

**National Council for Education and
Training Wales**

**Evaluation of the Information
Management Strategy (IMS)**

Final Report

Evaluation of the Information Management Strategy (IMS)

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Executive Summary

Purpose/Aim of Report

In March 2005, the National Council for Education and Training for Wales (ELWa) commissioned CRG Research Ltd to undertake an evaluation of its Information Management Strategy (IMS). The IMS was created in 2002 in response to an initiative from the Welsh Assembly Government, its aim being to “*make a real contribution to raising standards by freeing up time in schools, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and the Post-16 sector and promoting more effective use of management information*”¹.

More detailed expectations of the IMS are that it will:

- Raise standards and improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- Reduce the administrative burdens on learning providers.
- Develop good practice with regard to the definition, validation and exchange of data.
- Improve the knowledge base by developing a programme of research and evaluation.
- Maximise the use of all available information.
- Use resources efficiently and effectively².

The evaluation conducted by CRG had two interlinked parts: the evaluation of the Information Management Strategy itself and a review of the Management Information System (MIS) Development Programme – a programme of financial support to assist providers in developing their MI systems in preparation for implementing key parts of the IMS, particularly the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) system, through which data on learners is exchanged between providers and ELWa³.

Approach

The work programme for the evaluation encompassed:

- Initial discussions with the Evaluation Project Steering Group, to clarify the detailed project plan, outputs and milestones. An Inception Report was produced.
- A brief review of relevant literature and documentation.
- A series of interviews with ELWa staff.

¹ Welsh Assembly Government, (2002). *Information Management Strategy for Schools, LEAs and Post-16 Providers*.

² Op cit.

³ The MIS is an element of Objectives 3 and 8 of the IMS: the full list of objectives is given in Section 1.2 of the main report.

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- Telephone interviews with providers who did not access MIS Development Programme funding.
- Regional focus groups with post-16 learning providers who did receive MIS Development funding.
- A final report, assessing the performance of the IMS and MIS Development Fund so far, with recommendations designed to address issues highlighted by the evaluation.

Key Findings

Key findings from the report include:

- Much more positive views about progress made towards meeting IMS objectives held by ELWa staff by comparison with providers.
- The aims and objectives of the Strategy were still considered by both ELWa staff and the learning providers to be worthwhile and relevant.
- Further communications between ELWa and learning providers could help to improve understanding about the rationale for the IM Strategy, what it comprises and how LLWR and SuperSTAR fit into the overall Strategy. Perhaps inevitably, providers' attention has mostly focused on data input requirements.
- There is some evidence to suggest that, for some ELWa staff, the introduction of the LLWR and the move to electronic data submission has seen an increase in the quality and timeliness of data submitted.
- Providers see the introduction of the LLWR (and other aspects of the IMS) having increased administrative burdens on them, sometimes markedly.
- Benefits to most providers so far have been limited.
- Support offered to providers to ease the transition to electronic data submission via the MIS Development Programme was beneficial, although some concerns were voiced by learning providers over the timescales for application, and the basis on which funding allocations were made.

Conclusions

From the findings of the evaluation, five themes were identified as conclusions:

1. Communication

Although ELWa has made a number of efforts to disseminate information about the full IMS, and seek responses from other stakeholders, providers' understanding of the overall IMS (as opposed to specific elements of LLWR) is inadequate and sometimes contradictory. This is not intended to be critical of providers, who face many other pressures to deliver learning effectively, maintain their own systems and manage resources. Even within ELWa a number of different levels of understanding of IMS thinking became apparent. This evaluation points to the need for major efforts

to improve communications about the IMS both internally in ELWa and externally with providers.

II. Availability of data to providers

A key element of the IMS (Objective 5) is giving providers prompt and easy access to analyses of key management information. Despite investment by ELWa in SuperSTAR and other systems, most providers (and some ELWa staff) perceive progress so far to have been limited. This alone is, we believe, the source of many of the concerns expressed by providers; follow-up evaluation work will be needed to ascertain whether any teething problems in these early stages of implementation have been ironed out.

Particular attention now needs to be paid to making progress with all aspects of the overall IMS, but particularly those relating to feeding back data and analysis to providers.

III. Resources within ELWa

Communication problems and the inability to meet providers' needs are thought to be partly due to the inherent complexities of some of the issues, but have also been influenced by constraints on resources to allow for regular briefing of providers, responding to queries, ensuring prompt analysis of data, and carrying out a critical review of data requirements. As well as good technical skills it would be helpful if ELWa staff improve their understanding of WBL and ACL operations.

IV. Data Collection Burden

Overall, providers have seen a need to collect more data to meet the requirements of the LLWR than under previous systems: in many cases increased requirements have been substantial.

With limited benefits apparent to providers at present, this data collection burden has become a particular cause of resentment. Both providers and a number of ELWa staff believe there is scope for reviewing the LLWR to consider whether data requirements can be reduced without compromising the key benefits a fully implemented IMS can offer (including collecting figures once, and then providing data to all who need information on education and training in Wales from a single source).

V. Impact of the MIS Development Programme

On the basis of funding take-up, the MIS Development Programme was successful, with take-up of the funds by eligible providers high (82%) - although variations in take-up were noted across the different learning strands, with full-take-up among ACL providers low compared to larger FE and WBL providers.

Assessing the impact of the MIS Development Programme was complicated by the time elapsed since funds were distributed (some consultees were unable to recall any specific MIS Development Programme details) and by the level of funds which – for some providers – represented only a limited proportion of their overall ICT budget⁴.

Nevertheless a range of benefits from the MIS Development Programme were confirmed by the evaluation. Both providers and ELWa staff reported data transfers becoming more accurate and timely, more efficient data transfer, and improved standards in hardware, software and staff ICT skills.

Recommendations

The recommendations focus on the five themes identified in the conclusions:

I. Communications

ELWa should consider the development of a formal communication strategy for the IMS - within ELWa and externally with learning providers, and using a range of communication methods. In particular, this should:

- Describe the strategy in full, together with the Action Plan for 2005-06.
- Clarify and simplify guidance and support documentation, including information on the roles and responsibilities of both ELWa and learning providers, and data collection rules and timescales.
- Highlight contact points, summarise channels for resolving specific concerns.
- Address what seem to be differences in perception between ELWa and providers in a number of key areas, e.g. through targeted workshops.
- Explain the benefits for providers – how IMS elements can improve their operations.
- It is not clear what implications (if any) may arise from the planned merger of ELWa into the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), but ELWa should pay particular attention to communicating any implications from the merger to providers.
- Make more transparent the formulae used to calculate providers' funding allocations.

II. Availability of data to providers

ELWa should give high priority to ensuring data is made available to providers as set out in the IMS aims and objectives.

- ELWa should consider further developments to the SuperSTAR system, encouraging providers and ELWa staff to develop their own capabilities and make best use of the LLWR data.

⁴ This made assessing the reasons for non-claims impossible.

