

How non-formal/informal education can complement formal mainstream education

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Traditional methods of learning are not suited to everybody. Often mainstream education does not meet the needs of many of our young people, which can lead to them leaving education early, repeatedly with no qualifications, which can frequently act as a barrier to maintaining sustainable well-paid employment.

Research has demonstrated a strong link between disadvantage and low educational attainment and found that attainment in Wales at age 14 and 16 is generally behind other countries and regions of the United Kingdom.

Some of the reasons the research identified for this low attainment included disengagement from secondary schooling; it also identified that interventions targeting these issues can add up to 14% value in terms of positive outcomes.

If we are to reduce child poverty in the longer term, young people will have to be educated out of poverty, providing them with the confidence, skills, knowledge and wherewithal to make the most of the opportunities available to them. Growing evidence demonstrates an increasing gap between educational achievers and non-achievers in south Wales.

In order to try to combat this issue, in Rhondda Cynon Taf in Wales, we looked at a number of interventions that could be used to stem the effects of non-engagement and non-participation of young people that were becoming habitual in many of our valley's communities.

Following research and analysis, the Pathways to Progression Project was developed in 2009, and

aimed to better prepare and support young people to enter the world of work and compete effectively in the labour market by providing them with enhanced employability skills. The project identified a number of interventions that have been designed to enable young people to have access to flexible, rounded learning programmes that encompass generic life and work skills, basic skills and opportunities to improve their confidence and self-esteem.

One of the interventions initially piloted is "Step-UP", which is the National Open College Network (NOCN) suite of qualifications called Skills Toward Enabling Progression (Step-UP). They have been developed as a direct result of learners' and Welsh educational providers' needs. It meets the requirements of a number of key Welsh educational policies such as Learning Pathways 14-19, Extending Entitlement and Stronger Partnerships for Better Outcomes.

Through the awarding body Agored Cymru (formerly OCN Wales), the Step-UP qualifications consist of an innovative range of credit-based pathways, part of the new QCF (Qualifications Credit Framework), which have been designed to accredit a wide range of activities engaged in by learners aged 14 plus. Activities can be carried out in a range of settings, both formal and informal.



What can it be used for?

- Learners from 14 and over
- As an alternative to the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE)
- To prepare learners for:
 - progression into vocational training;
 - independent living and employment as well as supported employment

As part of the pilot, the Youth Accreditation Team were approached and they agreed to co-ordinate the delivery of the pilot in partnership with Agored Cymru, schools and other providers and to provide the central administrative management of accreditation and become external contributors for schools.

Whilst teachers are best placed to deliver Step-UP within the school environment, there is a need to equip them with the knowledge and confidence to do so. External contributors can enhance delivery, however, ownership of the planning, delivery, monitoring and review of Step-UP needs to remain with the school. External contributors would be in a position to provide advice, support and positive challenges to schools regarding the delivery of the programme, whilst providing direct, proactive, responsive, needs-led support to teachers.

Ferndale Community School led the way in developing and delivering Step-UP as part of the pilot, initially introduced in September 2009, it was quickly reported that Step-UP was having a positive school impact. The "usual suspects" of causing disruption were suddenly engaged in activities and felt part of the school for the first time.

Some quotes from young people taking part:

- The work we are doing really helped me with my behaviour.
- It is much better in Year 10 than Year 9 because the course I am doing is just excellent.
- This year, I feel much better because I feel I am part of a team and my manners are much better.
- I think the course has been good because I am much better behaved and I don't mind coming to school because I enjoy the work.
- The course is awesome and I really like it. It helps me with my attendance and behaviour.

- It's better in Year 10 than in Year 9 because of the course. We do more team work and I enjoy the work because I can do it.

Demand for Step-UP has exceeded all expectations and is currently being rolled out across all schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Benefits for schools:

Step-UP meets the needs of a number of policy areas. It is constructed using "Basic Skills", PSE and vocational elements; it has the opportunity to engage and motivate learners to identify their individual and personal strengths for progression in achieving qualifications that may lead to further education or work-based learning and prepare them for the transition into adulthood. Indeed, the Education Act (1996) states that "all students, wherever they are learning, must receive a broad and balanced curriculum which promotes their spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development and prepares them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life".

Step-UP will contribute positively to the following:

- reducing the number of young people leaving full-time education with no qualifications;
- improving the proportion of 16 year-olds progressing to further full-time or work-based learning;
- reducing the number of 16-18 year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET);
- providing a positive focus on achievement where young people's success is celebrated;
- supporting young people's capacity to be more independent, make choices and participate in the democratic process;
- impacting positively on basic skills, workforce skills and sustainable employment;
- providing vocational taster opportunities that will lead to further progression into vocational areas of education or employment;
- better linguistic understanding, given its availability in English and Welsh.

Non-formal learning – is this the best approach for us to tackle child poverty in the future? We think it is.