



# Estyn

*Rhagoriaeth i bawb - Excellence for all*

Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrthidi dros Addysg  
a Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate  
for Education and Training in Wales

## Choice and flexibility for 14-19 learners

March 2008



BUDDSODDWR Mewn Pobl  
INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



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- ▲ LEAs;
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<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Purpose of report	1
Background	1
<b>Main findings</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Option menus in Wales</b>	<b>7</b>
What are option menus?	7
What is the quality of option menus?	7
<b>Increasing choice and flexibility through option menus</b>	<b>9</b>
Developing option menus	9
Expanding options at key stage 4	11
Expanding options at post-16	15
Using new technologies	18
<b>Securing wider choice and flexibility</b>	<b>19</b>
Leadership	19
Collaborative and partnership working	20
Improving quality	21
Other key elements of Learning Pathways 14-19	22



## Introduction

### Purpose of report

- 1 This report focuses on Element 2 – Wider Choice and Flexibility – of Learning Pathways 14-19<sup>1</sup>. The report shows what is working well and what needs to be done to meet the aims and objectives of the Learning Pathways 14-19 initiative. It also identifies examples of good practice. The report's findings come from an analysis of the annual development plans of all 14-19 networks<sup>2</sup>, visits to 11 networks and evidence gained during area inspections in Merthyr Tydfil and Wrexham.
- 2 This report follows on from two Estyn reports published in 2006 on qualifications and Learning Pathways 14-19<sup>3</sup> and on collaboration between schools with sixth forms and further education colleges<sup>4</sup>.
- 3 In 2008, Estyn is publishing three other reports that are concerned with the provision for 14 to 19 year olds. These are on science, Welsh-medium provision and the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification. They contain further information that complements the contents of this report.

### Background

- 4 The Welsh Assembly Government outlined its commitment to transforming the provision for 14 to 19 year olds in Wales in the Learning Country: Vision into Action (2006). The aim is for:

*'95 per cent of young people by the age of 25 to be ready for high skilled employment and/or further or higher education by 2015'*
- 5 This transformation is to be achieved through Learning Pathways 14-19. Learning Pathways 14-19 consists of a blend of six key elements which, in combination, will ensure that all learners receive the appropriate balance of learning experiences that best meet their needs. The key elements also enable learners to receive the support and guidance they need to realise their potential. The six key elements are:
  - individual learning pathways to meet the needs of each learner;
  - wider choice and flexibility of programmes and ways of learning;
  - a learning core which runs from 14 through to 19 wherever young people are learning;
  - learning coach support;

<sup>1</sup> Learning Pathways 14-19 Guidance II. Welsh Assembly Government 2006

<sup>2</sup> 14-19 networks are strategic groups of providers of education and training in a local authority area, set up as part of the Learning Pathways 14-19 initiative.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.estyn.gov.uk/publications/Remit\\_17\\_\\_14to19\\_Learning\\_pathways\\_2005\\_2006.pdf](http://www.estyn.gov.uk/publications/Remit_17__14to19_Learning_pathways_2005_2006.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.estyn.gov.uk/publications/Remit\\_18\\_Collaboration\\_between\\_schools\\_with\\_sixth\\_forms\\_and\\_FE\\_institutions\\_May\\_2006.pdf](http://www.estyn.gov.uk/publications/Remit_18_Collaboration_between_schools_with_sixth_forms_and_FE_institutions_May_2006.pdf)

- access to personal support; and
  - impartial careers advice and guidance.
- 6 The Learning Pathways 14-19 initiative aims to encourage more young people to achieve their potential so they become better equipped for the world of work, and better informed and more active citizens. It aims do this by contributing to an improvement in the proportion of 16 year olds gaining worthwhile qualifications, progressing to further learning in education and training, widening choice, promoting equality of opportunity and supporting the achievement of '*Extending Entitlement*'<sup>5</sup>.
- 7 The Welsh Assembly Government provided guidance on Learning Pathways 14-19 in July 2004 in '*Learning Pathways 14-19 Guidance*'. In April 2006, it published '*Learning Pathways 14-19 Guidance II*'. This enhanced and built on the original guidance and included the action plan that followed the Deputy Minister's report on Learning Pathways 14-19 in November 2005.
- 8 By 2010, at the latest, the Welsh Assembly Government plans to create a new learning infrastructure in Wales. This will draw upon the resources of schools, further education colleges and training providers to work together to provide Learning Pathways 14-19 for learners. The partners in each local 14-19 network are expected to set out the full range of choices available to learners in the area in an option menu. Learners should be able to choose the formal aspects of their personal learning pathway through the option menu.
- 9 By September 2007, 14-19 networks were expected to have analysed existing choices, and developed innovative and collaborative option menus for their areas. The option menus should, by 2008, therefore:
- include opportunities in each of the domains<sup>6</sup> of learning;
  - demonstrate increased choice for learners, especially in more practical and applied options; and
  - avoid duplication of provision.
- 10 The Welsh Assembly Government proposes to introduce an Assembly Measure for Learning Pathways 14-19<sup>7</sup>. The Measure will include an entitlement for learners to a wide range of general and vocational courses, and will place a duty on providers to co-operate.
- 11 The reports of Beecham<sup>8</sup>, Leitch<sup>9</sup> and Webb<sup>10</sup> are likely to influence the development of the Learning Pathways 14-19 initiative. Beecham states that more collaboration is

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<sup>5</sup> Extending Entitlement is the Welsh Assembly Government policy for youth support services in Wales.