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- ELWa should consult with learning providers to assess what further analysis and benchmarking information would be of value to support learning providers' use of the LLWR data for planning and analysis.
- ELWa should discuss with providers ways of ensuring the validity of data held, particularly that passed to inspectors and auditors.
- ELWa should carry out a follow-up evaluation of progress in making useful data available to providers

III. Resources within ELWa

ELWa should consider whether the resources allocated to the implementation of the IMS are sufficient, with particular attention to data collection, data analysis support offered to learning providers. Any delays in obtaining authorisation from WAG to recruit staff to support this work need to be resolved.

- ELWa should review the resources which would be needed to implement the communications strategy and ensure appropriate data is made available to providers (see separate recommendations) and consider ways of meeting these requirements.
- ELWa should review the frequency of and reasons for delays in ELWa responses to requests for clarification/help by providers. It should consider identifying and implementing appropriate solutions, which may include providing additional resources.
- ELWa should assess the business case for an additional post to support WBL analysis within teams working with LLWR.

IV. Data Collection Burden

- ELWa should conduct a critical review with relevant ELWa staff and external providers of the need for, and use made of all current LLWR data fields, and simplify requirements wherever possible.
- ELWa should consider the feasibility of linking learning activities to awards.
- ELWa should review options for reducing/ removing Audit requirements for paper-based records which duplicate electronic LLWR records.

V. MIS Development Programme

It is important that Stage 2 of the MIS development programme is implemented without further delay to support providers both in the submission of electronic data, and in further training of staff so that they are able to use their MI systems appropriately.

- ELWa should re-investigate the pros and cons of developing its own software to support all providers, irrespective of size, when submitting data; alternatively ELWa could consider investigating opportunities for working with software houses to improve communication and responsiveness.
- Consideration should be given to the appropriateness of application timescales for future funding rounds.

Terms and Abbreviations

ACCAC: Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales

ACL: Adult Continuing Learning

ANIC: Association of Northern Ireland Colleges

CQFW: Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales

DELNI: Department of Education and Learning (Northern Ireland)

DfES: Department for Education and Skills

FAQ: Frequently Asked Question

FE: Further Education

FEI: Further Education Institution

FES: Further Education Statistics

FESR: Further Education Statistical Record

HE: Higher Education

HESA: Higher Education Statistics Agency

ICT: Information and Communications Technology

ILR: Individual Learner Record

IMS: Information Management Strategy

ISR: Individual Student Record

IT: Information Technology

JISC: Joint Information Systems Committee

LEA: Local Education Authority

LLWR: Lifelong Learning Wales Record

LSC: Learning and Skills Council

MI: Management Information

MIAP: Managing Information Across Partners

MIS: Management Information System

NAfW: National Assembly for Wales

NICIC: Northern Ireland College Information System

NPFS: National Funding Methodology and Pricing Model

NTF: National Training Foundation

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PLASC: Pupil Level Annual School Census

SFEFC: Scottish Further Education Funding Council

WAG: Welsh Assembly Government

WBL: Work Based Learning

WDA: Welsh Development Agency.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The National Council for Education and Training for Wales (ELWa) was created in April 2001 with a remit to direct, plan and manage post-16 education and training in Wales (with the exception of Higher Education). As part of this remit, Section 40 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000⁵, requires ELWa to “*establish systems for collecting information, which is designed to secure that its decisions with regard to education and training are made on a sound basis*”. In response to this requirement ELWa has agreed with learning providers a formal Information Management Strategy (IMS). The IMS came into effect in 2002, with a planned update in Spring 2005 (to be informed by the current evaluation).

The IMS was intended to be an important step forward in the move by ELWa to simplify the collection of data on all post-16 education across Wales, promote more effective use of data, and raise the quality of data submitted. Detailed objectives were inherited from the WAG’s pre-16 IMS, however, and are not necessarily as clear and relevant to post-16 as they could be.

In July 2004 the First Minister announced the merger into the National Assembly of the Wales Tourist Board, Welsh Development Agency, and ELWa by April 2006. The planned merger has inevitably caused a certain amount of uncertainty over the future of the IMS.

In March 2005, CRG Research Ltd was commissioned by ELWa to undertake an evaluation of the IMS. The evaluation was conducted between March and May 2005.

Aims and Objectives of the Evaluation

The aims of the evaluation, as outlined by ELWa, were to:

- Design and carry out an interim evaluation for ELWa’s Information Management Strategy, with emphasis on the MIS Development Programme; and
- Draft a specification for a 3 year evaluation framework of the IMS.

⁵ Department for Training and Education, (2000). *Learning and Skills Act 2000 - Statutory Approval of Qualifications under Section 99*. Welsh Assembly Government.

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The objectives were to explore:

Information Management Strategy

- Progress against the strategy's objectives.
- The extent to which these objectives are still relevant for providers.
- The extent to which the Strategy is having a positive impact on providers and learners.
- Obstacles to implementing the overall strategy (e.g. resources, approval delays).
- Whether the actions are meeting the objectives or whether they need to be adjusted.
- What impacts the actions are having on the strategy.

MIS Development Programme

- To what extent data⁶ from providers are more accurate and timely as a result of the programme.
- The quality of the hardware, software and other ICT support offered to providers.
- Difficulties experienced by ELWa staff in getting quality, relevant data from providers.
- The proportion of eligible providers making claims and reasons for non-claims and under claiming.
- Areas for improvement or adjustment and areas of good practice in the design and implementation of the scheme.

Methodology

The evaluation methodology contained seven phases:

- **Phase 1:** Initial discussions with ELWa to clarify the scope of the evaluation, agree a detailed project plan, collate contact details, and define outputs and milestones.
- **Phase 2:** As directed by the steering group, a limited review of background material looking at comparable systems operated by the LSC in England and the Scottish Further Education Funding Council in Scotland.
- **Phase 3:** A series of face-to-face interviews with ELWa staff from key departments that were impacted upon by the IMS. Representatives from the Information Management and Technology Team, Quality Team and Funding Team were interviewed. Semi-structured discussions were

⁶ Amended from original Invitation to Tender, where "claims" were referred to rather than "data".

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based around the topic guide in Appendix I, and focused on interviewees' assessments of ELWa's progress against the IMS objectives (although in discussion with the Evaluation Steering Group it was agreed that less emphasis should be given to some objectives of the IMS⁷), the implementation of the IMS, and any drawbacks or benefits from the introduction of the IMS for their departments.

- **Phase 4:** Focus groups with staff from learning providers funded by ELWa. One focus group was held in North Wales, Mid Wales, and South West Wales, and three focus groups in South East Wales. The sessions explored the impact of the IMS on providers, and canvassed providers' opinions of ELWa's progress against the stated objectives for the IMS. A list of attending providers is given in Appendix II.
- **Phase 5:** Telephone interviews with a sample of learning providers who did not claim funds under the MIS Development Programme, based around topic guides given in Appendix I.
- **Phase 6:** Production of an interim report (discussed in detail with the Steering Group).
- **Phase 7:** Production of a final report based upon analysis of the data collected and discussion of the Interim Report with ELWa.

1.2 Background - IMS, MIS Development Programme and LLWR

UK Approach

The Welsh IMS can be seen as part of a UK wide approach to addressing the bureaucracy and data collection burdens on providers. It builds upon work already conducted by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Management Information Across Partners (MIAP) group.

