

**Quality and standards of
Ufl/Cymru Learndirect programmes**

Interim Report

April 2005



...Rhagoriaeth i bawb... ...Excellence for all...

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 As a part of its 2004-2005 remit from the Welsh Assembly Government, Estyn was asked to undertake a survey of, and report on, the quality and standards of Ufi/Cymru Learndirect programmes. Estyn was also asked to comment on the impact that Ufi/Cymru has had in widening participation and, enhancing the flexibility of e-learning for learners across Wales. Advice was also required on future options for funding and management of the Ufi/Cymru delivery.
- 1.2 The scope of the survey was agreed with the relevant Welsh Assembly Government and ELWa officials. Whilst a Welsh operating arm of Ufi had been in place since 1999 the separate trading arm of Ufi/Cymru had been operational for less than a year at the time of the survey. It was therefore anticipated that initially an interim report would be produced with further work undertaken, possibly in 2006-2007, to fully answer the questions that the Remit had posed.
- 1.3 This interim report therefore sets out some early conclusions and recommendations for the Welsh Assembly Government and Ufi/Cymru to consider.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 Inspectors held discussions with Ufi/Cymru senior managers, managers and staff. They also met with the staff of Ufi/Cymru partner organisations, managers, and officers from the Welsh Assembly Government and members of ELWa National Council.
- 2.2 A questionnaire (see appendix 1), was issued to the 18 partner organisations.
- 2.3 The returns of this (16 of 18) Together with scrutiny of existing Estyn inspection and survey reports on e-learning, the results of the returned questionnaires (16 out of 18) formed the main evidence base for this survey.
- 2.4 The inspectors also visited a sample of three partnerships, including the private sector centre, to test the results of the questionnaires and the outcomes of the desk research.

3. Background

- 3.1 Prior to April 2004, Ufl Learndirect UK had funded and facilitated the delivery of Learndirect programmes in both England and Wales. In Wales, delivery was organised through partnership agreements with a number of further education colleges and one private sector centre.
- 3.2 In April 2004, Ufl/Cymru was established as a separate trading arm of Ufl. At that time it took over the ELWa funding allocation for Ufl programmes in Wales. This funding was allocated by ELWa as ring-fenced funding to further education colleges, to purchase Learn direct licences and programmes from Ufl/Cymru.
- 3.3 Ufl/Cymru took over responsibility for the existing partnerships (18) and the private sector centre in Wales. In the process, they introduced new partnership and licensing arrangements for their partners. These included quality-monitoring procedures for partnership delivery. Some of the partnerships also sub-contract the delivery of Learndirect programmes to a third party provider.

4. Main findings

- 4.1 The new licensing agreement and arrangements between Ufl/Cymru and the partnerships have caused difficulties for a number of its partners.
- 4.2 The third party agreements in place between Ufl/Cymru, colleges and providers are not routinely reviewed or managed by Ufl/Cymru.
- 4.3 All partners are asked to produce an annual self-assessment report following the Estyn Common Inspection Framework. However, little feedback is given to them by Ufl/Cymru on the quality of their report.
- 4.4 There are anomalies in the Learndirect data collection systems that skew key performance indicators, and generally data systems are inefficient.
- 4.5 Ufl/Cymru has increased participation in e-learning, by taking e-learning out into the community. This is a great strength of most of the partners.
- 4.6 Learners are supported well by on-line personal tutors, course tutors and through e-mail, chat rooms and on-line conferencing.
- 4.7 E-learning materials through the medium of Welsh are not well developed.

5. The New Licensing Agreement

- 5.1 The new licensing agreement and arrangements between Ufi/Cymru and the partnerships have caused difficulties for a number of its partners. These difficulties include having unrealistic targets for the number of courses to be delivered and payment in advance for Ufi/Cymru Learndirect licences and programmes. This has meant that some funding difficulties are being experienced by the partnerships. In one case, for example, the partner has had to share its Ufi/Cymru licence with another partner in order to ensure that targets are met.
- 5.2 The third party agreements in place between Ufi/Cymru, colleges and providers are not routinely reviewed or managed by the contractor or Ufi/Cymru. Where providers have these agreements, they are seen as being of very little value. For example, one college agreement states a three-month notice period will be given to the provider if funding has to be withdrawn. This provider was recently notified of the withdrawal of funding by a further education college in a one-line letter with no notice period.
- 5.3 Another third party provider, whose funding is provided by six further education colleges, has to comply with the six different administration systems used by the colleges. This causes a substantial administrative burden for the provider.