<sup>6</sup> There are five domains: mathematics, science and all aspects of technology; business and management; services to people; creative arts and culture; and humanities and languages.

<sup>7</sup> Proposals for a Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2008. Welsh Assembly Government consultation document 046/2008.

<sup>8</sup> Beyond Boundaries: Citizen-centred Local Services for Wales 2006

<sup>9</sup> Prosperity for All in a Global Economy: World Class Skills 2006

<sup>10</sup> Promise and Performance 2007

required between local authorities and between those who provide a service to the public. Although Beecham is most concerned with local authorities, he also refers to post-16 provision as an area in which rationalisation is required. The Leitch Report says that it is essential for the education system to produce more people with a higher level of skills to meet the demands of industry and the employers of the future. The Webb Report calls for a 'radical change' to 14 to 19 education and training and states that 'marginal readjustments will not suffice'. In particular its recommendations about new planning and commissioning frameworks and consortia delivery, if accepted, would have a major and far-reaching impact on all providers.

## Main findings

### Option menus and choice

- 12 The choice of courses available to learners is increasing. The best example is where groups of schools and colleges have planned provision together and made the full range available to all learners in their institutions. Schools cannot fund this range of provision on their own.
- 13 Even so, most learners do not have the flexibility to choose from the full range and type of courses available in their area. Their opportunities depend too much on what is on offer in the provider that they attend.
- 14 At key stage 4, there has been an increase in the number and type of vocational courses being offered, mainly at entry level or level 1. The Work-based Learning Pathways pilot is working well and learners like it. However, there has been little increase in courses for more able learners, particularly vocational courses at level 2. This constrains choice for the more able learners and also blocks progression for those who complete low level courses in Year 10.
- 15 Many schools still see vocational courses as only being suitable for less able learners. They are also uncertain to what extent attainment in these courses is recorded in publicly-available performance indicators and so are reluctant to offer them because they will not contribute to key performance indicators such as five GCSE grades at A\* to C.
- 16 Only a minority of schools offer options that try to meet the aspirations of Learning Pathways 14-19. Many options in key stage 4 derive from a previous idea of what constitutes a broad and balanced curriculum. This approach aims to offer courses in a number of 'areas of experience' such as the 'humanities', 'technology' and the 'arts'. This approach leads to the formation of groups of options which limit learners' choice to the subjects within them.
- 17 At post-16, the range of options available across networks increases considerably. There is a very wide range of general education and vocational options that cover all domains and levels in all areas. Nearly all learners can choose courses that enable them to follow their chosen learning pathway provided they are prepared to move between institutions. Most of the limited expansion of courses at post-16 has been in new level 2 courses for middle-ability or lower-ability learners.
- 18 Many schools encourage learners to continue their study in the sixth form and do not give them clear, unbiased information about the options available to them in other providers. Learners who decide to remain in a small sixth form have a limited and narrow choice of courses, and have very few opportunities to mix general education and vocational courses.

### Networks and collaboration

- 19 Over the last two years, networks have improved the collation of information on the courses offered in their area in an option menu. In general, networks use the option menu as a planning tool, but they are not doing enough to increase learners' access to or, knowledge about, the options available within a network.



- 20 The most effective networks are those where co-ordinators have status and authority, and where the network is linked to the key strategic bodies in the area that have access to funding.
- 21 Direct competition between providers at post-16 continues to be prevalent. Collaboration, with a few exceptions is on the periphery and does not affect mainstream study patterns. In most cases at post-16, there is only a small amount of collaboration and it affects only a few learners or a narrow range of courses.
- 22 A few schools have harmonised their timetables with those of other providers in order to expand the number of courses and to increase the flexibility of study for learners. Schools that do not harmonise their timetables find it difficult to benefit from collaborative arrangements.
- 23 There are a small, but increasing, number of well-developed collaborative arrangements at post-16, some of which are long-established. These involve a common post-16 curriculum in a group of schools and the best examples also include colleges. Very few also involve work-based learning providers.
- 24 Though there have been many interesting and valuable developments in expanding choice and flexibility over the last two years, this has often resulted from grant rather than from mainstream funding. It is uncertain how this kind of provision can be maintained once the grants cease.

### **Leadership and quality assurance**

- 25 Leaders in providers do not always have a clear vision of how they can develop the Learning Pathways 14-19 agenda. In particular, too many do not pay enough attention to the entitlement of learners or the need for learners to plan and achieve their individual learning pathways.
- 26 Working in collaboration or partnership demands new and unfamiliar leadership skills. There is a tension between the need to plan collaboratively across an area and the funding and governance arrangements that focus on independent, individual providers. Networks will find it difficult to offer greater choice with less money due to falling rolls without rationalising provision and securing better partnership working.
- 27 Networks do not have clear and comprehensive systems for quality assurance that draw conclusions about the effectiveness and efficiency of all of the provision in their area. Networks should seek to grow the provision that is good and intervene to tackle any under-performance. This is likely to be difficult for networks that do not have any powers to direct providers.

