

RESPONDING TO RURAL LEARNING NEEDS IN NORTH WALES: Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Final Report
of GWLAD Project

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BACKGROUND

The **GWLAD** project was funded through ESF EQUAL 2 and was implemented by a Development Partnership working within the EQUAL thematic field of adaptability and lifelong learning. The partnership consisted of educational, statutory, community and voluntary agencies. Those who took part in Action 2, in which the project's activities were developed are:

- **School of Lifelong Learning, Bangor University.**
The School of Lifelong Learning is the lead partner, and has experience of widening participation and adult and continuing education, working across north Wales
- **CAIS** is the main voluntary sector provider of drug and alcohol services in Wales. It has developed programmes for employed and unemployed people that prevent drug and alcohol related harm, and help people to get and retain employment.
- **Medrwn Môn** is the umbrella body on Anglesey which provides information and advice on volunteering and represents the voluntary sector.
- **BEN (The Black Environment Network)** promotes equality of opportunity with respect to ethnic communities in the preservation, protection and development of the environment.
- **Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg (Welsh Language Board)** is a statutory organisation whose main function is to promote and facilitate the use of the Welsh language.
- **The Open University** is the largest provider of part-time higher education in the UK and the only one dedicated to distance learning.

All the above partners have been involved in one or more of GWLAD's activities. Other GWLAD partners include **Chwarae Teg**, and **Stonewall**, who have had valuable input to the GWLAD equal opportunities policy and practice. **The Rural Stress Information Network (RSIN)** and **Alfred McAlpine Slate Ltd.** also provided valuable input in the early part of the project.

1. The project's aims focused on providing learning and experiences relevant to gaining employment (or leading on to further learning), particularly to socially excluded groups in rural north Wales, more specifically:

- by developing innovative approaches to lifelong learning;
- by empowering socially excluded groups;
- by focusing on linking learning and employment;
- by ensuring the principles of equal opportunities were upheld.

2. How we worked:

- by researching the barriers to employment and learning through convening focus groups, conducting interviews with a range of individuals and communities of interest to identify learning or training needs, supplemented by research undertaken in earlier projects, such as SEQUAL and with reference to relevant literature; in general an action research approach was used whereby research and activity are closely linked;
- by working with partners, communities and a range of agencies to develop activities in accordance with research findings;
- by networking with agencies and service providers working with socially excluded groups both within and outside the GWLAD partnership;
- by working with people in communities to identify their needs and providing appropriate activities in their own localities.

The EQUAL principles of empowerment, innovation and equal opportunities underpinned our approach.

3. What we did:

The partners, individually or collectively, developed and undertook a very diverse range of activities. All were aimed at facilitating participation in learning or employment for people living in rural areas, and most were aimed particularly at those who were generally excluded from educational opportunities. For example:

• **INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO LIFELONG LEARNING**

A BLENDED LEARNING approach enabled lecturers to develop on line resources, to prepare very detailed material and to pilot

free-choice blended learning with a group of mature students, where students have been able to opt for entirely face-to-face, entirely on line or a combination of the two methods. This approach is suitable for use in dispersed rural areas.

- **EMPOWERING SOCIALLY EXCLUDED GROUPS**

SKILLS TRAINING WORKSHOPS FOR ECONOMIC MIGRANTS, linking innovative approaches to learning and empowering those from socially excluded groups. Basic English seminars aimed at supporting people from ethnic minority backgrounds to develop their English skills and acquire work related knowledge at the same time.

BEN's objective has been to improve and develop skills through exploring issues of access to training/education opportunities in the context of the natural environment, outdoor activity and historic environment sectors during which time two publications have been produced, ***“Informal Learning partnerships for engaging with ethnic communities: Guidance for the Environmental and Heritage sectors”*** and ***“Love the Countryside Work for the Countryside: Job opportunities to consider in the Environmental and Heritage sectors”***.

ACTIVITIES FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES. A learning group, consisting in the main of older men involved in agriculture, have been involved in culture and language based learning activities. In the same community classes have also been held on video-making for young people, and a business course for women. These activities were delivered through the medium of Welsh.