6. Quality management

- 6.1 All partners are asked by Ufi/Cymru to produce a self-assessment report and quality development plan on an annual basis. Ufi/Cymru has developed guidance in the form of a tool-kit that follows Estyn's Common Inspection Framework. However, the report is produced in a stand alone format specifically for the Learndirect aspect of the college or provider's curriculum.
- 6.2 The format of the self-assessment report does not allow for clear, evaluative statements of the partners' strengths and areas for improvement. The quality of the self-assessment reports submitted by partners is variable. Ufi/Cymru gives little feedback to the partner organisations on the quality of their report.
- 6.3 The stand alone Learndirect self-assessment process can be costly in time and resources for partners. Much of this self assessment could be carried out within the partners' own institutional self-assessment, rather than completed through a separate self-assessment for Ufi/Cymru.

7. Data and funding

- 7.1 The data collection systems currently used by Ufl/Cymru are specifically designed for the Learning Skills Councils (LSC) and not for the data capture requirements of the Welsh Assembly Government or ELWa. As a result data systems are inefficient. In order to secure their funding and to comply with the data requirements of the Assembly, ELWa and Ufl/Cymru partners find they have to input data a number of times into different systems.
- 7.2 There are anomalies in the Learndirect data collection systems that skew the key performance indicators. For example when learners complete a course that leads to a qualification, but fail a module, they cannot be recorded as completed on the Learndirect systems. This is despite the learner having worked through every aspect of the course. This results in full qualification attainment not being recognised or showing as poor.

8. The Quality of Learndirect Courses

- 8.1 Learndirect courses are flexible and can be adapted to meet learners' needs and abilities. Learners can study at their own pace and place. Some learners choose Learndirect courses in preparation for full-time college courses. Many learners will take from the course as much or as little as, they want. They do not always want to complete the whole course, but may wish to take from it the skill or knowledge that they wish to gain. Partner organisations report that learners who have special learning needs improve their confidence and self-esteem when using home study, as they often view a classroom situation as a barrier to learning. Many learners welcome the reduced fees or free courses.
- 8.2 Partners offer a wide range of locations in an attempt to remove as many barriers to learning as possible. Providers widen participation by taking e-learning out to the community. This is a great strength of most of the partnerships.
- 8.3 Learndirect offers all learners access to a 24 hour a day telephone and e-mail help line, as well as an on-line message centre, which is also used as a discussion area. Learners are able to chat with their peers about problems and the issues they are facing. They can post messages for their tutors and ask questions.
- 8.4 However, most of the partners cannot provide this 24-hour service. Nevertheless, learners are well supported by on-line personal tutors, course tutors, and through e-mail, chat rooms, and on-line conferencing. In many cases, personal tutors are in contact with learners about every four weeks. A few learners prefer to attend their

centre for face-to-face support whilst continuing to undertake their learning remotely.

- 8.5 One of the partnerships has created its own bank of specialist subject support tutors, as the Ufl on-line tutor support for learners does not work particularly well for their learners. Often learners find that there is a lack of continuity with the Ufl/Cymru support tutor, and learners complain that they have to go over old ground to keep the tutor up-to-date with their support needs.
- 8.6 Many partners use Learndirect programmes to raise the profile and awareness of e-learning. Learndirect is used effectively in the community to offer flexible learning and gives learners access to learning where they would otherwise have difficulty in accessing traditional forms of learning. Partners also use Learndirect to ensure that gaps in their mainstream provision are filled. Some case studies of good practice in the use of Learndirect programmes are listed at the end of this report.
- 8.7 The quality of materials offered by Ufl/Cymru is widely regarded by staff, learners, and employers as good to very good, particularly basic skills materials. However, content, style and delivery are not always suitable for all age groups. Some learners have difficulty in following instructions for downloading assignments and up-loading them for marking.
- 8.8 E-learning through the medium of Welsh is not well developed. Partners complain that their own members of staff undertake much of the development. Not enough funding or marketing materials are provided by Learndirect to support the development of bilingual learning routes.
- 8.9 Currently there is little support for learners studying level 3 qualifications in Wales. However, Ufl UK offers this support to learners in England.