## Recommendations

In order to expand choice and flexibility for 14-19 learners:

### **providers should:**

- R1 harmonise their timetables with those of other providers and take account of the gaps in local option menus in planning their provision to ensure that all learners have equal access to their entitlement;
- R2 provide learners with clear, accurate and unbiased information about the options available to them, particularly at 16;
- R3 increase the range of vocational courses available to all learners, especially at level 2 in key stage 4 and level 3 in post-16; and
- R4 develop the leadership skills of networking and negotiating to facilitate collaboration;

### **networks should:**

- R5 ensure that all providers, staff, learners and parents have a clear understanding of Learning Pathways 14-19 and of the options available to learners;
- R6 explore ways to gain the full involvement of work-based learning providers;
- R7 plan for the use of mainstream funding to support the development of effective option menus;
- R8 link the development of option menus to lifelong learning and economic developments in their area; and
- R9 develop quality assurance arrangements that enable decisions to be made about the relative value for money of courses; and

### **the Welsh Assembly Government should:**

- R10 develop a communication strategy in order to ensure providers, learners and parents are better informed about the purpose of Learning Pathways 14-19 and of option menus.

## Option menus in Wales

### What are option menus?

- 28 Collaborative option menus form the main component of the second key element of Learning Pathways 14-19. This key element is concerned with extending choice and flexibility in education and training options for learners. An option menu includes courses that lead to approved qualifications and make up the formal element of a learner's individual learning pathway.
- 29 An option menu should ensure that all learners aged 14 to 19 are aware of, and have access to, the whole range of options available in an area. Learners should be able to choose from a choice of options drawn from the five domains and be able to choose a combination of general education and vocational courses from entry level to level 3 in each of these domains.
- 30 Learning providers need to collaborate on all aspects of the option menu across the 14-19 Network in order to make sure learners get this entitlement and to make the best use of existing and new funding. The overall provision on offer is likely to include options that are available at each provider, together with those that are available at only one or more provider in the area, or even outside the area.
- 31 The Welsh Assembly Government expects providers to encourage learners to seek the options that are best suited to their needs, even if those options are located at another provider. Providers should give learners the advice, information and help they need to access and remain successfully on the option they have chosen.

### What is the quality of option menus?

- 32 Each year 14-19 networks produce an Annual Network Development Plan (ANDP) that covers all aspects of Learning Pathways 14-19. This plan sets out the strategic priorities for the network. It includes the option menu and an action plan to show how the network will meet the identified objectives. Networks completed their fourth ANDP for 2007-2008 and are preparing their fifth one for 2008-2009 for March 2008.
- 33 Each ANDP contains an option menu and, in general, the quality of these has improved over the last two years. All option menus include general and vocational options as well as an extensive range of formal and non-formal qualifications. All show the provision at schools and further colleges, and most also include some work-based learning provision. A majority of option menus identify courses from all five domains from entry level to level 3 and show, in broad terms, the progression routes through them. Around half identify faith-based provision, but only a few identify bilingual arrangements.
- 34 There are still shortcomings in all option menus. In particular, they do not identify clearly where there are gaps and duplication. Many also do not identify the provision that is delivered through partnership or collaborative arrangements. Many menus do not contain any useful detail on individual subjects or courses, or indicate where this can be found. These menus do not show whether the provision is for key stage 4 or post-16 learners. A few menus do not include opportunities within the work-based learning sector.

- 35 Even though option menus list a wide range of courses, it does not mean that they are equally accessible for all learners. Much depends on whether arrangements, such as common timetables and transport, exist so that learners can choose from all the options available.
- 36 Providers' knowledge and understanding of the purpose and content of option menus varies considerably within networks. Many staff within providers are unaware of the option menu and most do not take enough account of them when planning their own provision.
- 37 At present, learners' access to the information contained in option menus is limited. Only one network has placed its option menu on a website so that learners can see it. In general, networks use the option menu as a planning tool and are not doing enough to increase learners' knowledge about, and access to, the options available within a network. A Careers Wales Online (CWOL) project, which contains the information in an option menu and enables learners to access it, was trialled in four schools in 2006-2007. This is now being introduced in phases across Wales and about half the secondary schools in Wales started to take part in September 2007. This work has the potential to help learners get more access to option menus, as shown in the following example:

#### **Case study 1**

As a result of one school's involvement in the pilot project, it has introduced a paper-less option system for Year 9 learners. Learners choose their subject choices online, through the [Careerswales.com](http://careerswales.com) 14-19 Learning Pathways pilot site. Learners log-on to the website and view all the information needed to decide on what courses best suit them. They have access to this information at any time, including at home. The information includes optional subjects available in the school, in other neighbouring schools, and at local further education college. As a result, learners can get a very wide range of easily accessible information about the options available to them. In turn, the school has access to the choices that learners are making and it uses this information to help plan a key stage 4 curriculum that meets learners' interests and needs.

