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The Welsh Assembly Government, under the aegis of the Learning and Skills Act, established National Council ELwa in April 2001 to maximise resources for optimal delivery of learning opportunities in three key areas: individuals, businesses and communities. NC ELWa's first *Corporate Plan*, which covers the period 2002 – 5 derives its direction from the Welsh Assembly Government's strategies and policies as outlined in 3 key documents, *Plan for Wales 2001*, *The Learning Country and A Winning Wales*.

It is my intention in this paper to explore some of the key issues arising from NC ELWa's *Corporate Plan* in the light of 2 of the conference themes: namely

- Use of evaluation
- Policy evaluation

and then relate this Wales specific picture to some of the larger policy issues relevant for NC ELWa at an European level. However, it is my primary intention to describe what I consider to be the bridge between both of the above topics – *How policy is formulated*. As this can prove to be a most effective means of illuminating the dynamic between and many of the attendant issues that underpin the above topics.

NC ELWa's recently produced *Evaluation Guide and Strategy* are intended to embed a learning culture within the newly *reconfigured* organisation. What is meant by reconfigured? In brief, NC ELWa is a fusion of some 6 former entities: The Further Education Funding Council for Wales (FEFCW), four Training and Enterprise Councils (TECS) and the Council of Welsh TECs. These origins give an indication of the multi layered and multi faceted nature of the organisation. However, to understand the full scope and ambition of the objectives and attendant targets contained within the *Corporate Plan*, it is important to remember also that NC ELWa assumed responsibility for Adult and Continuing Education from Local Authorities and this year, took over the funding of School Sixth Forms. This brief profile therefore indicates the range of policy NC ELWa must spearhead in distinct but ultimately interrelated contexts if its *Corporate Plan* is to be fulfilled. The evaluation challenges arising from this complex learning agenda are many. Given the enormity of the issue, it is my intention to touch on but a few of these in the paper that follows.

As one of the primary public sector agency's in Wales, NC ELWa carries a correspondingly sizeable budget to implement its ambitious objectives for post – 16 education in Wales. This year alone for example, 02 –03, its budget for domestic programmes is circa £489 million. Since NC ELWa has the greatest financial resources of any public sector agency in Wales, the expectations for effective policy delivery are enormous from public and politicians alike.

To provide a flavour of the range and depth of delivery targets NC ELWa is charged with, the specific national targets contained within its *Corporate Plan* for 02 - 03 can be summed up under 2 headline indicators:

- 500,000 people to benefit from learning
- + 12000 businesses to receive help in tackling skills needs

These overarching targets are then broken down in the document more tangibly and thematically according to NC ELWa's 5 key goals. (See slide)

- Essential Skills
- Creating Lifelong Learners
- Developing the Ability to Apply Knowledge
- Skills for Business
- Learning Communities

A major challenge for NC ELWa is to provide all Wales policy that nevertheless responds to the different requirements of learners, employers and learning providers in the very diverse geographical locations of Wales. As acknowledgement of the importance of this diversity, NC ELWa, within its own structure, has 4 Regional Offices identified in terms of North, Mid, South West and South East. Each office has a dual perspective. On the one hand, it carries the national lead for a specific corporate policy and on the other it produces a Regional Statement of Need which highlights context derivative/ specific issues relating to the area it serves. The structure of the *Corporate Plan* itself evidences the contrapuntal interaction between the nationally expressed goal, its key targets and the related principal areas for action identified in each Region's assessment. The formulation and implementation of NC ELWa's national policy therefore is inherently complex as by definition, it is committed to taking account of how social and economic issues impact differently upon Wales' regions and localities. Ensuring dialogue therefore between and from the Regions re NC ELWa's Corporate Directorates underpins the operational success of the organisation.

The organisational structure, described above, indicates the challenges NC ELWa faces regarding its evidence based policy. While recognising the challenges, the organisation in its recently published *Evaluation Strategy*, has declared its commitment to pursue an evidence based policy which is as inclusive as possible.

“all evaluation activities should reflect the views of the full range of National Council – ELWa beneficiaries, delivery partners and other stakeholders”.

How can this commitment be realised in practice?