The MIAP group was established in 2002 by the DfES to look at how MI arrangements could be improved through a more co-ordinated approach. The group consisted originally of 17 members from within post-16 learning, covering the areas of funding, quality assurance, assessment, local partnerships and specialist agencies, and has expanded to include over 30 organisations, including representatives of the HE sector.

The work of the MIAP group has built on existing research highlighting the need to reduce bureaucracy in the education and learning sector (see, e.g.

⁷ Numbers 6,7,9 and 10 were deemed 'not as important' as the rest.

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The Better Regulation Task Force⁸; The Sweeney Report: *Trust in the Future*⁹; and “*Making a Difference*”, *Reducing Red Tape and Bureaucracy in Schools*¹⁰). The focus of the MIAP group is to: “*benefit learners by supporting the drive to deliver quality and value whilst helping to remove wasteful and unnecessary bureaucracy from post 16 education and learning*”.¹¹ This in turn leads to two key aim for the MIAP group:

- To improve decision making through improved MI.
- To improve value for money through sharing data.

More specifically, three objectives were established by the MIAP group to shape specific IM Strategies:

- Agree respective roles and responsibilities in relation to data and information collection, storage, access, sharing and usage.
- Develop options for rationalising data collection through better sharing and use of information.
- Implement arrangements to manage and co-ordinate changes to partner data requirements are managed (to minimise adverse impacts on other partners/learners).

Wales IMS

In Wales, the IMS is overseen by the Individual Learner Data Programme Steering Group chaired by the Director of the Education and Training Department, Welsh Assembly Government. Two projects sit under the steering group representing pre-16 and post-16¹² education, with each sub-group having a separate Data Advisory Group. The post-16 Data Advisory Group is comprised of representatives from National Assembly for Wales (NAfW); Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA); Careers Wales; Fforwm (representative body for Further Education colleges in Wales); Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC); Estyn; Welsh Development Agency (WDA); Welsh Language Board and ELWa. The Data Advisory Groups are tasked with providing detailed assistance to facilitate the development of both projects.

⁸ <http://www.brta.gov.uk>

⁹ http://www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Documents/Keyinitiatives/SuccessforAll/Report_BureaucracyTaskForce+.htm

¹⁰ http://www.dfes.gov.uk/iru/uploads/schools_red_tape_report2.pdf

¹¹ MIAP Group. “*Management Information Across Partners Programme Strategy Document*”.

¹² Post-16 provision covers Further Education institutions, private sector work-based training providers, employers delivering Assembly-sponsored training programmes and voluntary sector organisations involved in work-based training and adult education. It excludes Higher Education institutions.

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The stated aims of the IMS are to:

- Raise standards and improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- Reduce the administrative burdens on learning providers.
- Develop good practice with regard to the definition, validation and exchange of data.
- Improve the knowledge base by developing a programme of research and evaluation.
- Maximise the use of all available information.
- Use resources efficiently and effectively.¹³

Based upon these aims, 10 objectives for the IMS have been identified:

1. A framework will be developed to ensure only essential information is collected and duplication is avoided.
2. The roles and responsibilities of data collectors, providers and users will be agreed and published.
3. Common definitions will be used to facilitate the sharing of data which will be held electronically to assist in the transfer of data.
4. Information users will be encouraged to make best use of existing data.
5. Data providers will have prompt and easy access to analysis of key management information.
6. Minimum standards will be agreed for administrative software and hardware.
7. Minimum standards will be agreed for electronic information collection and transfer.
8. Standards of competence in collecting, maintaining and using management information will be assessed and linked, where necessary, to training and inspection.
9. Minimum standards for software and hardware support will be agreed and implemented where necessary.
10. Change procedures will be developed to facilitate the review and updating of the strategy as necessary.

An integral step in working towards meeting these aims has been the creation of an integrated database of unique learners, and a specification for the new Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR). Previously ELWa had drawn its data on learners from a number of different inherited sources (e.g. the Individualised Student Record and Claims system).

¹³ Welsh Assembly Government, (2002). *Information Management Strategy for Schools, LEAs and Post-16 Providers*.

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ELWa initially carried out a double consultation during May and October 2002 regarding the collection of post-16 data. The proposed strategy for collecting data through the LLWR was circulated, and the views of data providers (i.e. training providers, Local Authorities, and Further Education (FE) institutions), and some potential data users were collected via workshops and written responses.

The 2002 consultations found that the majority of data providers were in agreement with the concept of a comprehensive post-16 database and the other principles of the IMS, and the majority of consultees stated themselves to be content with each of its 10 objectives.

Most of the basic data proposed for inclusion in LLWR was not considered to be a problem, however there were concerns about some fields where data was considered hard to collect, including information about school attended and previous qualifications; information about generic skills such as literacy and numeracy (which may require a test to measure); and information about which some providers had little knowledge, such as ILA information and other funding and employment related fields.

There were also some concerns about the proposed 'short LLWR' for short/full cost recovery programmes, and whether this might compromise the comprehensiveness of the system and create inconsistency.

Concerns were also raised about the anticipated increased burden on providers of data, as well as tighter timescales for FE institutions, and possible software issues for training providers. The proposed timescale for implementation was also felt by some to be too tight, not allowing sufficient time for development, testing and addressing potential problems. ELWa responded to some of these concerns by dropping a number of fields and restructuring the record, and by developing the MIS Development Programme.

1.3 MIS Development Programme

ELWa recognised that the introduction of the LLWR and the consequent move to an electronic data submission system would require upgrading the Management Information (MI) systems operated by many learning providers. To support learning providers in this transition, the MIS Development Programme was created and submitted to the Welsh Assembly Government for approval. The first stage of the MIS programme was approved in January 2003 and ran from January 2003 to March 2004.

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The MIS Development Programme aimed to encourage and support all learning providers in acquiring systems that would enable them to submit data electronically to ELWa - at the same time reducing the data provision burden on learning providers themselves. Funding under the MIS Development Programme was allocated to learning providers based on the number of learners undertaking learning at a specific date. Funding was made available under Stage 1 of the programme to support:

- The purchase and installation of MIS software upgrades or new systems.
- The purchase of new hardware required to support the new or upgrade MIS.
- Technical training for staff in the use of the new or upgraded systems.

In addition to the financial support for hardware and software purchases, ELWa ran a series of regional workshop on the LLWR during 2003 and 2004, covering LLWR data requirements, and information on the software systems.

A proposed second stage of the MIS Development Programme has yet to receive approval from the Welsh Assembly Government. This is planned to help new providers, although any spare funding will be available for existing providers with particular needs.

1.4 England, Scotland and Northern Ireland

The LLWR has been designed to collect data on learners in Wales, potentially allowing interoperability with systems developed outside Wales by ELWa's counterparts in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It was agreed with the evaluation steering group that collecting information about other parts of the UK should not be given a high priority within this evaluation, but a number of important details in the differing approaches being adopted in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are worth noting, to compare with aspects of the Welsh approach..

The Welsh LLWR database has four main datasets, compared with only two in the English Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and three in the Scottish Further Education Statistics (FES). Information only collected in Wales includes: Welsh language abilities, details of the last school attended by the learner, and the literacy and numeracy of the student at the start of the programme (and at the termination of courses in cases where the course has involved Basic Skills).

