

LEARNING PATHWAYS: THE PARADOX OF CHOICE

I am delighted to be able to open this conference which comes at an opportune time as 14-19 Learning Pathways policy matures.

We have:

- a well established policy;
- new legislative powers;
- significant funding to ensure that it delivers for young people.

Over the coming years I expect to see a raising of young people's attainment; a reduction in the number of young people leaving full-time education without qualifications; more young people progressing into further learning; and a reduction in the number of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training.

But I want to start with a few words about the Education portfolio overall, as this is my first opportunity to say something on a broad basis.

I regard the job as one of the most challenging and one of the most interesting and important in government.

In principle, it should be quite simple. The job is to raise standards, to world-class levels, and to spread opportunity and equality of life-chances and outcomes. Ensuring that the resources are present for those who need them at the front line.

My mantra, as I have said before, is straightforward:

- Better implementation
- Fewer initiatives
- Keep it simple

I happen to think a small country should be able to do things smartly and simply.

The job of the Education Minister is to keep a sharp grip on the big picture, and not to get drowned by the detail of the day to day decisions within the system.

In Wales, over the last decade, we have established a variety of exciting initiatives:

- Establishing the Foundation Phase –widely praised across the sector and across the world
- Creating the Welsh bacc – interested to see Professor Anthony Seldon saying the Welsh Bac is in some ways ‘actually superior’ to the International Baccalaureate – with the curriculum broadened to include vocational pathways
- Developing the 14-19 learning pathways – a model that others say England should learn from
- Leading the way in grant support for university students

- With a strong two-language focus, with our first Welsh medium education strategy to be published later this year.

here is a clear Welsh direction, but that does not mean we should not learn from international best practice – from Scandinavia, from Scotland, from England.

I am concerned more about standards than structures – except where structures get in the way of delivery.

So what are my priorities? For those of you who have read the First Minister's election manifesto, they should be obvious. If you haven't read it, I'm afraid you're off the pace. The First Minister's manifesto is being implemented, and will be implemented. His manifesto puts flesh on the bones of the One Wales agreement.

The First Minister committed to an additional 1% above the money received from the block grant each year until the spending gap with England was closed. That will kick in from the 2011-12 Financial Year.

The First Minister committed to a re-focussing of educational investment, to ensure more reached the front-line of schools, colleges and universities. I have announced a review of the cost of administering the education system and that will help us shape our budgets for the next financial year. We need to make the best use of all of the resources available to us. I want to reduce bureaucracy, avoid duplication and ensure that as much funding as possible reaches the front line. The review of funding for education in Wales will help streamline the education system, make it lean and effective, and ensure that we deliver the best possible service to our learners.

The Assembly Government's Education budget can no longer be a Christmas Tree with presents for everyone. Money will follow One Wales commitments and Ministerial objectives. In future, I will be publishing a written statement on our priorities when we publish the allocations for FE and sixth forms. I hope Governors will pay particular attention to that.

There were a number of other commitments of the First Minister directly relevant to 14-19 Learning Pathways. I will discuss two of those today, having spoken a little about apprenticeships and action to address the numbers not in Education, Employment or Training the other day. The two I want to spend time on are:

- achieving parity of esteem between vocational and academic routes
- action to address unnecessary competition between FE colleges and schools

Achieving parity of esteem between vocational and academic subjects

Fifty years ago, Raymond Williams wrote, in *Culture and Society*:

Many highly educated people have, in fact, been so driven in on their reading....that they fail to notice that there are other forms of skilled, intelligent, creative activity: not only the cognate forms of theatre, concert, and picture-gallery; but a whole range of general skills, from gardening, metalwork and carpentry, to active politics. The contempt for so many of these activities, which is always latent in the highly literate, is a mark of the observers' limits, not those of the activities themselves.

So the academic/vocational divide has been there a long time.

14-19 Learning Pathways require a paradigm shift on the part of learning providers. We know that if we do what we're been doing in the past, we'll get what we're getting. And whilst there have been significant improvements in some areas, we clearly need to do better for many of our young people. Change is just no longer an option, it is now a necessity.

14-19 Learning Pathways relies on the collective responsibility of all learning providers to work together to secure an appropriate choice of provision which meets the needs of ALL learners in their area. This includes those who are disaffected or disengaged, those who are disruptive or have additional, emotional or mental health needs, those who can be identified as potentially Not in Education, Employment or Training, as well as those who are heading for a place at university.

It also includes all those in between. Our 14-19 Policy is not just aimed at those who were perhaps

struggling with traditional GCSEs. We know that many more of our young people could do better if properly motivated and supported to achieve success and a curriculum was available that they saw as relevant.

We all know that is our challenge. How do we secure the choice our young people want and need, the quality and range of provision we promise, in the most efficient and effective way? And how do we support our young people to make the choices which will best help them to realise their potential, their aspirations and achieve success?

From a conceptual idea in *The Learning Country* in 2001, 14-19 Learning Pathways has evolved into a holistic and comprehensive collaborative approach.