## Increasing choice and flexibility through option menus

### Developing option menus

- 38 Many promising examples of expanding choices are emerging as networks start to increase collaboration between schools, colleges and work-based learning providers.
- 39 A few networks have made some headway in establishing the notion of a learner entitlement. All are now engaged in some work on this in anticipation of future legislation by the Welsh Assembly Government that is likely later in the year. However, the understanding of, and commitment to, the principle of entitlement varies considerably between providers and networks. The few networks that have been thinking about entitlement for some time have significant advantages. In these cases, individual providers, especially schools, are starting to reflect on what impact the entitlement will have on what they offer to their own learners. All learners should be able to access the entitlement irrespective of the provider they attend. Enabling this to happen is a major challenge for both networks and individual providers. At present, most learners do not have an equal opportunity to access a sufficient range and type of courses. Their opportunities depend too much on the school that they attend. In a number of networks, co-ordinators are frustrated by the reluctance of some schools to become involved in expanding choice and flexibility for learners, especially in key stage 4. These co-ordinators see the forthcoming regulation that specifies the learner's entitlement as necessary in order to secure the involvement of reluctant schools.
- 40 Some network members have a reasonably good idea of what the learner entitlement might be at key stage 4 and post-16, and have started to plan accordingly. However, there is still some uncertainty about what constitutes a 'vocational' course and what volume of work is likely to be classified as a 'course'. Networks anticipate that guidance from the Welsh Assembly Government will clarify this. Whatever the specification, it is unlikely that any school, even the largest, will be able to provide the minimum entitlement of courses by themselves. For example, one very large school visited as part of the survey has over 1,800 learners, including over 500 in the sixth form. In key stage 4, the school offers, in addition to those courses in the core, 27 options, including seven vocational options. At post-16, the school offers 32 A levels and courses in six vocational areas. However, the school is not able to offer these on its own, as it collaborates with a neighbouring further education college to provide some of the courses. Another large school, with over 1,300 learners and over 260 in the sixth form, works in partnership with two other schools and a college to offer over 40 courses at key stage 4, including 15 vocational courses, and it offers 30 A level courses and 17 vocational courses at post-16.
- 41 The main activity in expanding the 14-19 curriculum over the last two years has been to increase the number and type of vocational courses. Most of this expansion has been in courses that are set at entry level or level 1 in key stage 4 or at level 2 at post-16. It is only in very few cases that there has been an expansion of vocational courses for more able learners. There are a few exceptions to this. For example, in one network the more able learners have the opportunity to take two extra GCSEs in collaboration with the local college. Another network enables learners to take

courses after school that are either additional or they are courses that normally attract small numbers. However, very few schools give learners the opportunity to take some qualifications early or to move onto to higher level qualifications, such as AS levels in key stage 4.

- 42 Vocational courses are often more expensive and difficult to provide than National Curriculum subjects. One network estimates that they are often three times more expensive to provide than traditional classroom-based sessions such as those in English, mathematics and history. Vocational courses need to be taught by well-trained specialists and delivered in accommodation with suitable equipment that meets industry standards. This type of provision is unlikely to be provided by schools working alone. In one school visited, key stage 4 learners from six schools were involved in a catering lesson in specialist facilities that were only available in that school and taught by a member of staff from a neighbouring further education college.
- 43 Though most schools are aware that vocational courses are more expensive to provide, very few of them analyse the costs of providing general or National Curriculum subject courses, especially those catering for few learners. For example, in one school that has carried out this analysis, the costs varied from just under £100 per learner for all the key stage 4 learners taking mathematics to over £6,000 for the one learner taking A level French.
- 44 A minority of schools are reluctant to expand their vocational provision at key stage 4 because they feel that it may have a detrimental effect on how their performance is perceived. Schools are wary about how attainment in these courses is recorded in publicly-available performance indicators, especially on the RE2 form<sup>11</sup>. There is still a widespread feeling that the significance of the indicator about the proportion of learners achieving five or more GCSE grades at A\* to C will hamper developments. This is because some vocational courses are not included in this indicator. The development of the wider points score and the Level 2 Threshold indicator<sup>12</sup> will go some way to alleviating this concern.
- 45 Many schools still have a narrow conception of the need for Learning Pathways 14-19 and often do not see a demand for more vocational courses other than for a small number of less able and/or disaffected learners. Overall, too many schools still see vocational learning as something for less able or disaffected learners.
- 46 Many networks have provided new specialist facilities where vocational learning can take place. The best examples are where groups of schools and a college have planned this provision to be available for all learners in their institutions, as is illustrated below.

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<sup>11</sup> The RE2 form contains summary examination information, specific to each school, compiled by the WJEC on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government.

<sup>12</sup> The Level 2 Threshold indicator is shown on the RE2 form for 2007 as a pilot indicator with the intention that it will be implemented from 2008. The Level 2 Threshold indicator is a measure of the volume of qualifications at level 2 that is equivalent to the volume of 5 GCSEs at grades A\* to C.

## Case study 2

As a result of partnership working, one school and its partner schools and college used grant funding to improve the school's accommodation and equipment for engineering, multi-media work, performing arts, and sports and leisure. This provision is available to the partnership and the school in turn has access to new provision in its partner-institution schools, for example in construction and hair and beauty therapy. Another three schools in a different network each have different specialist facilities that together cover construction, hair and beauty, and health and social care. The three schools fully share these facilities.

## Expanding options at key stage 4

- 47 There has been an increase in the range of courses at key stage 4. Most of these have evolved from what was previously known as the 'alternative curriculum', where provision was designed to meet the needs of a relatively small number of learners who were unlikely to achieve to their potential by continuing with the traditional options available in schools. The expansion from these courses has been mainly to meet the needs of a larger number of lower-ability and middle-ability learners. Schools believe that these learners will find vocational courses to be more rewarding. This has led to a marked increase in the number of courses, mainly provided through collaboration, delivered at entry level or level 1. In doing this, networks and providers offer courses that lead to recognised qualifications that have clearly defined progression routes into further study, training or employment. Many schools start to expand this range by themselves and only seek collaborative provision from the network when they find that they are unable to go further alone. These are often the schools that are reluctant to accept the notion of an entitlement for learners or of the need to work in partnership with other providers.
- 48 A number of schools are changing the pattern of their options in key stage 4 in response to Learning Pathways 14-19. However, many option choices in key stage 4 are still influenced by a previous idea of what constitutes a broad and balanced curriculum. This approach aims to offer courses in a number of 'areas of experience' such as the 'humanities', 'technology' and the 'arts'. This approach led to the formation of groups of options for these areas of experience where learners' choice is limited to the subjects within them. However, over time, this idea has been superseded by new demands on the key stage 4 curriculum, such as the expanding core, and the introduction of new subjects. Only a minority of schools have adopted an option system that better meets the aspirations of Learning Pathways 14-19. These schools consider that the Learning Core, including the statutory requirements, now provides the common experiences for all learners, and that the options should be there to widen choice and flexibility, and should be, as far as possible, unconstrained. One school visited presents this view of options to parents in the curriculum overview section of its prospectus. It sets out the core experience for all learners, and it then lists the large number of general and vocational courses on offer with the following text:

*'Option blocks are created following an initial free choice of the subjects offered. Learners are offered clear guidance based on prior attainment, future*

*potential, targets and professional judgement so that choices made are appropriate and enjoyable'.*

- 49 This school, therefore, offers options that enable learners to select appropriate courses from the wide-ranging option menu. Only once learners have made this initial selection, does the school then construct its option groupings. The school stresses that learners have to be aware of the potential progression routes and it cautions against specialising too early. Despite the large number of courses and learners in the school, nearly all learners can follow the courses they want. Another school presents the subjects on offer in key stage 4 in domains. The information presented to learners indicates the level of courses, the progression routes they lead to and the areas of work and/or careers they might support. A further school has a dedicated option that contains all the vocational courses on offer, so that all learners have access to them. In contrast to these three examples, another school still retains the constrained options with the result that many learners are unhappy about not being able to take the courses they wanted because of the structure of the options.
- 50 There are many example of good practice in the developing option menus in key stage 4.

### **Case study 3**

In one network, there is developing collaborative work between schools and further education colleges in one of the many clusters that have been set up. Schools have agreed on the days that these day-long collaborative activities can take place. They usually cover two traditional option blocks and take up a whole day of the week. Learners can choose from a wide range of vocational areas, though most of these are at entry level or level 1. Different subjects are provided at different schools in the partnership, depending on the availability of specialist facilities, and learners travel between sites.

### **Case study 4**

In another network, schools and the local further education college have set up an afternoon when learners can take a number of vocational courses, mainly at entry level or level 1, and a few GCSEs. The GCSEs are for more able learners who can take one subject in Year 10 and another in Year 11. Learners in this network can also take additional modern foreign languages in twilight sessions.

- 51 In the above examples, schools have had to harmonise their timetables and curriculum to some extent. They have agreed on the specific day or part of a day, typically a morning or afternoon, when the collaborative activity can take place. In some networks this process has gone even further where there has been a move towards sharing a common timetable.



### Case study 5

In one network, all schools have agreed the same basic format to the curriculum, based on a two-week 50 period timetable cycle, a common pattern to the day, with three one-hour lessons in the morning and two in the afternoon, and common timings to the day.

- 52 Other networks are starting to see whether there can be a further alignment of timetables and the curriculum. For example, some are considering a more radical structure to the curriculum so that options take place on two specified days and the Learning Core, including the statutory requirements, is taught on the other three days.
- 53 Where schools have not sought to harmonise timetables, collaborative activities have created additional problems. For example, in one school that has not adopted a common timetable, learners on collaborative activities are not able to take some courses, while others miss some lessons in their options. In contrast a much larger school that has harmonised timetables with its partners does not find the same difficulties. Harmonising timetables is not straightforward. Making it work requires not only a commitment and determination to finding a solution, but also willingness to compromise. Discussions about common timetabling also quickly expand into other areas such as transport, staffing and funding, thus making the problem more complex and difficult to solve. However, despite this, there are many examples of schools and colleges that overcome this problem because there is the will to do so.
- 54 Although the expansion of vocational courses started from what was previously known as the 'alternative curriculum', the need for these courses remains and there has been further improvements to them. The courses now provide a more coherent and balanced experience, and are more likely to lead to a qualification. The best provision is where networks have focused on those learners who do not benefit from the traditional key stage 4 curriculum or who have been identified as being likely to become not engaged in employment, education or training (NEETs). In one network, the special school works with a number of mainstream schools to set up a five-days-a-week course that takes place in eight venues across the area. The activity leads to a number of qualifications at OCN and NVQ entry level to level 3.
- 55 A key development that is taking place in key stage 4 is the pilot scheme in Work-based Learning Pathways that started in seven networks from September 2007. The schemes involve collaboration with businesses in construction and the built environment, engineering, sports management, leadership and coaching, and the motor industry. In addition to receiving the basic curriculum, learners undertake a work placement of between 20 and 50 days and study for a vocational qualification at level 2. The initiative is aimed at able and motivated learners and allows them to study for vocational qualifications, not just in school, but also in college and the workplace. One such example is given below.

### **Case study 6**

One school and college are working together to deliver a Work-based Learning Pathway course in engineering in co-operation with the sector skills council, SEMTA. Learners were provided with good quality guidance and information about the course, and took part in an open evening for themselves and their parents at the college where the course is taught. The college achieves very high standards in its engineering courses and has established effective links with a number of manufacturers, including those concerned with highly advanced and technical products. Fifteen learners are taking part in the course and they have the opportunity to achieve a level 2 qualification. Learners are taught in dedicated and high-standard accommodation by college specialists for a morning and afternoon each week. They will also have the equivalent of 20 days of work placements at one or more of the linked businesses. Back in school, the learners follow a complementary GCSE course in product design and the two elements are closely linked. Learners are enthusiastic about the course and the opportunities it presents for learning in a work-focused way. They are highly motivated and see the course as being of great benefit to them. In particular, they feel that the course is providing them with a considerable experience of working both in specialist facilities in a college environment and in real businesses. They are quick to appreciate the demands and standards required in vocational work of this nature.