The Scottish Further Education Funding Council (SFEFC) has an online data collection system in place for FE institutions, FES Online. It includes three

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datasets: Programmes/Courses (FES1), students (FES2) and individual programme elements (FES3). Outcomes are built into FES2. The 'courses' table is the primary dataset as opposed to the 'students' framework underpinning the LLWR system. For the last two years, each student enrolling at an FE institution in Scotland has been allocated a unique identifier number, but only for that particular institution. If the student were to enrol at multiple FE institutions, further identifier numbers are generated, so it is not possible to track students across institutions using only one identifier number with the Scottish system.

Further Education and training in Northern Ireland is funded directly by the Department for Employment and Learning. The Northern Ireland College Information System (NICIS) was established in 2002 by the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (DELNI), the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC) and colleges themselves and aims to provide an integrated MIS. Software called QP has been designed and is used by the 16 colleges for collecting and sharing information. This includes the Further Education Statistical Record (FESR) database, which has three sets of fields covering courses, students and student enrolments. As with the Scottish system, separate identifier numbers for the student are generated for each institute enrolment.

In England, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) has developed the ILR, a collection of data about learners and their learning aims, which includes a learner identifier. Again as in the Scottish and Northern Ireland systems, the learner identifier is generated by the provider in receipt of FE, Work Based Learning (WBL) or Adult Community Learning (ACL) funding, and by providers funded by some kinds of European Structural Funds support. The learner identifier does not allow individual students to be tracked across institutions or across time, although there are plans for the LSC to move towards a system similar to the one used by the DfES, which allows tracking of individual students. The LSC uses ILR data as basis for funding calculations, to inform decisions and planning, and monitor performance. The ILR was introduced in 2002/3, and replaced the Individualised Student Record (ISR).

1.5 Key Points

Detailed findings are given in Sections 2 - 4, but a number of key points set the context for these more specific issues.

The current indications are that the introduction of the IMS has produced a number of benefits, but the evaluation pointed out that, up to now, the majority of the benefits have been gained by ELWa, with limited positive

impact **so far** upon learning providers. This is not necessarily unexpected, as the nature of the IMS has always meant that some benefits would be seen more by ELWa than providers, and vice versa. As the IMS and the changes associated with it become more embedded, both within ELWa and by providers, it is expected that further benefits will be seen by providers.

In general, the learning providers canvassed were critical of the extra workload the new data collection regime has generated (possibly exacerbated by audit requirements), and a perceived failure of ELWa to communicate effectively with the learning providers.

Direct assessment of the impact of the MIS Development Programme was hindered by the time that had elapsed since the funds were allocated. This was a particular problem for the interviews conducted with learning providers who had been eligible for MIS Development funding but did not claim the funding.

1.6 Structure of the Report

The remaining chapters of the report are as follows.

Chapter 2 discusses the findings of the interviews conducted with ELWa staff, focusing on their involvement or interest in the IMS, and their views on the progress made towards the IMS aims and objectives.

Chapter 3 describes the view from providers' perspectives, their experiences of the implementation of the IMS, and suggested action points for consideration by ELWa.

Chapter 4 looks at the take-up and impact of the MIS Development Programme specifically.

Chapter 5 details conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 6 outlines a suggested three year evaluation framework for the IMS.

2. Findings: ELWa

2.1 Overview

Representatives from key ELWa departments (Funding, Quality, and Data Collection) were interviewed to determine their level of involvement with the planning and implementation of the IMS, and what impact the IMS has had on the operation of their department.

In the crucial area of data collection ELWa previously depended on disparate systems inherited at its creation in 2001. The data now collected through the LLWR underpins ELWa's key activities including the new National Planning and Funding System, planning for Welsh medium provision, the Credit and Qualifications Framework Wales (CQFW), and responds to the requirement of the Welsh Assembly Government to create a coherent and consistent approach to data collection.

Responses from interviews with ELWa staff are summarised first in relation to the specific IMS objectives, and then a number of 'key themes' are reviewed.

Overall, it was interesting to note varied levels of familiarity with different parts of the IMS – which seem to indicate that internal dissemination might usefully be refreshed. Those working directly with the IMS described important internal processes (e.g. those linked to the IMS Action Plan), which seemed not to be widely understood - both within other parts of ELWa and amongst suppliers.

2.2 Meeting the IMS Objectives.¹⁴

Objective 1: A framework will be developed to ensure only essential information is collected and duplication is avoided.

The objective was not yet thought to have been met fully. Several interviewees accepted that the data burden on providers has actually increased - although it was thought that, over time, the burden would decrease. Certainly, the LLWR asks for a greater volume of data than before, but the electronic format reduces the administrative burden compared to paper-based systems. The 'collect once, use many times' ethos of the LLWR

¹⁴ By agreement with the evaluation steering group, objectives 6,7,9 and 10 were given a lower priority than Objectives 1,2,3,4,5,8.

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was strongly supported and, when further developed, will help avoid unnecessary duplication.

The original intention by ELWa had been to provide data for all who required it, but in due course “*every man and their dog wanted fields added to the LLWR*”. Decisions on the scope of the LLWR were agreed through the Post-16 Data Advisory Group and through the consultation process, but it was thought a lack of focus had “*crept in*”, and it was suggested that a process of reviewing the scope/coverage of the LLWR needs to be introduced to ensure “*best-fit with the needs of everybody with a **legitimate** interest*”.

Objective 2: The roles and responsibilities of data collectors, providers and users will be agreed and published.

This objective was thought to be partly met, with ELWa having taken “*all reasonable steps*” to address these requirements. Guidelines have been drawn up in consultation with data providers and disseminated: but concerns centred on the degree to which providers have taken this on board. It was suggested that an analysis should be performed to identify which providers were ‘struggling,’ and for ELWa to target additional support accordingly.

Objective 3: Common definitions will be used to facilitate the sharing of data which will be held electronically to assist in the transfer of data.

This objective was thought to have been met. The use of common definitions has facilitated higher levels of sharing with other agencies such as the WAG . Some issues still remain: a small proportion of providers are thought to have misinterpreted guidance on how data is to be collected and entered into the LLWR. There have also been problems with some of the software packages used by learning providers, compounded by difficulties in getting software houses to make major alterations specifically for Wales.

Objective 4: Information users will be encouraged to make best use of existing data.

In terms of ELWa’s own use of data, ELWa staff considered the objective met. The variation in skills and resources amongst providers, however, has meant that the objective has been only partially met at this level. ELWa has made several efforts to improve matters through the MIS Development Programme, workshops and one-to-one support, but it is accepted that varied performance in the use of data still exists. Larger providers were believed to be making better use of the data, but smaller providers, with limited resources, were “*often missing out*”. Issues with software may be a

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contributory factor: data submission software for smaller providers does not include analysis features; effective use of SuperSTAR requires good skills and familiarity with the system – and both ELWa staff and providers have had to contend with a certain amount of system unreliability in the early stages of SuperSTAR implementation.

Objective 5: Data providers will have prompt and easy access to analysis of key management information.

