

To link with Item 6

## ***General Council Statement***

### **An Education and Training Action Plan for Wales**

The General Council recognises that the status quo for post - 16 education and training is unacceptable. Radical change is necessary if Wales is to achieve future economic success and an improved quality of life.

The General Council believes that the National Assembly must have the ambition for Wales to lead the way in creating a well integrated, coherent and progressive post - 16 education and training system that is both accessible and able to provide the skills and understanding which young people and adults need in fulfilling their own aspirations and the needs of their communities.

The General Council welcomes the report prepared by the Education and Training Action Group and believes that it provides a sound basis on which the National Assembly should proceed.

In particular, the General Council welcomes the report's recommendations that the National Assembly should:

secure the basics in education and training right from the earliest years and provide the cultural capacity to make good use of knowledge and understanding, to tackle skills needs and to reduce social exclusion;

ensure that all training and education provision takes appropriate account of the labour market information provided by the Future Skills Wales project and subsequent skills needs assessments;

establish a National Council for Education and Training in Wales, with strong board level representation from business and trade union interests, which will be answerable to the Assembly and, together with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, responsible for resourcing all publicly funded post - 16 education and training;

establish a national credit based qualification and quality assurance framework which will expect year on year improvements in performance from all providers of education and training;

introduce local education and training partnerships to bring about an integration of post - 16 provision and to establish genuine parity of esteem and treatment for academic, vocational and workplace learning;

establish a national all age careers information, advice and guidance service.

The General Council is convinced that the regions of Wales, as evidenced by our own Regional Committees, the Economic Forums, the TEC's, the regions of the WDA and the soon to be established Regional Committees of the National Assembly, must contribute to the process by ensuring that post 16 provision takes full account of the particular economic and employment circumstances of the region. The National Assembly will need to ensure that this regional dimension is built into the future planning and provision of post - 16 education and training, recognising that it is at this level that social partner involvement can often be most effective.

The General Council also recognises that turning Wales into a Learning Country cannot be achieved solely through organisational change, efficiency gains and the better utilisation of information technology. The huge expansion of student numbers in both FE and HE in Wales over the last five years has seen the student unit of resource plummet, by as much as 60% in FE and 35% in HE, to levels far lower than apply in England. This situation needs to be rectified. Whilst the increase in basic funding announced by the Welsh Office in December 1998 is a welcome move in the right direction, it is essential that the unit of resource is restored to previous levels and is funded to at least the same levels as in the rest of the UK.

Conference supports the General Council in identifying the proper funding of education and training as a matter which the National Assembly must take on board at the same time as taking forward the recommendations in the Education and Training Action Plan if Wales is to seize the opportunity of bringing learning and skills together for the benefit of all.

Consultation Response

# An Education and Training Action Plan for Wales

## 1 Introduction

1.1 The Wales TUC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation document 'An Education and Training Action Plan for Wales' issued by the Government's Education and Training Action Group for Wales.

1.2 The Wales TUC represents the interests of 54 individual trade unions which in turn represent about 500,000 individual trade union members in Wales working in both the public and private sectors and in manufacturing and service industries.

1.3 The Education and Training Action Group (ETAG) was established by the Welsh Office following publication of the White Paper, *Building Excellent Schools Together (BEST)*, and is chaired by Peter Hain, MP, Education Minister. Its remit is to "*examine education and training in the round*", and to "*consider what proposals might be made to the Assembly for overcoming problems in these fields*". ETAG was heralded by the BEST White Paper as having an "*open and inclusive*" approach, with its work being shaped by "*informal reference and expert groups*". In practice, however, the opportunity for engagement with ETAG during the

course of its deliberations has been limited. This emphasises both the importance of the current consultation exercise and the fact that the consultation document does not in itself represent anything of a consensus view.