- **LINKING LEARNING AND EMPLOYMENT**

The approach to learning used by CAIS is that of using a motivational intervention which allows people to control their substance misuse behaviour so that they can take up employment or remain in employment. These have resulted in two publications, ***“Brief Intervention Handbook”*** and the report ***“Brief Computerised Motivational Interventions for Employed and Unemployed Substance Users”***.

MEDRWN MÔN has researched the feasibility of initiating an employer-led scheme with businesses across the island and has developed a toolkit, ***“Employer Supported Volunteering”***.

This list is exemplar only. A more detailed account of our activities

can be found in our report “**Responding to Learning Needs in Rural North Wales**” or by reference to our website, www.gwlad.org

4. Working transnationally:

Our work has benefited very much from the transnational element of our project. We have shared experiences of good practice with other EQUAL projects in the Czech Republic, France and Belgium, looking particularly at ways of motivating learners, approaches to accrediting experiential learning, and the advantages and difficulties of e-learning. Our transnational work also included exchanges of staff with a project working in a rural area in the Czech Republic that had many similarities to north Wales.

5. Lessons Learned:

- The importance of enjoyable informal learning activities cannot be over-emphasised. It is often the key to initial engagement of hard-to-reach groups. It is important to stress that informal learning does not necessarily equate with low level learning (ie below level 2) and it is possible to move from informal learning straight into higher education.
- Learning needs to be generated from individual or group interest and it needs to take place in people’s own communities. This is particularly relevant in rural areas where physical isolation often compounds social isolation.
- Emphasis should shift from gauging success in learning solely in terms of credit gains for individuals. Soft outcomes include the empowerment of individuals and their families, the promotion of social cohesion and the regeneration of disadvantaged communities.
- Grass-roots initiatives take a long time to develop, but are more effective and sustainable in the long term. It takes time for people to build up confidence to participate fully, be it in learning, community regeneration, employment or volunteering. There are rarely quick fixes (although the project has seen some significant achievements).
- Working in partnership with other agencies can maximise impact and participation, and is key in rural north Wales to maximise the use of available resources without duplicating provision.

- People do not have enough information of what is available to them (for example, about courses, their location, eligibility and fee waivers). Information needs to be disseminated in heavily-used venues like health centres (not just in less frequented venues such as libraries or colleges). Information, advice and guidance is also most valuable when delivered in face-to-face situations.
- Flexible funding has been an advantage in enabling responses to unforeseen situations to be implemented – for example, we have been able to put on courses for economic migrants dispersed over a wide rural area.

6. Recommendations:

- Informal learning is crucial in generating confidence and increasing widening participation in learning and employment. Many learners will move on from informal to formal learning or employment but, it is important to recognise that this can be a long process. **Our recommendation is that funding streams should be available to support a wide variety of types of informal learning.**
- The current emphases on learning for skills and employment, while important, can lead to the devaluing of other outcomes. Social cohesion, self-employment, generation of micro-businesses, social enterprises and volunteering should be seen as equally desirable goals. This is particularly the case in rural areas where high quality employment opportunities are limited. **We recommend that a wide range of outcomes should be valued.**
- Research has demonstrated that it is possible to measure ‘soft’ outcomes using objective approaches. **We recommend that more research needs to be carried out on this, but that enough evidence already exists to support the wider use of ‘soft’ outcomes where appropriate.**
- Lack of transport and limited availability of childcare are still significant barriers to engaging in learning in rural areas. These barriers have been very well documented but are still significant. In order to engage rural populations in learning, the learning has to be taken to potential learners in their own communities. **We recommend that funders acknowledge the real costs of**

providing services in dispersed areas in the allocation of funding.

- Lack of information about learning opportunities, and the knowledge of where to look for information act as barriers for many people. Access to the internet is increasingly relied upon to disseminate information but access is often variable and is dependant on the IT skill levels of the individual. **We recommend that Information given should be relevant, easily accessed and available across the boundaries of assembly and local authority departments.**
- Much of the most effective work that is done to increase the employability of individuals, or to develop their potential to learn is dependent on short term funding. This source of funding inevitably cause gaps in provision, loss of expertise, the raising of false expectations and lack of sustainability. **We recommend the prioritising of medium to long term funding for activities as important as this.**