Although providers have expressed a range of concerns, this objective is considered by ELWa to have been met. At least in principle, providers can receive validation reports immediately on submitting LLWR data, and download weekly reports on data quality. There are also quarterly data quality questionnaires, Funding Form Cs for FEIs, WBL providers' monthly funding feedback, and other reports.

Providers have made representations about delays with data submission and access processes. ELWa have responded in a number of ways, including the recent introduction of a facility where providers can download all their data. SuperSTAR has initially been rolled out to provide WBL funding reports and data analysis to ELWa staff, and plans are being actioned to increase the data available on this system. In practice, however, SuperSTAR is not suited for many of the reports providers require - but other web reports are available through the LLWR submission system and more are to be added.

Work is continuing to improve SuperSTAR, but in addition, greater support for providers - with encouragement to make good use of what can be provided - is seen as a key area for attention.

Objective 6: Minimum standards will be agreed for administrative software and hardware.

This objective was thought to have been met, with minimum standards agreed for administrative software and hardware, based upon consultations with providers. The minimum standards are not deemed particularly onerous, but even so they were not thought to be being applied consistently across the learning strands. Colleges, with their access to greater resources, were thought to be able to meet the minimum standards without significant problems; other institutions (particularly smaller ones) could find the standards more problematic. It was felt that the MIS Development Programme has gone some way to ensuring that WBL providers are able to meet the standards.

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ELWa has noted that further work is required before true interoperability can be achieved, and has requested the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) conduct the required work, which will be monitored by ELWa. Problems with incompatible data submitted by providers have been reported, thought to be linked to the variety of different software systems and limited appreciation by some providers and some software houses, of a number of the new data requirements. Clarification has been issued by ELWa, and it is hoped that these are just 'initial setup difficulties'.

Objective 7: Minimum standards will be agreed for electronic information collection and transfer.

The objective was considered to have been met. The standards set built upon research conducted by ELWa, which found that levels of connectivity were adequate and appropriate for the size of the providers. It was noted by one interviewee, though, that the standards applied were so minimal as to be almost irrelevant: the main requirement was the ability to supply and download electronic data via an internet connection.

Objective 8: Standards of competence in collecting, maintaining and using management information will be assessed and linked, where necessary, to training and inspection.

It is accepted that more work is needed by ELWa before this objective will be met fully. Varied levels of competence have been identified both within ELWa staff¹⁵ and amongst providers.

An ELWa survey of providers' competence in handling data and using management information was considered to have produced insufficient baseline data. It may not be feasible to set absolute standards of required competence, but ELWa will monitor the position through audits and link into Estyn inspections. Plans to extend funding to improve providers' competence were postponed in January 2005. ELWa recognises that provider staff may need training in the use of new or upgraded MI systems, and is currently awaiting WAG approval to release Stage 2 MIS Development Programme funds, which will allow limited training in the use of hardware and software.

¹⁵ Confirmed during these discussions e.g. ELWa Auditors' familiarity with the LLWR data held by providers.

Objective 9: Minimum standards for software and hardware support will be agreed and implemented where necessary.

Thought to be “*met to the extent necessary*”.

A survey found that the level of support was ‘not an issue.’ Gaps in expertise among providers are still thought to exist, however. WBL providers’ hardware/software standards are confirmed as part of the tendering process: only those providers meeting minimum standards were awarded contracts, but financial support can be offered to providers for necessary upgrades. There are currently very few new providers, so significant support will not be necessary.

Objective 10: Change procedures will be developed to facilitate the review and updating of the strategy as necessary.

The IMS is still being implemented, of course. Change and control procedures were considered to have been well managed during the initial stages of IMS implementation, although several interviewees admitted to less clarity about “*where we stand now*”. This evaluation will play a part in further developments and will support the effective management of change in the future, including reviewing progress, and assessing costs and benefits of proposed actions. In particular, the results will be used to update the Strategy, and developing procedures for changes for 2005/06.

2.3 Key Themes

2.3.1 Dissemination of the IMS

Although key teams were involved in the IMS consultation and LLWR development processes, it was felt that further internal promotion and dissemination within ELWa should take place soon. Staff do not always appreciate the full extent of, or implications from, the LLWR and the wider IMS at present. An internal website has been set up, but not promoted sufficiently. Additional workshops and promotion at ELWa events were proposed to reach colleagues in the regional, as well as the central offices.

Additional communication with Learning Providers was recommended, including re-emphasising the aims and planned impact of the **full** IMS. ELWa should also make providers aware of the potential benefits of the LLWR to them, and ELWa's efforts to reduce the burden on providers.

2.3.2. Benefits

Implementation of the IMS has already produced a number of benefits for the ELWa Directorates.

The timeliness of the data has enabled ELWa to make more informed planning decisions generally. The Funding Team reported that the LLWR data is “*easier to manage*”, and can be processed in a more automated way. This has enabled the Funding Team to reduce the number of staff required to process the data substantially, leading to attractive cost savings. The LLWR data is also believed to be more accurate, and the volume of rejected data submitted by Learning Providers has decreased appreciably.

The LLWR data has enabled the Funding Team to calculate funding allocations more accurately. Funding is now able to be paid via profiles based on LLWR data from the previous academic year, and contract variations are now based on information specific to individual providers.

The LLWR data has increased the speed at which the Data Collection Team can turnaround the data. They are now able to share data more easily with other agencies e.g. WAG and LSC, as common data definitions have been employed.

Benefits to the Quality Team include a consistent set of criteria for assessment across the various learning strands, replacing a variety of systems and data across the different learning strands and ELWa regions. Data across all strands on what courses are run, pass rates and retention rates, enables the Quality Team to conduct more detailed evaluations.

WBL providers, historically, have not been good at recording learning-related data but linking funding allocations to LLWR data has given them an incentive to improve their record keeping.

2.3.3 Constraints

A number of obstacles to the effective implementation of the full IMS were identified - ranging from external delays to “*inertia*” within ELWa, the latter possibly due to a lack of belief in some parts of ELWa that LLWR would ever be implemented.

Some delays were thought to have been introduced by the WAG, including delays giving ELWa permission to spend the budget for the IMS, and responding to information provided by ELWa. As a consequence of these

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delays ELWa was forced to suspend parts of the IMS, which had a knock-on effect on providers.

The introduction of a new National Funding Methodology and Pricing Model (NPFS) was also problematic. Slow progress in the development of the NPFS (resulting partly from issues surrounding the inclusion of WBL) meant that the LLWR had to be developed with only limited information in key areas.

Internal resource issues within ELWa have also impacted upon the implementation of the IMS. It was initially hoped to improve the LLWR's suitability for monitoring Quality, but this element of the IMS was suspended. The Information Management & Technology team is now working with the Quality Team, and hope to implement this phase during 2006.

The main focus of the LLWR is funding, so the LLWR does not always lend itself to the measurement role of the Quality Team. The LLWR requires, for example, FE institutions to record both when students enter for and achieve a course award, but some institutions omit those students who have been entered for an award but do not achieve it, thereby creating - potentially - an unduly positive picture. Further, the direct link between learning activities and awards has not yet been implemented, so the number of successful completions for a course cannot be easily calculated.