1.4 The fundamental omission from the ETAG report is that the basic level of funding for post 16 education is ignored. The reference to the need for student support is welcome as is the encouragement for the Wales CBI and Wales TUC to look at the issue of release, but even in these two areas the recommendations are weak in relation to what is required. It is not credible to promote the idea that lifelong learning can be achieved through efficiency gains and information technology. The huge expansion of student number in both FE and HE in Wales over the last five years has seen the student unit of resource plummet by as much as 60% in FE and 35% in HE. This damage now has to be repaired. In the current financial year every student in Welsh HE receives £157 less than their counterpart in England. The increase in basic funding announced by the Welsh Office in December 1998 is a welcome move in the right direction, but it is essential that the unit of resource is restored to previous levels and is funded to at least the same levels as in the rest of the UK. This should be a central recommendation of ETAG's final report to the National Assembly.

1.5 One further general point which the Wales TUC wishes to register is in relation to Information and Communications Technology. We do not accept that *"issues relating to new information and communications technology..... were covered fully in LIFE"*. Appropriate ICT networks are fundamental to two of the main strands of ETAG's proposals. These are the proposed national information, advice and guidance service and the development of co-ordinated post-16 provision. We do not consider that there is any overall strategy in place in Wales for ensuring that the ICT infrastructure develops in ways which will underpin effective and efficient future provision of services and the ETAG report to the National Assembly must include reference to the need for a strategic approach to investment in ICT networks.

## **2 Background**

2.1 Wales has seen a massive industrial restructuring over the last two decades from being heavily dependent on agriculture, mining and heavy industry into a much more fast moving, dynamic and diverse modern economy.

2.2 The key to future economic success will be in growing healthy businesses and in continuing to attract world class inward investors. The success of the education and training system in the UK and in Wales will be an essential ingredient to achieving that success. Wales therefore needs an infrastructure that will deliver the full range of skills required in the first quarter of the new millennium.

2.3 The importance of relating the education and training system to meeting the economic and skills needs of Wales is increasingly (although not yet universally) accepted. Its fundamental underpinning role for future success was set out in the Government's own *"Pathway to Prosperity"* document and in as far as the Wales TUC welcomed and approved the strategy advanced in *"Pathway to Prosperity"*, we also endorse the general recommendations made in the ETAG document that:

school and college development plans should take account of future skills needs analyses;

priorities for skills development must be determined and a strategy for increased take-up of vocational qualifications should be developed;

parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications must be secured and

the commitment of industry to the training of their own employees must be increased.

2.4 Similarly the Wales TUC welcomes and endorses the focus by ETAG on the role of learning for personal fulfilment and for combatting social exclusion. We share ETAG's belief that cultural and social factors must be addressed to overcome the skills deficit in Wales, and that we must *"generate the confidence necessary for wealth creation"*.

2.5 The remit set for ETAG was a considerable one, building on the vision already articulated in *"Building Excellent Schools Together"*, *"Pathway to Prosperity"* and *"Learning Is For Everyone"* (LIFE). In dealing with the breadth and complexity of the task set it would appear that ETAG has sought to focus on those things *"which appear to us to have the most strategic significance"*. As a consequence, it can be argued that insufficient attention has been given to some of the broader economic, social and cultural issues. In particular the Wales TUC is concerned that:

a preoccupation with structural reform to address the effects of inter-provider competition between schools and colleges has, in part, taken precedence over adopting a holistic approach to education and training provision;

as a consequence, the contribution of higher education, the role of voluntary and community organisations, and the experience of the trade union movement in widening participation in learning have all been under-explored and

while acknowledging that it does not attempt *"to cover all of our views and ideas"*, ETAG leaves unanswered the question of the relationship between their Action Plan and LIFE

### **3 Skill Needs**

3.1 The emphasis given to the use of the Future Skills Needs Survey is both supported and welcomed. The intention to use this as a common planning tool for all school and college development plans is a significant step forward although it is important to keep in mind that skills needs studies and labour market assessments are far from being exact sciences and should be used to assist not determine the planning of education and training provision. It is also important that a broad definition of skills is adopted in order to ensure that such skills have a wide application.

3.2 We agree with the recommendations for effective collaboration between schools, colleges and industry and would hope that the extensive work already being undertaken in Wales is built upon. The recent HMI survey of Education Business Links shows that there is current good practice within Education Business Partnerships in Wales which could usefully be further developed.