NC ELWA's Evaluation Strategy describes the key role to be played by an “Evaluation Team”. At national level, the evaluation strategy (with its four main components of summative, individual project / programme, continuous evaluations and longitudinal cohort studies) will be managed by a team of evaluation experts under the Head of Market Intelligence. The national interface with the regions will be ensured by a dedicated member of staff at regional level responsible to the Head of Market Intelligence for the implementation of defined evaluation activities as well as the provision of guidance and support to regional staff to undertake necessary regionally specific evaluations. This framework is intended to ensure a co-ordinated approach and coherent information base upon which to undertake a review of NC ELWa's current policy as well as inform the formulation of future policy developments. However, to achieve a comprehensive evidence – based response to the complexities of the Welsh context, ie. demographic, geographical and socio-economic etc. it will also be necessary for the evaluation framework to take account of related research activities, equally carried out by the Market Intelligence Team, such as customer and labour market research and in particular the 2nd Future Skills Wales Survey for 2003 which will be used as the evidence base for population and workforce skills. The conjunction of this body of information with the above mentioned co-ordinated evaluation of current and inherited programmes is essential if NC ELWa is to achieve the 3rd of its Key Actions described in the *Corporate Plan*,

- Raise demand for learning

Here evidence serves as a guide to future NC ELWa policy which promotes programmes that actually respond to learner needs as well as on a practical level, facilitating and ensuring access to learning through an integrated approach across the learning provider network.

It can be argued that the challenges NC ELWa faces internally re *joined up* co-ordinated working to direct effective targeted policy interventions are a microcosm of the challenges it faces with key external partners in delivering a shared strategy for Wales. The Annexe to the Welsh Assembly's *A Winning Wales* maps out the complex mosaic of multi agency partnerships which are charged with delivering the milestone objectives of its 10 year strategy. NC ELWa appears consistently across the full range of thematic objective areas: from Encouraging Innovation and Entrepreneurship to Promoting ICT and Supporting Businesses. For NC ELWa, strategic inter – agency working involves memoranda of understanding and interface with the action plans and policies of organisations such as the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Welsh Development Agency, Careers Wales, the Employment Service as well as partnership agreements with Wales Local Government, the Arts Council for Wales, CCET's and the Voluntary Sector to name but a representative few. It is not surprising however, that under the thematic objective Develop the Learning Country, NC ELWa appears alone or at most in conjunction with the Welsh Assembly. This is indicative of the importance the Welsh Assembly ascribes to its role in this area. Tangible evidence of the common policy objectives shared by NC ELWa and the Welsh Assembly appears in the direct correlation between Assembly objectives enumerated in *A Winning Wales* and the goals described in NC ELWa's *Corporate Plan*.

The overview provided above is intended to illustrate *how* evaluation is designed to interact with policy development within NC ELWa as well as the internal and external environments / relationships which can impact upon policy formulation. As indicated in the previous list of national partners, multi – agency working underpins NC ELWa strategic functioning at an all Wales level. The keynote of partnership is reflected, regionally and locally at an operational level, where NC ELWa must maintain, foster and co-ordinate relationships with myriad partners and learning providers in order to deliver prioritised programmes and initiatives for example 26 Further Education Institutions, more than 200 providers of Work Based Learning, 170 Secondary School Sixth Forms. Co-ordinated policy delivery therefore is as important as co-ordinated policy development. For this reason, communication among partners of NC ELWa policy and related objectives, clearly defined and justified on the basis of robust evidence, will serve to strengthen both existing relationships as well as where appropriate, permit NC ELWa to anticipate and forge new ones.

It is also clear that NC ELWa's development and implementation of successful policy interventions in the national context needs to take account of European policy / funding initiatives in Lifelong Learning. The necessary equation of domestic and European is referred to explicitly under Policies and Priorities in point 17 of the *Remit Letter* 2002. This document is a clear agenda for action for NC ELWa as stipulated by the Minister for Education, Jane Davidson AM.

"I expect the Council to continue to play a full and effective part in the deployment and management of all relevant European funding packages and I am looking to the Council to work in a way that reflects the opportunities which the Structural and other

Funds, taken together represent. It will be important that optimal use is made of the resources available to the Council as an element in match – funding packages”.

To ensure its successful participation in the European context, NC ELWa has established an HRD European Partnership Unit, within which my role is as Senior European Monitoring and Evaluation Manager. The overarching aim of the Unit is to facilitate the integration of national policies and strategy with European Programmes. The Unit has a specific Key Action deriving from analysing “integration” of the domestic and European:

- Identification of potential European Programmes and budgets which will contribute to the achievement of NC ELWa’s goals.