As this is the first year of using the LLWR, there is a lack of data for benchmarking provider performance, which *"can only partially be addressed by patching the old and new data together"*. As more data is collected over time, this will become less of an issue.

Reduced staff numbers are now required to process the data, but this has resulted in ELWa losing experience and knowledge of sectors, and fewer staff resources are available to ELWa teams, for example to respond to requests for help from providers.

2.3.4 Perceived Impact on Learning Providers

Concerns were raised over some providers' ability to respond adequately to the new requirements. Varied levels of providers' data collection and ICT expertise have led to ELWa staff having to spend more time helping those with less expertise.

Software houses sometimes misinterpret guidance, but this is largely unavoidable, given the decision to allow providers to use their existing software and update it, rather than create disruption through an enforced migration to a common MIS. To ease the transition, ELWa has developed

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data submission software with smaller providers in mind. Some of the larger providers are also using this software – although it is questionable whether it gives enough support for effective business management on its own.

LLWR is essentially a paperless system, but providers have made a number of representations about the audit paperwork requirements, notably for WBL funding.

ELWa has introduced the SuperSTAR system to produce reports based on LLWR data for providers and other ELWa directorates. SuperSTAR should reduce the burden on the Statistics team eventually, but has had periods of unreliability in its set-up phase which have been frustrating for potential users. Work is continuing to improve the reliability and capability of SuperSTAR.

ELWa staff accept that providers may not yet be seeing the full benefit of the IMS but in time, as the LLWR and SuperSTAR become embedded within ELWa systems, major benefits should become apparent. One concern is, however, that the impending merger with WAG may lead to additional changes, further delaying achieving the benefits the full IMS offers.

2.4 Suggested action points for the IMS

- ELWa should look to prioritise and ensure only essential information is collected, and ELWa and providers' staff are clear about data collection rules and timescales.
- An analysis should be performed to identify which providers are 'struggling' and ELWa should consider targeting additional support accordingly.
- ELWa should ensure that providers have prompt access to the LLWR data.
- Further internal promotion of the LLWR and the IMS should take place within ELWa to ensure that the IMS becomes more central to ELWa's objectives and operations.
- ELWa should assess the feasibility of inserting extra fields in the LLWR to accommodate the needs of both the Funding and the Quality Team (but carefully noting the first action point regarding collecting essential information only).
- Consideration should be given to implementing the link between learning activities and awards within the LLWR taking into account the additional burden this will place on providers.

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- ELWa should ensure that the resources allocated to the IMS are sufficient to meet the objectives of the IMS.
- ELWa should re-investigate the pros and cons of ELWa developing its own software for all providers, irrespective of size, to submit data.

3. Findings: Learning Providers

3.1 Overview

To assess the impact of the IMS on learning providers, six focus groups were held with FE, WBL and ACL providers, and representatives from local authorities. To ensure a range of regional perspectives were included, focus groups were held across Wales: three in South East Wales, one in West Wales, one in Mid Wales, and one in North Wales. Those attending included managers with a more general focus, as well as MI specialists (see Appendix II for a list of consultees).

Discussions covered both general issues surrounding the IMS and MIS Development Programme, and a review of each of the ten objectives set out for the IMS.

Major differences in the views of providers and ELWa rapidly became apparent. Rather than stifle provider contributions and supply information about the 'official' position on a number of matters, the facilitators simply noted provider views as expressed at the events – which included a wide range of practical suggestions for taking forward the aspirations within the IMS. A key recommendation is, however, that ELWa take steps to resolve what seem to be a number of misunderstandings and misconceptions, which have arisen from less-than-ideal communications between ELWa and providers in the past.

As pointed out in Section 1.5, most of the benefits have been seen by ELWa, and providers at present perceive mostly an increased data submission burden, but this was not unexpected bearing in mind the nature of the objectives.

Discussions centred on how progress might best be made in relation to these objectives, and the IMS as a whole, in future.

3.2 Meeting the objectives¹⁶

Objective 1: A framework will be developed to ensure only essential information is collected and duplication is avoided.

The general view was that this objective has not been achieved.

For most providers, the issue of what they see as allocating significant resources to submitting “*duplicated, non-essential*” data is a matter of significant concern. This can reduce the resources providers are able to dedicate to running programmes and the view: “*I don’t think ELWa are adding anything to the learner’s experience... we’re spending too much time on paperwork.*”

For most providers, the volume of data they have to supply per student has increased substantially: at worst, it may now take 15-20 minutes to enter registration data for each learner, compared to three minutes under the ISR. The increased data requirements have been especially burdensome for ACL providers, who previously submitted data collected from brief manual enrolment forms, but are now required to consider 120 fields of data for each learner. Although it is usually possible to enter ‘not known’ for a proportion of fields, “*the whole thing can be very daunting: it also gets a bad reaction from our learners – particularly the older ones, who’ve been with us for years – who say ‘I don’t see why you should be asking about that’ – they may give up for that reason alone*”.

Prior to the introduction of the LLWR, local authorities only submitted a simple individualised census return, but are now expected to collect more data on each learner. Whilst the local authorities did receive MIS Development Fund resources to support this, many felt they still had to invest heavily in the necessary structures, software, hardware and staff.

Examples of duplicated information requests were centre numbers, postcodes and addresses - further exacerbated for FE institutions if the college delivers additional courses funded by ELWa via different funding streams. Whilst providers’ systems should be able to fill duplicate fields automatically, some providers’ software cannot do this (or at least do it quickly and easily) – and problems are compounded when providers are using several different systems to run their businesses, meet the requirements of other funders, and provide data for the LLWR.

¹⁶ By agreement with the evaluation steering group, objectives 6,7,9 and 10 were given a lower priority than Objectives 1,2,3,4,5,8.

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Questions were raised over the need for data including: attainment for courses (such as cookery classes) which are designed not to have formal outcomes, destinations for students on three hour courses, and school information for elderly students. Concerns were also voiced over the necessity of collecting data on disability to the depth required by the *Learner and Learning Programme Registration Form*.

Providers agreed that the move to electronic data submission has made several aspects of the process more automated and streamlined - but it has not entirely removed the necessity for paper based systems as the audit process still requires paper based records.¹⁷ The process can be seen as “streamlined on ELWa’s side, but results in duplication for everyone else”.

Objective 2: The roles and responsibilities of data collectors, providers and users will be agreed and published.

Overall, ELWa’s role and responsibilities were considered unclear to most providers. In contrast, providers believed they were clear about **their** position - largely in terms of the minimum they need to do in order to get funding.

At worst, providers feel that roles and responsibilities are weighted in ELWa’s favour, with ELWa prone to “move the goalposts”, even when the ‘formal’ position remains stable.

Guidance on roles and responsibilities was seen by most as “difficult to read and poorly structured”. Direct contact with ELWa was often found to be “fine - if you get the right person” but a minority felt that they had received conflicting guidance from ELWa’s own departments.

Information and guidance is available to providers via the ELWa website, but this was seen as difficult to use due to the sheer volume of information presented: “and putting important information under FAQs doesn’t work - it just gets buried”.