3.3 Another positive aspect of this part of the report is the proposal for fiscal incentives to engage SMEs in training and the establishment of sector groups. Both these proposals are strongly supported. Again best practice needs to be examined and built on as for example in the electronics sector where education, industry and TEC's have worked together to develop technician training frameworks.

3.4 A serious and glaring omission from the report is the role of Higher Education and the current developments being encouraged between FE and HE by the use of a Partnership Fund. This is a

collaborative approach between FE, HE, schools, local authorities, TECS, business and community groups and should have been a part of ETAG's consideration. It is essential that, if we are to achieve a "*seamless system of post 16 education*" and the eventual goal of lifelong learning, then our schools, further education, higher education and business must all be partners in any proposed model. Effective participation by HE will be an essential prerequisite in driving up the quality of the jobs across all sectors and making entry into the lifelong learning agenda available to all in Wales.

3.5 The Wales TUC strongly supports the aim of establishing a parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications. However if parity of esteem is to be achieved between vocational and academic qualifications then the work based route must be given equal prominence in any local plans and partnerships.

3.6 The first report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning "*Learning for the Twenty - First Century*" states that "*Learning at the workplace will need to make a major contribution to national strategy through marked improvements in the numbers of learners at work and in the range of activity and achievements of those who learn at, for or in the workplace. It should embrace training in new or updated skills, whether specific*

*or generic, continuing professional development, learning for personal development and learning to use new technologies, including those which support learning itself. It accommodates the needs and interests of a variety of partners, including employees, employers, customers, government and providers. It will contribute to competitiveness, skills enhancement, employability and capacity to deal with change.*" We continue to endorse this view.

3.7 Through enhanced opportunities for workplace learning, individuals, employers and organisations will be enabled to respond to the changing nature of economic activity. It will contribute to improved efficiency and productivity in employment and help meet the personal and career development needs of individuals. Only then can the culture of lifelong learning become a reality.

3.8 For many who have been marginalised by the school system, the workplace is the only place where they will engage in formal learning. The Fryer

report recommends the adoption of a broad, inclusive policy framework to underpin the extension of workplace learning for all. This will be essential if we are to re-enthuse people and get them back into education and onto the lifelong learning agenda.

3.9 Trade unions have an important role to play here and one which the report gives insufficient attention to. Trade union are an important source of information on, as well as being direct providers of workplace learning. This includes literacy and numeracy provision, vocational skills, industrial relations qualifications and increasingly is being seen as a gateway to other areas of lifelong learning. The involvement of trade unions in the Bargaining for Skills initiative with TEC's and the new Union Learning Fund initiative with the Welsh Office are examples of how unions are exploring new opportunities to extend lifelong learning amongst working people at the workplace.

## **4. Standards and Targets**

4.1 In aspiring to establish Wales as a learning country it is clear, in both LIFE and the ETAG report, that what is needed is a radical cultural transformation and that success in tackling the learning divide and in

widening participation will, indeed, rest on securing *"a balanced and inclusive learning system incorporating clearly defined avenues for progression and personal achievement"*. The ETAG report acknowledges that although *"great strides have been taken in widening access and promoting opportunity, yet educational inequality remains a reality"*. In reaching out to *"!educationally detached"* people, ETAG has recognised the scale of the task and of the resources needed, and we commend the interventions proposed to tackle the barriers to access, not least through raising motivation, confidence and aspirations, especially for *"potential learners who need constant coaxing and constant reassurance at early stages, if they are to regain confidence."*

4.2 In calling for policy, provision and funding to address such needs, it is disappointing that ETAG fails to reflect the urgency of this approach in identifying national targets. The Wales TUC would wish to encourage ETAG to recommend targets to measure the success of providers in developing structures, curricula and accreditation processes which are a stepping stone to further learning and take non-traditional learners to the threshold from which progress in vocational or academic programmes can be secured. Such learning often takes place in groups and in work related and community settings other than education and training institutions. A target to measure and value this work would serve to raise the profile of access programmes and to secure them in the inclusive, progressive framework ETAG calls for.