This process requires acknowledgement of 2 time-scales relevant both for current / future domestic policy and European programmes / funding ie. pre + post enlargement. Firstly, it is necessary to focus upon existing EU budgets and programmes which will enable NC ELWa to fulfil objectives outlined within the time-span of its current *Corporate Plan* ie. 02 – 05. Secondly, it is necessary to attempt to profile potential EU initiatives and corresponding budgets that will be relevant for Wales post enlargement.

The second task raises important questions surrounding the established role of evaluation as a determinant of national policy. For how can NC ELWa fulfil the terms of the Remit Letter in the long term when it is only possible at the moment to speculate about the policy consequences of enlargement for Wales?

The domestic element of the equation ie. the revision of NC ELWA domestic policy is circumscribed by a clear timetable and processes. Since NC ELWa’s funding of programmes is strategy – led, the *Corporate Plan* is reviewed each year so that it always looks forward 3 years. It is furthermore complemented by the additional focus of an annual *Operational Plan*. Very little specific information has emerged from the Commission to indicate the real expectations Wales and other current Member States can have re their changed eligible status post 2006. What has emerged instead is an intense debate and consultation exercise re the future of education programmes in general. Among the general issues of European policy debate that Wales needs to be cognizant of and weave into its future profile is the simplification of Structural Funds, their management and implementation.

Recently published EU policy documents also indicate general EU policy directions that Wales could capitalise upon. The Commission published its Resolution (November 02) on the *1st Progress Report on Economic and Social Cohesion* which clearly underlines a need to strengthen cross – border, trans- national and inter-regional co-operation as a key facilitator of integration between peoples and regions. A current policy paper *Beyond Wales – Benefiting from Transnational Partnerships* (WEC September 02) is now available which advocates the benefits gained through participation in interregional and cross- border activities. Since the pursual of such policies would concord with general advocated trends in EU policy, it would seem logical for Wales to consider building upon established project activity under Community Initiatives like INTERREG. NC ELWa’s *European Strategy* foresees an important role for EQUAL in delivering the objectives of the *Corporate Plan*. The characteristics of EQUAL, piloting new innovative approaches to combating discrimination/ inequality in the labour market which are then mainstreamed would permit NC ELWa to launch and direct successful pilots relevant to the priorities of the *Corporate Plan* into mainstream programmes with the consequent impact upon policy.

But the question remains as to how can evaluation be used to take the Welsh debate forward concretely? One method is to learn lessons from the evaluation of current programmes with the specific purpose of building a credible if hypothetical proposal for Wales' future in a Europe of 25 Member States. I shall elaborate on how the evaluation activities of the Monitoring and Evaluation Team within the HRD European Partnership Unit can and are contributing to this emerging picture later in my paper.

It is perhaps useful at this juncture to provide a brief picture of European Funding in Wales and of some of the principal mechanisms for deployment of funds and delivery of Welsh - European policy objectives. At present in Wales, the majority of European funding is channelled through Objective 1 + 3 with the former, in the programming period 2000 - 06 accounting for £1.2 billion and the latter some £83 million. Four Strategic Partnerships have been established for the Objective 1 programme to take a strategic view of the programme in the 4 key areas classified as drivers for economic change ie.

- Business Assets
- Community Assets
- Human Assets
- Rural Assets

The HRD European Partnership Unit is charged with developing policy relating to Human Resources and this feeds into the Human Assets Strategy Partnership's role of developing detailed strategy for the use of Objective 1 funds. My role, in brief, to evaluate the effectiveness and added value of EU funded HRD projects, feeds specifically into the HRD Regional Partnership Board for which NC ELWa is the "lead partner" for both Objective 1 + 3. As well as Board secretariat support, the Unit's keynote activity of providing HRD policy direction is manifest in the formulation of HRD strategies relevant for Wales which determine priorities for action and subsequently inform the selection of HRD projects by the Board which will then deliver against those priorities.