Last year the Nuffield Review of 14-19 education and training¹ recognised the Assembly Government's attempt to incorporate in its "Learning

¹ *Education for All: The future of education and training for 14-19 years olds*

Pathways” a broader and more flexible vision of progression and suggested that England should learn from us.

Learning Pathways has been built on the strong foundation of what we know works best for young people in Wales. Whilst using international experience as inspiration, the policy was created from the experience and expertise of practitioners here in Wales. Many of you here today will have been involved in the dialogue which created the Learning Pathways “package” and the legislation now driving it forward. As much as this was a collective effort in its development, we now need to redouble our efforts in implementation if we are to make the difference we all aspire to.

Part of that redoubling of efforts has been the introduction of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, which secures wider learner choice with a minimum entitlement

The Measure secures learner access to a more flexible curriculum that will both better meet their needs, and equip them for high skilled employment or further and higher education. Learners can now choose from a minimum number of courses at Key Stage 4, including vocational options. By 2012 all year 10 pupils will be able to choose their course of study from a local curriculum comprising a minimum of 30 Level 2 course choices. This curriculum must also include a minimum of five vocational course choices, thereby ensuring that there is a real choice of vocational options for learners.

The entitlement for Key Stage 4 is being introduced incrementally towards 2012 but I am pleased that 91% of schools met their specified minimum course requirement for September 2009.

The minimum course requirement for Post-16 will be rolled out from September 2011.

I want to say a word about learner choice. The American Psychologist Barry Schwartz published a book in 2004 called *The Paradox of Choice*. It was subtitled *Why More is Less*. His thoughts on this started, he said, when he went to a branch of Gap to buy a new pair of jeans. He was offered regular, easy fit, and relaxed fit, in a variety of colours and sizes.

‘The jeans I chose turned out just fine, but it occurred to me that buying a pair of pants should not be a daylong project....before these options were available, a buyer like myself had to settle for an imperfect fit, but at least purchasing jeans was a five-minute affair. Now it was a complex decision in which I was forced to invest time, energy, and no small amount of self-doubt, anxiety and dread.’

Schwartz draws a larger conclusion ‘when people have no choice, life is almost unbearable. As the number of choices increases, as it has in our consumer culture, the autonomy, control and

liberation this variety brings are powerful and positive. But as the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multitude of options begin to appear. As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize.'

And he says 'the fact that some choice is good doesn't necessarily mean that more choice is better.'

So we have the paradox of choice. In terms of the 14-19 agenda, we want to ensure a wider choice between vocational and academic routes. But I do not want that choice to dilute quality. So if we are to be honest with ourselves, we have to recognise that that broader strategic choice, to open up vocational options alongside the academic, may require us to limit subject choice if we are to ensure strategic subjects are taught and key skills learned.

And for individuals, having more choice means sometimes difficult decisions for young people. Support from a Learning Coach, together with impartial careers advice and guidance, will help young people make the choices that will give them the best chance of success in the future, and help them realise the choices they have made. (ASIDE) This is why we must ensure that the support and guidance offered must be of the highest quality.

As a society, we need to ensure that we are allowing certain kinds of priority subjects to be maintained in the curriculum. That is a constraint on choice. As we are in Wales, we need to ensure that we promote and protect the Welsh language. That is a widening of choice, in that previous generations did not have that choice – but it is also a conscious policy choice which establishes certain requirements and obligations on providers.

This paradox of choice is at the heart of the success of our Learning Pathways policy. As Schwartz says, 'we should learn to view limits on the possibilities we face as liberating not constraining'. Individual choice will always operate within collectively-determined priorities. And that is where democratically-elected governments come in, to provide the framework for choice and quality, balancing a widening of individual opportunities within a context of building a smarter, more sustainable, more prosperous society.

The paradox of choice, then, leads us to 'the language of priorities' which as Aneurin Bevan told us, is 'the religion of socialism'. You will be hearing a lot more about the language of priorities in the future.

**Action to address unnecessary competition
competition between FE colleges and schools**

The Learning and Skills Measure ensures greater cooperation between learning providers in the formation of the local curriculum

Wider learner choice will only be achieved through effective collaboration. The Measure provides a statutory basis for co-operation between learning settings in the creation of the local curricula. The local 14-19 Networks have a lead role in co-ordinating the formation of the local curricula. I look to these networks being as inclusive as they can be, with work-based learning providers playing a full part.

Wider choice of relevant options from a local curriculum, and greater flexibility to vary the speed and direction of programmes is a key element of a Learning Pathway. The local curriculum is developed by all the learning providers in an area and offers a wide range of relevant courses and qualifications including vocational learning routes targeted at young people of all levels, whilst

maintaining GCSE, AS/A level and other established courses.

Some young people will still follow a solely academic pathway, although with the addition of the Learning Core, guaranteeing Key Skills, and wider experiences. Some will choose a more specialised vocational pathway, where there is now a wider range. Most will be able to choose a mixture of provision to follow their aptitudes and interests and to provide a solid broad foundation for specialisation later on.

I spoke earlier about how Learning Pathways create an environment where learners will have the choices that suit their needs and circumstances. But there are certain skills and knowledge that we all need – in learning, in employment, in our daily lives.