9. Value for Money

- 9.1 Learndirect materials and learning approaches, particularly at the basic skills level, are of high quality both educationally and technically. They demonstrate good potential for engaging and up-skilling learners. However, this comes at a high material cost, in terms of the new licensing arrangements and administration. There is a risk that this cost diverts scarce resources from other areas, which might demonstrate a higher return in terms of overall participation, standards, and performance. It is therefore not possible at this stage to judge whether Learndirect represents value for money, even though it has good technical and educational qualities.

10. Summary

- 10.1 Ufl/Cymru in many respects still needs time to establish itself and to identify its niche in the e-learning market place in Wales. Some of its learning materials are of a good quality and standard, particularly in relation to basic skills. However, this comes at a high cost to the Welsh Assembly Government and at a financial risk as well as an additional administrative burden to Ufl/Cymru partners. There are comparable software packages available that offer the same or similar packages to Ufl/Cymru. If the marketplace were to be opened up by allowing the further education colleges more flexibility in their use of the funding, this would provide more choice for the learner.
- 10.2 At this stage, it is difficult to judge the value addedness that Ufl/Cymru brings to the market place. However there are some aspects of Ufl/Cymru's work that would benefit from further attention now. These include the quality monitoring of the delivery of partnership agreements, the administrative difficulties highlighted by partners and the funding methodology for the licences. These, together with other recommendations, are listed below.

11. Recommendations

It is recommended that:

The Welsh Assembly Government:

- R1 develops a more integrated approach to the support given to e-learning providers in Wales to further improve access to learning opportunities for the people of Wales;
- R2 with ELWa, reviews the current funding arrangements for Learndirect programmes; and
- R3 ensures higher level provision of e-learning across Wales.

Ufl Cymru:

- R4 reviews its licensing arrangements with its partner organisations to ensure that targets set for partners are realistic and achievable;
- R5 improves the quality monitoring of third party agreements;
- R6 reviews the administrative arrangements with partners;
- R7 considers incorporating self-assessment reports within an institution's overall self-assessment plan;
- R8 establishes a marketing strategy to ensure that the needs of Welsh learners and partners are met;
- R9 includes bilingual learning materials in course portfolios;
- R10 refines data collection systems to ensure a closer match with Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR); and
- R11 extends tutor support to include popular language courses and support for level 3 learners.

12. Exemplar cases:

Case study 1:

A Welsh kitchen retailer has registered almost half of its 140-strong workforce with on-line training courses through Learndirect. The company has devised a comprehensive training programme to ensure that the workforce is up to speed with the latest computer programmes.

The development of IT skills is a key priority for the organisation and the wide range of courses and the flexible on-line learning has provided a perfect solution for their staff. Almost half of the workforce has signed up to work-related courses covering word processing, spreadsheets and electronic communications. Two of the Directors have agreed to follow basic IT courses, and are now thoroughly enjoying the challenge.

Case study 2:

One partner is currently piloting the use of Learndirect skills for life to support 16-19 year olds throughout the curriculum areas. The use of this material is tied into the development needs identified by the organisation's on-line diagnostic tests for literacy and numeracy. It gives tutors the ability to devise individual learning programmes to address these identified needs.

The significant feature of this approach is the ability to provide a tailored learning programme as a result of the diagnostic test that takes place online, with progress monitoring and target setting linked together.

Case study 3:

A number of ethnic minority students have been working through ELLIS (an English as a second language package). They have improved their English to the point where they have then used the Learndirect literacy and numeracy courses to improve their skills further. They are now enrolled on mainstream GCSE Maths and English courses.

Case study 5:

One learner returning to education after a 13-year gap, enrolled on an Access to HE course. He was very worried about the level of his IT skills, so enrolled on a series of learndirect courses. These have taken him from being absolutely terrified of computers to a position where he can now word process assignments. He particularly enjoyed the flexibility offered by Learndirect that enables him to juggle his other studies and family commitments with his IT course.

Case study 6:

As an example of outreach activity in a rural area the college has developed a link with a telecentre, which is part of the local community. At this centre and others in the area, community outreach delivers basic IT programmes to a wide range of learners, most of whom are mature and are experiencing their first taste of e-learning. The community support tutors employed by the college promote Ufl as a part of the curriculum offered to learners. They also utilise some Ufl packages as part of the programmes of basic IT followed by groups accessing the centre. The main programme promoted is Better Letters, which is CD-rom and workbook supported. It not only leads learners to experience on-line learning, but also, more significantly, enhances their literacy skills as part of their overall development.