- 56 'Taster' courses are an important part of the provision in some networks, although not all learners in an area have the same access to them. Taster courses are important as they can give learners some, albeit limited, experience of courses that are new to them. The best ensure that learners get an authentic, realistic and balanced experience of what full-time courses might be like. These include visiting the place where the course is offered, if it is at a different provider to the one they currently attend. In doing so, they not only experience the styles of teaching and learning on the course, but also what it is like to be a learner in that institution, as is outlined below.

### **Case study 7**

One network has organised a week-long set of experiences for about 60 learners who have limited aspirations of progressing to further education or training. They experience a well-organised and motivating series of activities in selected vocational areas over three days at the local further education college and spend another day experiencing education at the local university. On the final day, learners provide a presentation on their experiences to the others on the programme.

- 57 Some networks have organised their tasters through Saturday clubs, after-school clubs, such as the 'construction club' or half-term activities. One network has established a 'vocational van' whose role is described below.

### Case study 8

One network has a specially-equipped van to deliver construction taster sessions, level 1 and 2 courses for key stage 4 learners in all schools in the area. College staff deliver the sessions. Once the model has been refined, it is intended to extend the concept to other vocational areas. The vocational van is also used for special schools, community programmes, youth centres and wherever there is a demand for delivery of simple skills courses.

- 58 Some networks have organised activities to challenge gender stereotyping in selecting options. These activities include the use of specific taster courses such as 'girls into construction or engineering' and 'boys into care professions' to offset the effects of preconceived ideas about which choices are appropriate for males and females.

### Expanding options at post-16

- 59 Learners in all areas are able to choose from a very wide range of both general and vocational options that cover all domains and levels. Nearly all learners can choose courses that enable them to follow their chosen learning pathways. A learner at 16 has a wide range of options available from a wide variety of providers. For example, in one network, learners can choose from over 40 A level courses and about 70 vocational courses in just one college in the network, as well as having access to other colleges with extra specialisms and a wide range of work-based learning provision.
- 60 The main issue that learners face at 16 is not about having access to the right type and level of courses, but about where to continue their education and training, and the quality of information they receive about their options post-16. Most learners have access to their entitlement at post-16 as long as they find out about the options available to them and are prepared to travel. In most areas in Wales learners make a choice between staying at school or moving to college or work-based learning.
- 61 Learners in school sixth forms often have a limited and narrow choice of courses, especially if the sixth form is small. They also have very few opportunities to mix general and vocational courses. In most cases their ability to develop flexible learning pathways is very limited. This problem can sometimes be overcome when schools collaborate with other providers, but this is not the case for the majority of learners.
- 62 In contrast to 11 to 16 schools, the quality and impartiality of guidance and advice 11 to 18 schools provide to learners is often not good enough. Many schools encourage learners, either explicitly or implicitly, to continue their study in the sixth form because the funding system is based on the number of learners enrolled. They do not encourage learners to seek the options that are best suited to their needs and abilities, even if those options are located at another provider.
- 63 Direct competition between providers at post-16 is still prevalent. As a result of the work of the networks in expanding option menus, the situation has improved since Estyn reported on collaboration between school sixth forms and colleges in 2006, but

the essential pattern remains the same. Collaboration, with a few exceptions, is on the periphery and does not affect mainstream study patterns at post-16. In most cases at post-16, there is little collaboration overall for a few learners and in a narrow range of courses. The main reasons for so little collaboration are still the same as when we reported on them in 2006. These reasons include competition for learners, limited trust between providers and difficulties in transport and timetabling. In 2006, we judged that re-organising provision in an area, especially in compact geographical areas, is a better way of improving efficiency. In more rural areas, there would also be benefits in re-organising sixth-form provision by bringing sixth forms together. The exceptions to this might include providers of exceptionally high quality or providers of Welsh-medium education in English-medium areas, where they are sole providers.

- 64 There are a few, but increasing, number of well-developed collaborative arrangements at post-16, some of which are long-established. These involve a common post-16 curriculum in a group of schools and, in the best examples, they include colleges as well. Very few also involve work-based learning providers. A few networks have established with varying degrees of formality, clusters of schools that are either geographically close or have the same character, such as Welsh-medium schools or denominational schools. There are some good examples here:

#### **Case study 9**

One partnership involving four schools has a common timetable and options structure. It presents learners with a single prospectus and has a common induction process. The partnership analyses what learners want to do and, on the basis of the numbers, decides how many teaching groups it will run before allocating them to schools based on quality criteria. In this way, some subjects will be delivered at all four schools, and others will only be delivered in one of the schools. As a result of this work, the number of learners staying on in education and training has increased as have the number of subjects on offer and the average size of classes. The partnership is well-organised and includes a management structure, a memorandum of understanding, and an integrated transport system. There is a financial agreement that all schools will bear the costs and there is no billing of each other.

