

Background information about Estyn

Estyn is the Office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. As a Crown body, Estyn is independent of the Welsh Government.

Estyn's principal aim is to raise the standards and quality education and training in Wales. This is primarily set out in the Learning and Skills Act 2000 and the Education Act 2005. In exercising its functions, Estyn must give regard to the:

- Quality of education and training in Wales;
- Extent to which education and training meets the needs of learners;
- Educational standards achieved by education and training providers in Wales;
- Quality of leadership and management of those education and training providers; Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of learners; and,
- Contribution made to the well-being of learners.

Estyn's remit includes (but is not exclusive to) nurseries and non-maintained settings, primary schools, secondary schools, independent schools, pupil referrals units, further education, adult community learning, local government education services, work-based learning, and teacher education and training.

Estyn may give advice to the Assembly on any matter connected to education and training in Wales. To achieve excellence for learners, Estyn has set three strategic objectives:

- Provide accountability to service users on the quality and standards of education and training in Wales;
- Inform the development of national policy by the Welsh Government;
- Build capacity for improvement of the education and training system in Wales.

This response is not confidential.

Introduction

Although Estyn is not directly involved in the Regional Skills Partnerships we are pleased to be able to submit written evidence for this inquiry. The evidence is drawn from our recent inspection and link inspector activity in the post-16 sector.

Her Majesty's Inspectors visited all further education colleges and work-based learning lead providers to undertake either a core inspection or link inspector visit during 2017/2018. Inspectors also spoke to leads in adult learning partnerships. During these visits inspectors asked questions about the planning and delivery of provision in each of the providers. As part of our secondary school inspections, we considered post-16 provision in those schools with sixth forms.

Consultation Questions

In our response we will focus on answering these questions:

- How well do the partnerships engage with and take into account the views of those who do not sit on the partnership boards, and how well do they account for the views of the skills providers themselves?
- Do the Regional Skills partnerships have sufficient knowledge and understanding of:
 - a. the foundational economy and the needs of those employed within it;
 - b. and the demand for skills provision through the medium of Welsh?
- Are the Regional Skills Partnerships able to actually reflect current and future skills demands within their regions? What about very specialised skills for which there may be low volumes of demand?
- What, in general, is working well and what evidence of success and impact is there?
- Are there any aspects of the policy that are not working well, have there been any unintended consequences, and what improvements can be made?

Estyn welcomes the drive to ensure better regional planning for skills development. The regional skills partnerships are useful for communicating and sharing messages both from and to Welsh Government as well as in securing endorsement and sign-off of local delivery plans. However, a few providers commented that partnerships can be overly specific with regard to recruitment targets. This can be difficult,

particularly in areas where demographic factors mean that there is a short or medium term downturn in numbers of 16 to 18 year olds. In some cases, having too specific targets may not operate in the interests of learners, particularly where learners are forced to move from studying in one occupational learning area to another.

Potential unintended consequences of the Regional Skills Partnership policy may include restriction of choice for potential learners due to lack of enough funded places caused by strict implementation of recruitment targets. Faced with a lack of choice for first choice occupational route options, potential learners may disengage completely from post-compulsory education and training rather than take up a place in alternative occupational routes where places are available.

A lack of learner uptake of certain occupational routes is also noted in a minority of provider visits to providers, such as in agricultural subjects. There may be value in considering prioritising or incentivising such routes to employers, providers and/or learners.

A few providers also expressed concern over the quality and usefulness of labour market data used by the partnerships. Providers' concerns relate to the timeliness and reliability of data. The Regional Skills Partnerships may secure a beneficial understanding of training needed from labour market information and their own experience. This may significantly influence their thinking when deciding on training needs. However, there will be a substantial number of employers who will not have a voice and therefore will not be represented, especially in terms of small and medium sized employers.

Estyn would be interested to know how evidence about the quality of provision from inspection and thematic inspection reports informs the regional skills partnership discussions. As well as inspection reports on individual further education college and work-based learning providers, recent thematic inspection reports have focused on the quality of provision of [higher apprenticeships in work-based learning providers](#) and [A levels in school sixth forms and further education colleges](#).

While most further education colleges mainly operate and deliver in a regional context, the pattern of delivery for many work-based learning providers is more dispersed and this limits the extent to which these providers are able to fully engage with all relevant regional skills partnerships. In terms of work-based learning provision, a very few training providers feel that it would be more appropriate for the key higher level objectives, to be set nationally with regional skills partnerships incorporating recruitment targets. This would mean that the regional skills partnerships and training providers could play a role in monitoring delivery against

these. Careful consideration needs to be given to the relationship between Regional Skills Partnerships and the future proposed Commission for Tertiary Education and Research.

A few providers expressed concerns that the needs of the foundation economy are not being given enough priority within Regional Skills Partnerships. For example, providers emphasised the importance and value of transferable skills such as interpersonal and customer service skills developed in occupational sectors such as hairdressing and beauty therapy which often lead to careers beyond the immediate confines of that occupational sector. Other providers cite local shortages in caring occupations as evidence of the continued importance of providing both further education and work-based learning provision at all levels rather than a perceived over emphasis on higher level qualifications when setting delivery targets..

The provision and uptake of skills provision through the medium of Welsh remains a challenge across the post-compulsory sector. From our Annual Report 2017-2018 we have found that colleges deliver very few courses through the medium of Welsh or bilingually and there are too few opportunities for learners to sustain or develop Welsh as an employability or life skill. In work-based learning providers, few practitioners encourage Welsh speaking learners to use and develop their language skills in the workplace. It is likely that additional support to grow capacity and to stimulate demand will need to be provided in order to make progress towards the ambitious targets which are being set.

Providers are concerned about the potential impact of Brexit, both in terms of their local economies and the availability of funding, and welcome the opportunity to be involved in the key City and Growth Deals in specific areas of Wales as well as plans for accessing post-Brexit prosperity funding.

Estyn notes that traditional boundaries between further education, work-based learning and higher education provision routes are becoming less important for learners and employers but remain a challenge in terms of funding mechanisms and for providers. There may therefore be value in allowing greater flexibility between routes within providers to minimise or avoid situations where potential learners are being turned away from some provision while unfilled places lead to shortfalls against targets in others.

Overall, in many providers the range and extent of provision changes relatively little in the short and medium term which may suggest that delivery patterns more reflect supply factors, funding vs cost decisions and learner demand than current or future skill needs of employers. There may be a need to consider short and medium term support measures to encourage providers to reshape provision more

in line with emerging skill needs and create a more dynamic offer for the longer term.

Estyn would be interested to discuss further how priorities from regional skills partnerships could inform future thematic inspection surveys through the Minister's Annual remit letter.