Overall the activities of the HRD European Partnership Unit facilitate the acknowledged role of NC ELWa to provide strategic leadership re European programmes and provide synergy between National Assembly policies and priorities and European programme targets and priorities. Within and without NC ELWa the Unit has a key role in disseminating advice and guidance re European issues in particular facilitating the essential interface between Corporate and Regional NC ELWa. For example, the Unit is required to provide guidance to NC ELWa Regional Offices as well as the provider network on appropriate European budgets which will support the achievement of the 5 goals outlined in the *Corporate Plan*. The Unit's European remit also extends to Monitoring and Evaluation. Quarterly reports are produced by the Monitoring and Evaluation Team within the European Partnership Unit for the HRD Regional Boards, Objective 1 + 3, described above. By producing profiles of EU funded HRD projects approved to date according to financial, sectoral and delivery criteria, the Team provides intelligence across all relevant HRD Priority Measures to inform Board decision making re current proposed projects as well as highlighting areas of potential project development. This dual focus of the Monitoring and Evaluation reports is intended to ensure that a balance of activity is achieved in approved projects to fulfil the full range of designated targets and outcomes. One of the additional expectations attached to this information is that it should enable the respective Board membership to allocate European monies judiciously and in the

longer term, guard against underspend and the consequent penalties of decommitment. The relevance of this kind of information is underscored by the fact that under – commitment is of huge concern to the Commission and it is currently urging Member States to take steps to rectify this trend generally by the end of 2002. WEFO at present is commissioning the mid term evaluation of Objective 1 + 3 in Wales which will contribute significantly to this process.

The bilateral nature of the Unit's monitoring reports (profiling "impact" assessment and highlighting project development) produce a solid if constantly evolving evidence base from which to undertake pro - active research re future European policy relevant for Wales post 2006. Thematic analysis might provide a particularly useful opportunity to explore key issues relating to future policy. However, since myriad thematic analysis could direct the energies of the M+E team, is there a single guiding rationale that could connect the results of these lines of enquiry? It is evident that the theme of *sustainability* could resolve the apparent polarisation of the pre + post enlargement policy scenarii. In other words, M+E thematic analyses and subsequent data produced can be synthesized to formulate proposals as to which current policies and attendant programmes demonstrate a potential for sustainability post enlargement

From the evaluation papers currently produced for the HRD Regional Partnership Boards, it is possible to identify trends in delivery of EU funded HRD projects. Focussed thematic analysis of projects could foreground a number of illuminating factors: for example if sectors tend to deliver certain types of projects within certain measures or indeed the converse, if there is significant non participation and or indeed wastage in other measures. Both of the above lines of analysis raise issues for proactive project development to fulfil stated policy objectives. The latter raises questions of urgent remedial action, the former the possibility of engaging with sectors to enhance project delivery. It would be particularly beneficial for the impact of Human Resource Development measures in Wales if established players within a sector could be persuaded, on the basis of robust evidence, to adopt a strategic approach to project delivery. There is also an argument for diversifying project delivery (with perhaps a particular eye on fulfilling NC ELWa and EU Cross – Cutting Themes) through inter – sector project development and implementation to achieve maximum policy impact through for example maximum beneficiary coverage. A potential by product of such co-ordinated project activity between sectors would be a much needed transference of expertise in European programme management and delivery perhaps even extending to a sharing of resources.

It is perhaps useful at this point to reflect on the definition of the term *sustainability*. One interpretation implies a linear if rather inflexible correlation between hierarchies of evidence and policy. In the context of the lack of concrete policy direction provided by the Commission, sustainability, according to the above definition, might prove to be counterproductive as a leitmotiv of thematic analyses. A more realistic yet flexible approach to conducting thematic analyses and usefully assimilating the evaluation findings that emerge is to evidence *synergy* between pre + post enlargement programmes and policies.

Promotion of inter – sector working in the area of Monitoring and Evaluation of European funded programmes in Wales could greatly benefit future policy development. For it is manifest that only the most comprehensive picture of the "impact" of European funded projects in Wales should inform future European policy development in Wales. Unfortunately at the moment, such a scenario is difficult to imagine for, the standard and breadth of activity undertaken by the M+E Team within the European Partnership Unit is not replicated throughout Wales. Feedback from all

relevant players / stakeholder groups re the “impact “ of EU funded projects across all programmes / sectors is necessary if input into the policy debate post enlargement is to be truly informative as well as representative. In view of this, the European Partnership Unit at present is exploring the possibility of drawing up an accredited course in Project Management / Monitoring and Evaluation with an European focus. The primary purpose of this pedagogical tool would be to overcome discrepancies in expertise / experience which undermine *inter alia* exhaustive information gathering re European programmes in Wales by establishing and disseminating an universally adopted and accepted standard re the 2 aforementioned disciplines.