4.3 The Wales TUC welcomes the proposals for monitoring, recording and reporting processes for measuring participation and achievement, and particularly the emphasis on greater harmonisation and transparency in the approach. We would support a widening of coverage in this area to bring in the New Deal, the University for Industry and other initiatives wherever possible.

4.4 We also believe that mechanisms need to be in place to record learning and achievement through the Welsh language since without this data we will be unable to measure progress in ensuring equal access to learning opportunities for Welsh speakers.

## **5 Access and Participation**

5.1 The issues of access and participation must be central to any strategy for improving the education and training levels achieved within Wales since they represent the biggest challenge of all. To tackle low aspirations and social exclusion, and raise motivation, participation and achievement means changing the policies and practice of the past, and raising the levels of investment in education and training which are currently seen as appropriate by Government, employers and individuals alike. The Wales TUC strongly endorses the appeal to the National Assembly to recognise that a real, lasting impact to facilitate wider access and inclusion demands investment at all ages to prevent *"disaffection, waste and further disadvantaged generations"*.

5.2 While recognising the legitimate concern for *"a well integrated system of post-16 education"* and the potential of the one stop shop arrangement described, we would caution against adopting a simplistic single track approach. ETAG itself points to the diversity of adults' needs and the system needs to be flexible and responsive and, above all, ensure that learners' decisions are informed by impartial information, advice and guidance and enable a choice between learning options which are all of high quality.

5.3 For non-traditional learners, progress may be intermittent and hesitant and very small steps may represent significant learning gain. The experience from the Gateway in the New Deal has confirmed that, especially for the most disadvantaged and disaffected groups, continuing access to a package of personal intensive support is often necessary for an extended period to address barriers and secure the learning

pathway. The credit framework and open college networks provide opportunities to accredit such learning and should be recognised and funded for work at this level.

5.4 In promoting the needs of non traditional learners ETAG will want to take on board the views of the equality bodies operating in Wales and who will be working with the National Assembly in meeting its statutory duties concerning equal opportunities.

5.5 One note of caution which we must enter here concerns the interaction between addressing the issues of access and participation and the objective of establishing parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications. Although ETAG are not proposing that vocational qualifications should be seen as a more appropriate option for under-achievers, it is nonetheless important to emphasise that true parity of esteem will depend on equal opportunity of access and the removal of financial barriers.

## **6 Information, Advice and Guidance**

6.1 The provision of high quality information, advice and guidance, both for those employed and for those who are unemployed and looking for work is an essential element in developing the lifelong learning agenda. We are therefore encouraged by the high priority given to this in the ETAG report.

6.2 The Wales TUC broadly supports the approach advocated by ETAG and we can see merit in structuring careers guidance on the four economic regions of Wales, thereby enabling and encouraging this service to be delivered in a manner which is economically driven and which is consistent economic and enterprise developments.

6.3 The report states that *"All too often young people are encouraged to stay on in school pursuing academic courses when that might not be the best option."* We agree that this is a major waste of talent and resources and prejudicial to the Lifelong Learning Agenda. Reservations expressed in the OHMCI report on the quality and impartiality of advice provided for Year 10 and Year 11 in schools are well founded. Careers education and guidance in schools should be both impartial and objective but objectivity is difficult to ensure in a school environment where key teaching staff are influenced by a system of funding which encourages schools to retain pupils and discourages them from advising more appropriate routes.

6.4 Since their inception TECs have been developing an extensive training and education data base. This has been used as the foundation for the adult information, advice and guidance service that underpins Learning Direct. Wales Quality Standards have been developed through the All Wales Guidance Network and will be introduced and piloted with all providers during 1999. It would be detrimental to undermine the work is in progress and it must be noted that the success of the Information, Advice and Guidance initiative in Wales is seemingly being recognised by the DfEE in England who are recommending that a partnership approach similar to the one already developed in Wales is the appropriate route to go down.