### **Case study 10**

Another partnership also includes a further education college as well as three schools. The partnership operates a common timetable and learners are able to choose from a wide range of general and vocational courses. The partnership has well-developed systems for management, funding and quality assurance. By working together, the partnership has pooled resources so that it can improve the specialist accommodation and equipment for vocational courses. Although a particular facility might be located on one site, it is made available to the others in the partnership. The partnership arrangement not only expands the range of options available to learners but also provides them in a cost-effective way with very few classes having less than 10 learners. There is a great deal of flexibility in the curriculum that allows learners to take additional options after school time, for example joining older learners in an evening class in A level psychology. Learners welcome the opportunity to take courses that suit their needs and aspirations. They find that the arrangements work smoothly and value the chance to meet other learners from other providers.

- 65 Most of the expansion at post-16 has been to provide level 2 courses to the lower-ability or middle-ability learners. These are often delivered in schools with the support of further education colleges. The case study below describes the use of a work-based setting.

### **Case study 11**

In one network, post-16 learners have the opportunity to extend their studies to include level 1 and 2 qualifications in a work-based setting. Learners are subject to a rigorous application process for each of the nine vocational areas on offer. Successful applicants now attend their work-based training venue for two half-days each week and gain valuable skills through 'on the job' training. All learners are enjoying meeting learners from other schools and take part in exciting training opportunities. The activity is linked directly to local economic need and enables learners to combine school and work-based learning.

- 66 The expansion of courses at post-16 is relatively limited compared with key stage 4. There has been an increase in the provision of some vocational courses at level 2. These usually attract learners who did not achieve high enough grades at GCSE to start level 3 courses. The courses are often of one year duration and enable learners to move on to level 3 courses or employment. There has also been an increase in A level courses that are additional to the usual range of subjects offered in sixth forms or those that attract few numbers, such as law and sociology. Only a few schools are expanding the number of vocational courses at level 2, but without the high standard of facilities or staffing needed to deliver them successfully.

## Using new technologies

- 67 New technologies, such as virtual learning environments (VLEs<sup>13</sup>) and video-conferencing, are generally having little impact as yet on expanding learners' choice and flexibility.
- 68 Many networks are expanding their work in VLEs by agreeing on common platforms and developing collaborative working between providers. At this stage, most are engaged in training staff in networks, often using expertise from the colleges that have well-established practices in using VLEs. School and colleges are often excited by the potential of VLEs. It is seen to lead to more collaborative working between providers and to sharing common learning resources. For example, one network is setting up a network-wide server to store shared learning materials. VLEs are also contributing to the development of new forms of teaching and learning, particularly those which promote greater independence in learners through easier access to materials, activities and support. It is possible that this work will eventually contribute to increasing the flexibility for learners, but developments are still at an early stage as yet. The work is also likely to contribute to the development of many aspects of Learning Pathways 14-19 and in particular to the Learning Core. However, it is unlikely to have much impact on expanding the option menu to increase learner choice.
- 69 There is also increasing use of video-conferencing to increase the number of courses at post-16, but its impact is limited to a small number of additional A level courses. It has had the greatest impact in increasing the number of post-16 courses in small rural schools and in Welsh-medium schools. It is most successful where the learners at the receiving schools have well-planned support and guidance, and where the video-conference is seen as only one part of a broader programme that includes the use of VLE and tutorials. In particular, learners benefit most where they have at least some regular face-to-face contact with subject specialists involved in the courses.

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<sup>13</sup> Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are systems that use computers and the internet to support a range of learning situations from conventional classrooms to off-line and on-line learning.

## Securing wider choice and flexibility

- 70 Option menus are intended to ensure that all learners have access to the courses they need to meet their needs, interests and abilities. Networks have made a lot of progress in this respect and there are many examples of increasing course choices, especially vocational options resulting from greater collaboration. However, the developments are still at a relatively early stage and much work is needed before the outcomes envisaged by Learning Pathways 14-19 can be achieved. The next part of this report considers some of the issues that will influence how well networks and individual providers can ensure that there is wider choice of courses and enhanced flexibility in where they can study for learners.

## Leadership

- 71 Inevitably, the best work takes place in networks that have effective leaders and managers. This not only depends on high quality leadership from the co-ordinator, but also on how well the work of the network fits into a broader context of related developments in the local area. The best networks also depend on the quality of leadership in individual providers.
- 72 Networks need to be linked to the key strategic bodies in the area and, in particular, those that have an influence over funding streams. This usually means that, in addition to the executive work carried out by the network, there needs to be an overarching group that can link the work of the network to other activities such as lifelong learning and economic development. On occasion, even where there is an overarching group, not all stakeholders are fully represented. For example, the strategic body may include the principal of the further education college and the chief education officer, but it may not include secondary headteachers.
- 73 The most successful networks are led by skilled and highly competent co-ordinators. These have the skills and sensitivity necessary to lead and develop collaborative working. They also have the status and authority that ensures that they gain the trust and confidence of providers. In these networks, there are well-understood processes and systems for developing and producing clear, specific and purposeful development plans such as the Annual Network Development Plan (ANDP). In a few, there are well-organised support systems for the co-ordinator. For example, one area has set up a '14-19 Unit' to take this work forward.
- 74 Leadership is also needed from the individual providers. These leaders need to have a clear understanding and appreciation of Learning Pathways 14-19. However, they do not always have a clear vision of how they can develop this provision. In particular, too many do not pay enough attention to the entitlement of learners and the need for learners to plan and achieve their individual learning pathways. Only a few schools use the Individual Pathway Learning grid that is set out in the Learning Pathways 14-19 Guidance II to plan this. Many schools are not responsible enough for the achievements of all learners. This is particularly the case in some 11 to 18 schools where their prime concern is to ensure that sufficient numbers stay on into the sixth form. Although schools provide information on the number of learners who leave at 16 without a qualification, very few of them routinely report the numbers who become NEETs.