Increasing reliance on providers’ own formal and informal networks – such as the NTF Work Based Learning Network - goes some way to clarifying issues that arise with the LLWR, but clearly are no substitute for direct contact with informed individuals within ELWa.

¹⁷ See section 4.1 of *Data Collection Forms 2004/05 Guidelines for use of the Templates. Version 0.2 May 2004.*

Objective 3: Common definitions will be used to facilitate the sharing of data which will be held electronically to assist in the transfer of data.

The introduction of common definitions has facilitated the sharing of data between providers and ELWa and other agencies, with some providers reporting a reduction in requests for the same information from multiple agencies. So far, however, this has tended to be overshadowed by the increased volume of data requested by ELWa, and the difficulty in sharing or accessing data held by other providers due to the issue of confidentiality. This can be particularly problematic if the student is already registered on the LLWR as attending one provider, and then registers with another.

MIS Development funds helped providers meet the requirements of the LLWR data submission process, but it has to be borne in mind that the maximum sums available were only £10,000 for the largest providers (see Chapter 4). Many providers found they had to make significant extra investments, and change their internal processes and staff skills substantially too. These changes were onerous for smaller providers with little IT infrastructure or staff IT expertise. For larger providers, such as FE colleges, new requirements were less dramatic, but again issues of either making major adjustments to existing systems or - in effect - running parallel 'internal' and 'ELWa' systems remain.

Changed ELWa requirements (e.g. adding new fields) may require providers to update their software systems. Contracts with software houses generally only cover routine upgrades which – depending on the details of individual contracts – may not cover this kind of extra work. The MIS Development Programme is currently a one-off, but providers believe that, in the case of revisions to LLWR requirements, ELWa (with WAG approval) should consider providing financial support for upgrading relevant software.

The willingness of software houses to update their products to reflect changes in the LLWR was also raised as an issue. The post-16 education market in Wales is typically given a lower priority than the English market by software houses, due to the smaller numbers involved.

The LLWR has rationalised many data definitions, but aligning data collection between FE and schools has been less successful. The different requirements for schools still exist: schools currently submit PLASC data twice a year whereas colleges are required to submit on a monthly basis. Further, the 'qualification aims' codes for school and colleges do not match,

making it difficult for accurate comparisons to be made. However, the two are moving closer and the qualification codes are now comparable.¹⁸

Objective 4: Information users will be encouraged to make best use of existing data.

The current overlap between the information submitted by providers to ELWa, and what providers use for planning and analysis, was thought to be too low.

In the past, providers have been disappointed that information from ELWa was not timely enough, lacked relevant statistics, and came in a “*user unfriendly format*”. Many have a separate internal MI system to analyse the data for planning purposes, in effect relegating the LLWR to use for funding purposes only.

Improvements in the SuperSTAR system were noted. Some providers had not come into contact with SuperSTAR at all, but most were enthusiastic about its **potential** – even though their use of data from it has usually been low so far. One problem has, however, been down-time.¹⁹ and perceived unreliability.

ELWa has been proactive in encouraging providers to make best use of existing data by running workshops: providers believe more could be done, however, perhaps through additional events which couple presentations on “*what’s expected of you*” with robust information on “*how to submit data practically*”.

Objective 5: Data providers will have prompt and easy access to analysis of key management information.

Providers were consistent in their view that ELWa is not making the information they need available routinely. Delays in delivering data back to providers (several providers pointed to delays of around 3 weeks) mean that many providers have only one week to act on the data before they are required to submit the next month’s figures.

Providers also reported that funding information is not fed back to them promptly enough to allow them to plan courses. This has meant that advertised courses have been cancelled due to a lack of funding, despite students enrolling on the course. Providers requested that ELWa make more

¹⁸. Schools have a shorter selection of codes to reflect the provision they offer - and the codes schools use are not Awarding Body specific whereas the LLWR codes are.

¹⁹. ELWa figures indicate actual “off line” time for SuperSTAR since it was released to providers in October 2004 of about 5 days

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transparent the formula used to calculate providers' funding allocations in order to facilitate their planning of courses etc.²⁰

The quality of the data returned by ELWa was questioned. Data submitted by providers via the portal may not match data used for inspections. The issue of mismatches between provider MIS data and the LLWR is thought to be a complex one, but the net effect has caused problems for providers who have been faced with *"people quoting stats to us we simply don't recognise."* More opportunities for providers to check and review data were recommended.

The format of some returned data is, for many providers, not suitable for planning purposes. Providers requested further consultations with ELWa to agree how appropriate category breakdown and comparative statistics may best be disseminated to allow, *inter alia*, performance monitoring against competitors.

Objective 6: Minimum standards will be agreed for administrative software and hardware.

Providers stated that they were unaware of any minimum standards and were therefore unable to assess whether they had been achieved. Some LEAs had initial problems submitting returns to ELWa because of *"teething troubles"* in hardware and software. Workshops for software houses and providers had specified ELWa requirements, but seem not to have led to full compatibility.

More pragmatically, however, the very feasibility of minimum standards was questioned due to the range of different software systems employed and the variations between them.

Objective 7: Minimum standards will be agreed for electronic information collection and transfer.

As with Objective 6, most providers were unaware that any minimum standards had been set, and so were unable to assess whether the standards had been met.

The level of communication between ELWa and the relevant software houses was raised. Although a minority of providers accepted that software houses have had a range of opportunities *"to understand the ELWa line"*²¹ for, most providers, there is something of an *"endless chain: ELWa tell us 'do this'; we*

²⁰ This is an important part of the IMS Action Plan, thought to have been delayed by lack of WAG approval.

²¹ Through provider workshops, one-to-one meetings with the ELWa Data Team, and ELWa data staff attending software provider meetings with their customers.

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say to software houses 'we need this;' they say 'what exactly do you mean?' we say 'only ELWa knows'; suppliers ask ELWa for clarification; they say 'sort it out with your customer ...'".

Objective 8: Standards of competence in collecting, maintaining and using management information will be assessed and linked, where necessary, to training and inspection.

Staff in several smaller providers have had to develop new skills and expertise in ICT more or less from scratch in order to meet the new submission criteria. The impact upon other providers tended to be less, as the necessary ICT skills and expertise were already available.

As noted in relation to Objective 4, ELWa ran workshops to support providers in the move to the LLWR, although they had to cope with delegates at very different skill levels – not always successfully in the minds of focus group members.

Providers were concerned over the linking of assessments to the use of management information, and argued that the key for them is **not** demonstrating to Estyn that they use data the way ELWa think they should do, but whether they are using it effectively for their own means

In the opinion of providers, ELWa's auditors show limited awareness of the LLWR: on several occasions, providers have had to show the auditors how to use the system.

Objective 9: Minimum standards for software and hardware support will be agreed and implemented where necessary.

Providers were again unaware of the existence of any minimum standards for software and hardware support (see Objectives 6 & 7), and were unable to assess whether the standards were being met.

Support from the software development houses via user groups was thought to be "adequate".

Objective 10: Change procedures will be developed to facilitate the review and updating of the strategy as necessary.

Providers showed much lower levels of appreciation than we expected of key elements through which the strategy is already being reviewed and updated.

