

Children and Young People Committee

CYP(4)-09-11 Paper 2

Evidence from UCAC

Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009

UCAC education union welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry by the Assembly's Children and Young People Committee

UCAC is an union with 5,000 members consisting of school teachers and headteachers, and Further Education and Higher Education lecturers in Wales. Its headquarters is in Aberystwyth, and it operates through the medium of Welsh.

1. What effect has the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 had to date on young people aged 14-19 years? Do young people have a wider choice of academic and vocational courses as a result of the Measure?

There is certainly a wider choice of courses and qualifications following the implementation of the Learning and Skills Measure, particularly in terms of vocational courses and qualifications.

2. Do Welsh language pupils get the same depth and range of choice?

This varies. On the whole, institutions are able to offer a sufficiently broad range to meet the requirements of the Measure, but provision is not necessarily as broad as the range available to English-medium pupils.

The situation is improving in terms of the breadth of choice, but it is a continuous struggle to overcome difficulties. The main difficulty is the lack of partners who are qualified to provide Welsh-medium courses (FE Colleges and private sector provision is weak) and the geographical distances to the nearest qualified partners. There are significant costs involved in overcoming these problems.

3. If the Measure has resulted in a wider choice of academic and vocational courses, has this had any unintended consequences for other subjects, for example modern languages?

Naturally, expanding the range of courses has affected certain subjects because the same number of students are distributed between a larger number of subjects. Schools with fewer than 1,000 pupils in particular are finding it difficult to provide

sufficient numbers of courses in a cost-effective way, unless they have invested in on-site facilities (facilities for construction, hairdressing courses etc.).

The groups in some subjects have decreased significantly, and in some cases, the numbers are so small that it is difficult to justify offering certain subjects at all. In general, it is the 'more traditional' subjects that are suffering; modern foreign languages are suffering consistently, and numbers fluctuate from year to year in other subjects.

This problem is at its worst in two-stream schools, where pupil numbers are divided between the English and Welsh streams, creating very small groups.

4. Has the implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 had any effect on the numbers of young people choosing to stay on in education or training after the end of compulsory education at age 16?

In some institutions, the numbers are not staggering, but there may be some indication that the wider choice of available courses has been a factor in attracting some to stay on at school beyond the compulsory age - but it is difficult to measure. In others, the change has been much more significant; those institutions tend to be larger, and are able to offer wider on-site provision.

5. What practical problems are being addressed in order to implement the Measure? Are there implementation problems for example:

- **in rural areas:** The distance between schools and colleges creates practical and financial problems in rural areas; transporting students from one institution to another is a significant cost to schools and colleges and can use up quite a chunk of teaching time. The 14-19 grant has been absolutely essential in securing the necessary transport to be able to expand provision. It is not unusual for schools to have to arrange buses, mini buses and even taxis for learners, as public transport is not convenient in terms of travel times or locations.

- in relation to the provision by local authorities of a minimum of thirty learning programmes, including five vocational options + delivering local area

curricula: In urban areas this is not too much of a problem; collaborative working between institutions can be effective enough, especially in areas where there is strong support from the Local Authorities (eg Cynnal in the north), but it is certainly more difficult in rural areas, for the reasons outlined above. In general, it is fair to say that 30 is felt to be too ambitious, and perhaps, somewhat excessive; there was no need to set the number at 30 in order to extend provision, and to ensure a minimum number of vocational courses. It has been a huge challenge for many organizations.

- **delivery of learning (including the use of IT and remote learning):** There have been positive developments in e-learning as a result of implementing the Measure, and this needs to continue to develop; once again the role of Local Authorities is extremely important.

The experience of teachers is that video-conferencing is an effective option for post-16 students, especially if the video-conferencing sessions are combined with regular face-to-face sessions.

The remote sessions are more difficult with the 14-16 age group. If you need staff to supervise pupils in the video-conferencing room while the teacher / lecturer teaches remotely, questions arise regarding the effective use of human resources but otherwise schools have to deal with disciplinary problems as a result of video-conferencing sessions.

Another aspect of remote learning is that it is often delivered by private providers, and the institution purchasing the provision must be confident of its quality and must be able to deal with any problems that arise in this context.

- **transport and travel issues:** See above, this causes real problems in rural areas.

Again, this varies according to the age group concerned. With post-16 groups there is no problem in terms of discipline, or coping with institutions which are potentially very different to their own. But with the 14-16 cohort, it is often necessary for staff to accompany the pupils to ensure discipline, safety and familiarization with the new institution. Again, the question regarding the effective use of staff arises.

In urban areas it is more common to expect staff (rather than students) to travel from site to site, and problems have arisen with this arrangement also. Often not enough time is allowed for travel (traffic problems, parking difficulties, reaching the classroom / lecture after reaching destination) and this causes unfair and undue stress on staff. There are examples of staff missing breaks or lunch time in order to travel from one site to another.

- **Any other issues?**

- (a) We are aware that the need to deal with private providers are placing a bureaucratic burden on schools; they have to deal with unfamiliar contractual issues and do not possess the expertise to deal effectively and confidently with them. In addition, courses purchased by private providers, including Further Education Colleges, can be extremely expensive.

- (b) There is an enormous problem on the horizon; there will be a cut of 12% in the 14-19 budget in April 2012, and further cuts of 7% from April 2013. That is, cuts of nearly 20% over two years. It is difficult to imagine how it will be possible to meet the requirements of the Measure under these budgetary circumstances.
- (c) Some schools have reported that they feel that their efforts to expand the provision have not been recognized, and especially so by new banding system. The reason for this is that the banding system takes the **Level 2 + Threshold** as the criterion (ie 5 GCSEs or equivalent, grade C or above, including Welsh / English and Mathematics), where the proposed Learning and Skills Measure takes the **Level 2 Threshold** (5 GCSE's or equivalent, grade C or above, *in any qualification*). They feel they are not being rewarded in any way for their efforts to expand the provision to include vocational courses and qualifications. This is also the case in another elements of the banding system, namely the use of capped Points Score (= the best 8 GCSEs or equivalent) rather than the wider Points Score - a score that has risen greatly in schools which have widened provision significantly, but which is not recognized by the banding system.

6. Is the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 being implemented consistently across all local authorities?

We have been told that 14-19 plans will need to be developed and agreed on a regional level (consortium) from April 2012 onwards, rather than at Authority level. There will be advantages and disadvantages to the new arrangement no doubt, but it will mean change, and accountability issues are bound to arise eg financial accountability; accountability regarding meeting the requirements of the Bill, accountability regarding needs and priorities.

7. Are vulnerable learners, particularly those with additional learning needs, able to benefit from the provisions in the Measure?

In some cases, increasing the range of provision offers an opportunity for learners with ALN to stay in the 6th form.

We anticipate that the cuts mentioned in question 5 above will reduce the capacity of the Measure to benefit these particular students. Currently, at Key Stage 4, the Measure focuses mainly on Level 2 courses, and far less on Level 1 courses; at Key Stage 5, the focus is on Level 3 courses rather than courses at Level 2. But it is the lower level courses that usually offer the most benefit to students with additional learning needs, and encourage them to continue their education beyond compulsory school age. When funding is cut, each educational institution will focus on achieving

the statutory requirements, and the unintended side effect will be that the courses at lower levels, and therefore students who are more likely to leave education, will suffer most. This will undo much good work done to date.