This is why the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification is such an important development. And it's why in One Wales we made the commitment to implement

a broader based baccalaureate with more vocational options.

The Welsh Baccalaureate aligns closely with the 14-19 Learning Core. Of course, that is no accident. Learning Pathways and the Welsh Baccalaureate have been developed alongside each other specifically to achieve this.

So it is by design that the Baccalaureate increasingly provides the qualifications structure to underpin Learning Pathways.

The Welsh Baccalaureate is designed to be a flexible model. It gives equal weight to qualifications in all learning routes and this allows programmes to be designed that meet individuals needs.

At the same time, the Core of the Qualification guarantees a degree of breadth and develops the skills and attributes that all learners need.

Any of the external qualifications approved for use in Wales can be used as the options within the Welsh Baccalaureate. And the Local Curriculum that Learning Pathways will guarantee will ensure that learners have a good range of real option choices.

These options include new Principal Learning qualifications. These employer endorsed qualifications were developed, initially for the 14-19 Diplomas in England, but we are implementing them in Wales as options within our Welsh Baccalaureate framework.

To help guide them through the choices that the Welsh Baccalaureate brings, learners also have a Personal Tutor, equivalent to the Learning Coach role in 14-19 Learning Pathways.

I am pleased that from this September there will be 217 centres providing the Baccalaureate to some 53,000 learners.

This represents over 8 out of 10 providers. You should all be proud of the contribution you have made to the development and now the delivery of this strategy. It is testament to the engagement we have had from frontline staff to get the right policies in place that we all believe in. I intend to ensure that we continue to engage frontline staff in the implementation stages of ALL our policies. You are the people who make the difference on the ground and know what is needed at local level. My job is to get the strategic framework right and provide you the tools to make it happen.

Remember:

Better implementation

Fewer initiatives

Keep it simple

Some of you may have seen the story in the South Wales Echo on 13th January, which featured a consultant surgeon at the Royal Glamorgan Hospital who had sent one of his trainee orthopaedic surgeons to spend a week working with chisels and saws on a timber roof with a team of carpenters in Sully. A wonderful example of the overlap of the vocational and the academic that genuinely rated craft skills.

Similarly, we have the example of the Bridgend pupil who wants to be a doctor but is doing a day a week at Bridgend College where he is taking Automotive skills.

Vocational and academic are not an either/or choice in Learning Pathways. Both are important – and all learners need to be able to access an appropriate choice at the right level. However, I recognise that we have a challenge in raising the profile of vocational courses to ensure parity of esteem with

their academic counterparts. The test should be whether a course allows a student to reach their chosen pathway.

Many of you have told us that choice is more expensive, and that it may be difficult to extend choice in a harsh financial climate. And there is no doubt that offering the range of choice required is a complex operation. I know how much effort has gone into developing the local curricula to the point where almost all Year 10 learners were able to access the range of choices set out in the phased implementation plan for the Measure in 2009. I appreciate that work and the benefits it has for our young people.

But.... and there is always a but.....we accept that there many more challenges to realising the full entitlement and to continuing to extend the range and quality of provision. Moving forward will sometimes, perhaps often, require more radical and imaginative solutions that have yet been put into

place. I know many of you are well aware of this and are up for the challenge. Better choice for learners sometimes means difficult institutional choices for those making the provision – which includes many of you in this room. The Paradox of Choice. It is likely that we will have to narrow the range of academic choices if we are to broaden the vocational agenda, maintain Key Skills and support strategic subjects. That is the paradox of choice. And the language of priorities.

We have a clear direction from the First Minister to eliminate unnecessary institutional competition. Our Transformation agenda supports that – locally determined, not a national blueprint. I do not believe that the current structure of post-16 provision is sustainable as it is currently constituted. I welcome the mergers that have taken place within the FE sector, and I expect that more will happen.

The Learning and Skills Measure places a duty on maintained schools and further education

institutions to work together to secure maximum choice for learners. Our next round of contracts with work based learning providers will bring them into the loop in terms of this expectation.

Current arrangements for post-16 learning delivery are unlikely to support the ambitions we have for the communities of Wales, or the efficient and effective delivery of 14-19 Learning Pathways.

Therefore, the transformation of post-16 learning is a key priority for our employment and skills strategy, Skills that Work for Wales (StWfW). The Strategy draws on the lessons of the Adrian Webb's review of the mission and purpose of FE in Wales and reflects our ambitions to more closely align post-16 provision with the needs of employers, learners and Welsh communities.

Like 14-19 Learning Pathways, our Transformation Policy seeks to ensure wider learner choice and reduced duplication of provision. It also seeks to ensure higher quality learning and teaching.

We did not prescribe a particular solution or model; rather we invited local proposals which reflect the local geographical, economic and social environment and which meet the national framework's criteria.

So, we are opening up more choice at a strategic level, between vocational and academic provision. Tactically, that will mean changes in day to day provision – in the configuration of courses and institutions. **The paradox of choice. And the language of priorities.**