6.5 Whilst agreeing with ETAG that there is much to be gained by drawing together the various strands of information, advice and guidance into a coherent service for adults, the Wales TUC also recognises that access points to the service will be potentially as diverse as learners themselves, and can be found in job centres, libraries, colleges, community groups and the workplace. The role of careers companies will include locating and training such agents as part of a network of providers, to ensure development of the necessary expertise and an effective role in the process. ETAG will do well to examine the recent experience gained in the New Deal Gateway.

6.6 It will be essential that the information and advice is seen as impartial and professional. The Wales TUC believes that the Union Learning workplace representatives programme, which we are currently in the process of introducing in Wales, can make a positive contribution in the delivery of impartial information and advice to those in the workplace considering learning options and opportunities.

## **7 Planning and Providing in Partnership**

7.1 The Wales TUC considers this part of the report to be the least robust. Whilst we have an inclination to support the broad approach advocated by ETAG we are concerned that ETAG itself seems unclear with regard to detail in this area and has sort to rely on offering a number of options. This part of the report emphasises the low level of consultation undertaken during the preparation of the report,- although in passing it might be said that in so far as the report has drawn hostile comment from both education and training providers as well as industry, on the grounds that ETAG is here favouring 'the other side', may indicate that ETAG has got it about right, at least in general terms.

7.2 Partnership is what we all want. The most effective use of resources is another common aim. The Wales TUC strongly endorses the need for greater coherence and planning for provision for those post 16. There is presently both a duplication of easily affordable courses and a subsequent paucity of others as a result of education having been coerced into a competitive ethos by the previous government imposing changes in the funding and management of education

7.3 However this cannot be achieved by simple exhortation, nor within the timescale envisaged. Suggesting that partnerships can be implemented in the year 1999 / 2000 is wildly unrealistic given the other demands being placed on the potential central partners. In particular we are alarmed at the threat to force partnership via primary legislation if a voluntary approach fails to *"achieve a very great deal, very quickly"*. A partnership approach based upon coercion is doomed to fail.

7.4 The Wales TUC wishes to see such an approach succeed however. We believe that developing a coherent approach to post 16 education and training is essential to building a more successful economy. We therefore recommend that ETAG should seek to explore ways of building partnership and coherence in post 16 provision by utilising the existing building blocks and areas of expertise.

7.5 ETAG suggests three options for consideration. We consider the first option by which the National Assembly would contract directly with perhaps several hundred different local bodies to be totally unworkable. The second option which emphasises the role of the new regions has the merit of engaging partners and in particular the social partners at a level directly relevant to economic development and enterprise promotion. The third option envisages the setting up of a Wales Council for Education and Training which would replace the existing FE Funding Council and the existing TEC structure (as far as training is concerned).

7.6 In line with our view that ETAG will do well to build on existing strengths we believe that there is merit in seeking to combine the elements of option 1 and option 2. The Wales TUC wishes to see the establishment of a common funding regime for post 16 education and training. We believe that the setting up of such a common funding regime, to be overseen by a Wales Council for Education and Training, the membership of which would be based on securing a partnership between employment, training and education, would of itself drive through the need for coherence and relevance in local post 16 planning and provision. At the same time we are convinced that the regions of Wales as evidenced in the Economic Forums, the TEC's, the regions of the WDA and the soon to be established Regional Committees of the National Assembly, must be empowered to achieve a the necessary coherence of post 16 provision taking account of the particular economic and employment circumstances of the region.

7.7 We have emphasised throughout our commitment to partnership in the planning, funding and delivery of education and training. We are concerned however that ETAG's three proposed options seem to limit the strategic partners to the schools, local authority adult education services, further education colleges and training providers. Our experience of lifelong learning leads us to conclude that any proposed consortia, be it at local, regional or at an all Wales level will need to be more inclusive and wide ranging than is suggested and will need to specifically include the social partners if they are to achieve real added value and deliver the improvements in provision which we all believe are so necessary.

W:\GENCOUNC\1999\99-01\GC12A.WPD.