As a counterpoint to forecasting which EU education programmes / funding may or may not be applicable for the Wales learning agenda post 2006, it is important to be aware of the debate currently raging at UK level, regarding the reshaping of the relationship between Member States and the EU. For example, the draft framework for an EU constitution, drawn up on behalf of the British government by Alan Dashwood (published October 02) has significant implications for Wales. The leitmotiv of the document is to enhance the role of the national and regional governments in contraposition to the established argument of an European federal structure. It argues for powers to be devolved as much as possible to citizen level with the subsequent conferring of greater powers, in the Welsh context, upon the National Assembly and Local Authorities. Rhodri Morgan took this argument forward at the recent British Council Devolution Conference where he discussed the more substantial role regions could and should play in influencing the future of the EU. This argument underscores an apparent irony that, while on the one hand, Wales' changed eligible status post 2006 will provide access to a level of EU funding considerably less than that which it currently enjoys, on the other, the adoption of policies emerging from the above discussions could result in defining more clearly Wales' dynamic with the Commission thus enabling it to play a larger role at EU level. This policy of direct engagement with the EU is already gaining ground at Local Government Level in Wales as the WLGA, the co-ordinating committee of the 22 Local Authorities in Wales, has recently stated its intention to establish “ a new era of direct local government representation in Brussels”. These UK specific developments are moreover taking place within the context of the clear messages emerging from the EU Regional Policy Directorate regarding “renationalisation” of the Structural Funds.

Future EU policy re allocation of Structural Funds is unquestionably of extreme importance for Wales and the fulfilment of the Assembly's 10 Year Strategy. The Commission recognises that Structural Funds should be available to all Member States post enlargement and not to do so would have political ramifications within the current EU 15 as well as create a divide between Eastern and Western Europe. However, this does not aid analysis of how Wales will be reclassified in the new post enlargement map of European funding given that the primary criteria of eligible status remains GDP. However, some initial answers to the urgent questions re future Structural Funds policy may emerge in the coming year since one of the Commission's 3 stated political priorities for 2003, as outlined in its *Legislative and Work Programme*, is a review of EU policies in light of the needs of an enlarged European Union.

It was my intention in this paper to map out the considerable evaluation challenges faced by NC ELWa, the characteristics of the Welsh context with which evaluation must interact as well as the range of policies it is ultimately designed to influence. A comprehensive start to responding to these challenges is illustrated in the structure of the proposed evaluation framework: co-ordination at national level but devolved with necessary interface to regional level which is then reinforced by programme

evaluations of local, community and business interventions. The acquisition and assimilation of such multi – layered information within universally accepted criteria is a challenge in itself, albeit one of process. The subsequent translation of such multifarious and abundant data into coherent yet comprehensive evidence which then supports the prioritisation of policy is arguably the greater challenge.

In the *Evaluation Strategy*, NC ELWa is committed to evaluations which are strategic yet inclusive reflecting key stakeholder expectations ranging from the Welsh Assembly Government to the individual learner. The scope of evaluation to be undertaken regularly within the organisation can be seen as an excellent tool for maximum coverage in stakeholder “consultation”. While there is a stated direct correlation between NC ELWa’s evidence based policy framework and “forthcoming” strategies and policies in the *Corporate Plan*, it is also important to remember that, on an operational level, policy contained within key strategy documents like the *Corporate Plan* should ensure *continuity* for the learner and the learning provider network alike. There is arguably a tension here between the policy comprehensive evaluation can produce and policy impact.

NC ELWa faces the twin challenges therefore of formulating domestic policy which is consistent, coherent and justifiable, while in response to its uniquely vast remit, fusing domestic policy successfully with European policy in lifelong learning. European programmes / monies can not only contribute to the continuity of NC ELWa’s mainstream programmes but their enhancement where appropriate. To ensure therefore that NC ELWa fulfils its part in delivering the National Assembly’s 10 Year Strategy for Wales, it is imperative that research and evaluation be undertaken now, in conjunction with key partners, to uncover areas of concurrence between current domestic policies and future European programmes and funding that may be available / relevant for Wales post enlargement.

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