies can sometimes be too assessment and qualification based.
- v. To ensure that education and training provision in Wales at least keeps pace as new initiatives are introduced in the rest of the UK. An example is the introduction of foundation degrees in England.
- vi. To ensure the speedy and effective implementation of the ICT strategy for education and e-learning throughout Rural Wales and to ensure that there is no lagging behind urban Wales.
- vii. To introduce new grant schemes which incentivise small and medium sized employers to accelerate the volume and quality of their training.
- viii. To require all Assembly sponsored public bodies and Local Government to stipulate that firms must include a structured training plan when applying for public financial assistance. This plan should be given equal validity to other aspects of the plan. Stage payments should be linked to progress in implementing the training plan and for larger firms (50+ employees), there must be a commitment to the Investors in People standard.
- ix. To recognise that delivering quality education and training costs in rural Wales because of diseconomies of scale.
- x. To recognise that participation in full time education and learning in rural areas is more costly and to implement actions recommended by the Wales Skills Taskforce: *"To encourage more young people to participate in education and training, a new "Learning Maintenance Allowance should be introduced building on the pilot Education Maintenance allowance schemes being conducted in England"*

MAJOR PROBLEMS OF RURAL WALES' SKILLS ECONOMY

5. Rural development policies must tackle:

- i. The low GDP per capita and the low business productivity levels that lie behind it.
- ii. The decline of the agriculture industry and the consequent loss of wealth and employment opportunities
- iii. The prevention of future employment problems.
- iv. The thinly spread exclusion from the labour market.
- v. The lack of engagement in learning and low awareness of the importance of skills particularly in agriculture and related industries
- vi. The low levels of use of ICT.
- vii. The lack of higher-skills in the local economy
- viii. The difficulty of accessing training
- ix. The need for multi-skilling across the workforce in SMEs

BEST PRACTICE

6. The following give some selected examples of best practice and illustrate the best way forward.

6.1 THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ... A VEHICLE FOR BETTER INTEGRATION?

Integration at a local level

6.1.1 Community Consortia for Education and Training (CCETs) will provide the new National Council with vehicles for advising on and planning local education and training provision. In order to do this effectively, however, CCET members will need to work in partnership across organisational boundaries in an open and collaborative fashion. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of developing partners' capacity to work together to tackle conflicts in institutional interests for the benefit of the community. The 'Tim Ceredigion' programme is a good example of a CCET addressing the fundamental issue of relationship and partnership building as a first step in its development.

6.1.2 In setting the agenda for CCETs, the National Council needs to be clear that the opportunity for 'eliminating nugatory competition' are not as great in rural areas and the diseconomies of scale associated with delivering education and training will remain. Furthermore, the dispersed and limited demand for education and training across rural Wales means that CCETs focussed on local authority areas may not be in a position to take a strategic approach to planning and delivering certain types of provision.

Integration at a pan Wales level

6.1.3 An example of provision that may be better addressed at a pan Wales level is full time courses in agriculture. The decline in the industry is reflected in a reduction in demand for places on agricultural courses at further and higher education institutions. Market forces cannot be allowed to prevail; a

structured approach needs to be taken to the organisation of agricultural education and training in Wales. The Future Skills Wales sectoral study into agriculture recommended that a holistic approach should be taken to the organisation of agricultural training, rather than the existing, somewhat fragmented systems.

6.1.4 The new National Council is well placed to take a pan Wales view and to rationalise provision across a sustainable number of institutions. It is also well placed to demand closer linkages between Higher Education (HE) and Further Education (FE). There are examples of good practice in existence, not least the relationship that exists between the Institute of Rural Studies at Aberystwyth and Coleg Sir Gar. Under this arrangement the FE centres are franchised to deliver HE level courses locally to working farmers in West Wales.

Integration across economic development agencies

6.1.5 The "Farm Development Strategy Group" established under the Agri-Food Partnership and supported by the WDA Food Directorate, identified training as a priority and commissioned Mid Wales TEC to investigate how the management and ICT skills of farmers might best be developed. The findings of the research point to the need for a programme that is centred on developing the skills to use IT as a business management tool rather than on the achievement of qualifications by individual farmers. The research will help to inform the development of an integrated package of skills support to be available through the National Council under the Farming Connect banner.