- 75 In addition, individual providers need to work more collaboratively and seek to engender confidence and trust with other providers. This is difficult in a situation where funding is dependent on the number of learners that a provider can attract. However, there are providers that see collaborative working as central to their institution. One college has appointed an assistant principal to lead on 14-19 and one school has 'learning through partnership' as one of its three core aims.

### **Collaborative and partnership working**

- 76 Working in collaboration requires new and unfamiliar skills. Most leaders recognise that there is a need for better training and support to develop the networking, communication and negotiating skills that are needed when working with others. Acquiring and developing the skills that are necessary to lead and contribute to partnerships and extended services is likely to be the most important training demand for the future. Schools are making progress in tackling the many challenges they face. However, it is difficult even for the best to make further substantial progress in dealing on their own with the most difficult challenges. The challenges include improving results, discipline and attendance, meeting the requirements of learners with a wide range of disadvantages, facing falling rolls, and tackling underachievement. If schools are to meet these challenges, they need to work in partnership with their local communities, a number of support services, and other schools, colleges and providers.
- 77 The main challenge for leaders, therefore, is to demonstrate the kind of leadership that will make the Learning Pathways 14-19 initiative a reality. To do this effectively they will have to give up some of their autonomy and be willing to compromise, but many are unlikely to do so willingly without a significant change of heart.
- 78 Learning Pathways 14-19 represents a considerable challenge for schools who wish to continue to offer the National Curriculum subjects up to A level, while at the same time trying to expand their vocational offer. Vocational courses need additional staffing and often new specialist facilities. Leaders will need to use more flexible resourcing and staffing models, and be prepared to share core funding with their partners.
- 79 The current arrangements for management and governance do not support more collaborative working. There are no examples of providers working together as a confederation where:
- a single organisation oversees and directs work across all sectors;
  - there are shared or pooled budgets;
  - there are clear legal arrangements including for example, contracts, a memorandum of understanding and/or service level agreements and single governing body;
  - provision of units or courses of study is rationalised across providers in order to avoid unnecessary duplication, to improve viability and to secure better value for money;



- providers manage ideas and decisions equally, and share responsibilities; and
- the confederation rather than the individual institution reports examination results.

- 80 There is a tension between the need to plan across an area and the fact that individual organisations are funded and governed independently of each other. The number of surplus places in secondary schools is rising and it is likely that it will double in some areas over the next few years. This means that the revenue available to individual organisations is likely to fall and it will be necessary to find ways of making savings. This provides an additional challenge for leaders who try to maintain the current range of options. It is likely to be particularly difficult to offer greater choice with less money without rationalising the provision and securing better partnership working across an area.
- 81 Although there have been many interesting and valuable developments in expanding option menus over the last two years, this has been mostly due to extra grant funding rather than through the use of mainstream funding. There is some uncertainty about how such provision can be maintained once the grants cease. In addition, a number of high-quality vocational facilities have been provided by the networks, but there is also uncertainty about their ownership and access once the grant funding stops or should the networks change their purpose and structure in the future.
- 82 The situation is not helped by the way in which schools and colleges are currently funded as this does not assist collaboration. There are two different funding streams for learners aged under 16 and those over 16, and this can hinder planning for Learning Pathways 14-19. There are also two grant systems which emanate from two different departments in the Welsh Assembly Government. The existing funding system, therefore, is complicated and its bureaucracy can be frustrating at a local level.

### **Improving quality**

- 83 In improving option menus, whether by extending the provision in the current configuration or more likely through rationalisation or reconfiguration, it will be necessary to consider the quality of provision. This process is likely to be supported by the work being undertaken by the Welsh Assembly Government in developing a quality framework and the role of 'quality champions' for each network.
- 84 Networks will need to decide on network-wide performance indicators, such as enrolment, completion and attainment. They will need to use common value-added measurements and progression rates from the different courses that are on offer. To make this happen, there needs to be common self-evaluation systems that have consistent approaches to how and when such evaluations take place. The system could, for example, set out common methods of collecting evidence, including the views of learners and the quality of teaching and learning.
- 85 Once these systems are established it will be important for networks to use the information to come to conclusions about the value for money from the provision in their area. To do this, the information will need to include the costs of individual courses, the size of teaching groups, duplication of provision and the extent to which

the 11 to 16 part of a school subsidises the sixth forms in those schools that have them. Networks will need to establish clear and objective criteria for deciding on the viability of courses. In principle, the network should seek to grow that provision that is good and intervene to tackle any under-performance. This is likely to be difficult for networks that do not have any legal powers or control over providers.

#### **Other key elements of Learning Pathways 14-19**

- 86 Wider choice and flexibility are unlikely to be achieved unless the other key elements of the Learning Pathways 14-19 are also introduced. The Learning Core should provide the necessary skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes needed to access and make the best possible use of any course options that are available. The development of key skills in particular is critically important not just in this respect, but also in meeting the broad intentions of Learning Pathways 14-19 and the Leitch and Webb reports if their recommendations are acted upon. The Learning Coach is expected to play a key role in helping learners to identify their goals and plan their individual learning pathways. A critical part of this process, alongside the provision of careers education and guidance, is to provide guidance and advice that are not only practical and realistic, but also impartial. Also the provision of personal support for those learners who need it is vital to keep them engaged and participating in education and training.