6.1.6 Further research commissioned by the Farm Development Group identified a strategy for the development of business support for land based industries. It clearly identifies that agricultural colleges should be utilised to underpin a network of demonstration farms. The establishment of College based "Focus Farms" by the Milk Development Council and the use of Greenmount College by the Department of Agriculture (Northern Ireland) are further examples of how the education network should be integrated across economic development strategies.

6.2 RAISING INDIVIDUAL DEMAND FOR LEARNING

Developing a 'learning culture'

6.2.1 In recent times, there has been much talk of 'culture' in the context of Wales' economic development. Better Wales.com talks of the need to embed 'lifelong- learning' into the culture of Welsh communities and organisations. The Entrepreneurship Action Plan points to the need to develop an 'enterprise culture' in Wales.

6.2.2 The development of a 'learning culture' forms a central plank of the Mid Wales Partnership's Integrated Skills Action Plan. The Partnership is in the process of developing an integrated plan that will involve a range of organisations, to increase the perceived value of learning and skills among people, from cradle to grave. Lessons taken from the Mid Wales experience should be shared across the whole of rural Wales over the coming months.

Overcoming barriers to learning

6.2.3 Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) are enabling a fundamental shift in the way people work and interact. ICT literacy is becoming a prerequisite for employability and effective use of technologies a major driver of business competitiveness. Yet, businesses and individual in rural Wales are considerably less likely to use ICT than their counterparts elsewhere. Urgent co-ordinated action needs to be taken to increase the use of ICT in rural Wales.

6.2.4 The Mid Wales Partnership's ICT/HRD project seeks to bring together the development of a modern communications infrastructure across the region with the development of people's capacity to use technologies. The project brings together a wide range of organisations that share a common vision for a 'connected' society in the region.

6.2.5 A modern communications infrastructure will make learning far more accessible within rural communities. E-learning is not, however, the panacea for rural Wales' skills ills. E-learning, like any other form of open and distance learning, requires motivated learners to make it work. The success of e-learning is also very dependent upon the quality and appropriateness of the mentoring support provided. The adoption of e-learning as a panacea for rural areas will, ironically, serve only as a new source of marginalisation.

6.3 RAISING BUSINESS APPRECIATION OF THE VALUE OF SKILLS AND TRAINING

Addressing businesses on their terms

6.3.1 The skills needs of rural businesses are, in essence, the same as those of businesses in urban areas. The main difference lies in rural business' inability to access training to address those needs or to deliver suitable training in-house, often because of size. Shareaspect's innovative Shared Apprenticeship Scheme (SAS) seeks to overcome these difficulties by bringing together a number of engineering firms, which individually could not offer a full range of training, to provide Modern Apprenticeship opportunities to young people. The SAS has been successful in increasing the numbers of young people undertaking training to craft and technician level in Mid Wales, but at a price. The costs of engaging a large number of small businesses, which dominate the rural economy, in training are greater and funding policies must reflect this 'rural premium'.

6.3.2 A similar approach to providing wide ranging training is being developed in Gwynedd where a 'Skills Ring' offers opportunities for young people to experience work within a variety of organisations in the retail and tourism industries.

6.4 IMPROVING THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Developing the product to meet learners' needs

6.4.1 Most training provides a 'just in case' approach to learning. However, businesses and, indeed, individuals want a 'just in time' approach to help them overcome today's most pressing problem.

6.4.2 Learning materials currently under development by the University for Industry (Ufi) go some way to providing 'bite-sized' units of learning but a great deal more work needs to be done to make training materials more appropriate to potential learners' needs. The establishment of the National Council provides an opportunity to explore new and innovative ways of providing learners with solutions to today's 'problems' and helping them prepare for tomorrow's.

Developing a systems that helps overcome barriers to learning

6.4.3 The systems for funding the development of skills are currently geared towards helping businesses and individuals to overcome cost barriers to training; yet successive research reveals 'time' to be the major constraining factor.

6.4.4 Proposals currently under development by Mid Wales TEC would help businesses 'buy time and knowledge' by focussing skills development on solving business problems. The proposed pilot programme gives wholesale recognition to the fact that sustained management assistance for small businesses can help them become more productive and competitive.