Most knew nothing of the IMS Action Plan or the Data Advisory Group to which it is presented: admittedly, more “*recalled something being said about it all*” when prompted, but the overwhelming pattern of responses centred on short-term, immediate issues, typically giving much more attention to the specifics of the LLWR, rather than the more aspirational concepts within the whole IMS.

Pointing out that the focus groups themselves would, potentially, lead to further rounds of IMS review and updating was accepted – after a certain amount of prompting – but did not change the main perceptions of a majority of providers who felt they were “*no longer being listened to enough by ELWa*”.

3.3 Key Themes

3.3.1 IMS Objectives

In terms of overall provider responses, all 10 objectives were seen as still relevant. It should be borne in mind that the IMS is still being implemented, but from most providers’ perspective, however, none of the objectives was seen as being fully met currently.

3.3.2 Contact with ELWa

All queries regarding the LLWR have to be directed to ELWa’s Cardiff offices, which in the view of many providers has meant the loss of useful working relationships with ELWa staff in the regional offices.

E-mail systems have been set up by ELWa’s Funding Department to handle funding related queries but response times of 5 days were “*often, nowhere near quick enough*”. It was accepted that some delays are inevitable when internal consultation is required, but more effort on the part of ELWa “*to let people know where they stand; avoid the feeling of being in limbo*” would be welcome.

The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) section on ELWa’s LLWR website was criticised for not being updated frequently enough, and the support documentation was considered “*not user friendly*” and “*too dense*”.

Providers stressed that when direct contact with the ELWa teams is made, staff are very helpful. The providers felt that many of the support problems faced by ELWa were due to inadequate resources and urged ELWa to address this.

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Providers were concerned that ELWa “*does not appear to understand our business*”. For example, the introduction of what seem to be minor changes to LLWR data fields can have significant knock-on effects if other systems are integrated. Providers requested more regular contact with ELWa, and suggested ELWa should visit different providers to gain a deeper understanding of their work. Different providers had different views on the form better contacts should take. Suggestions included: one-to-one visits, focus groups, workshops and separate interest groups (e.g. WBL, ACL and FE).

Providers are currently consulted via e-mails or website postings: most providers stated they would prefer to receive postal bulletins as well.

3.4 Suggested action points for the IMS

- ELWa’s Audit Team and external auditors should discuss the requirement for providers to keep paper-based records for audit purposes, and gain a better understanding of the LLWR.
- Important and updated points within ELWa guidance should be clearer and emboldened.
- ELWa should reassess what and how guidance/information is disseminated to providers, using a range of media e.g. use of InfoFlashes, postal bulletins and workshops.
- ELWa should consider support for major upgrades to providers’ MI systems resulting from changes in the LLWR and WAG should be responsive to requests for support, to enable changes to be implemented rapidly.
- ELWa should discuss with providers the necessity of running additional, tailored workshops on data submission to the LLWR and use this opportunity to discuss opportunities for cross-checking data.
- ELWa should make more transparent the formula used to calculate providers’ funding allocations to facilitate providers’ course planning.
- The feasibility of minimum standards for administrative software and hardware should be re-assessed in light of the range of different software systems employed, and the variations between them.
- ELWa should promote greater awareness of the LLWR and the IMS among ELWa staff.
- ELWa staff should gain a better understanding of providers’ work, e.g. through visits or workshops.
- ELWa should investigate the level of delays in responding to providers, and consider solutions, including that of additional resources.

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- As part of a wider communications exercise, ELWa should address a number of differences in perceptions or understanding between ELWa and at least some providers. Appropriate areas for consideration could include: options for entering 'not known' in registration records; how providers may access their own LLWR data; the status of the IMS Action plan; and provider links to the Data Advisory Group.

4. MIS Development Programme

4.1 Overview

Consultation workshops and a survey of provider MI systems conducted by ELWa in 2002 highlighted the need for financial assistance to help in the transition to electronic data submission required by the LLWR. In response to these needs, the MIS Development Programme was set up and ran over the financial years 2002/03 and 2003/04. It provided support for:

- The purchase and installation of MIS Software upgrades or new systems.
- The purchases of new hardware required to support the new or upgraded MIS.
- Technical training for staff in the use of their new or upgraded systems.

The aim of the programme was to encourage all providers to “*acquire systems that enable them to submit data electronically to the National Council in an efficient manner that reduces the burden of data provision*”. Funding was available from ELWa to meet all or part of the additional costs of purchasing upgrades or specific modules to enable providers to export data to ELWa.

Funding under the programme was allocated in bands, calculated on the basis of the number of learners (excluding HE) undertaking learning in the first week of December 2001. The bands were:

Fewer than 20 learners	£0
20 - 49 Learners	£2,000
50 - 199 Learners	£5,000
200 - 999 Learners	£7,000
1000+ Learners	£10,000

Reviewing the achievements of the MIS Development Programme was, of course, an integral part of the overall aims for this evaluation.

Information about the MIS Development Programme was collected from desk research, interviews with ELWa staff, and through the provider focus groups. Due to the time elapsed since the delivery of the MIS Development Programme, however, rigorous assessment of some elements of the programme was not possible (e.g. reasons for non-claiming of allocated

funds): many providers were unable to recall any specific details of the programme.

From the start of the MIS Development Programme, ELWa set four criteria for its success, and the findings from this part of the overall evaluation are structured against them:

- i Whether providers are able to submit data efficiently.
- ii The proportion of allocated funds claimed.
- iii The proportion of eligible providers making claims.
- iv Providers' views of the programme.

4.2 Findings

Whether providers are able to submit data efficiently

Findings from the evaluation indicate that the efficiency with which data is submitted by providers has improved – although many providers indicated *“this has been achieved at a significant price – mainly to us!”*.

In the opinion of ELWa staff, the data submitted by providers is *“easier to manage”* and can be processed in a more automated way, requiring less face-to-face contact with learning providers. Data was thought to be more accurate and contain fewer ‘spurious’ entries than previously, with a consequent reduction in data rejected. All of this impacts positively on efficiency.

The move to electronic data submission was also thought by ELWa staff to have increased the speed at which data can be collated by ELWa. The ‘live’ nature of the data has meant that ELWa is now able to make more informed decisions, based on data that is more up-to-date than with previous systems.

Additional benefits with a positive impact on efficiency (noted both by ELWa and providers) were higher standards in hardware, software, and staff ICT expertise among providers.

Funds allocated and claimed

Table 1 details the allocation and take-up of funding by different categories of provider. Overall take-up across the different learning strands was high at 82%. FE institutions showed the highest take-up of allocated funds (99%), and ACLs the lowest (71%). Full funding take-up among ACL providers was also low compared to FE and WBL, with less than half of the ACL providers (47%) claiming their full funding allocation.

Evaluation of the Information Management Strategy (IMS)

Table 1: MIS Development Programme Funding Claims by Institution Type.

Institution Type	Number eligible to claim	Total Allocated	Amount claimed	% of allocation claimed	% of institutions claimed full amount	% of institutions claimed part amount	% of institutions did not claim
FE	25	£248,000	£246,553.20	99%	84%	16%	0%
ACL (LEA)	19	£181,000	£128,793.22	71%	47%	26%	26%
WBL	89	£442,000	£342,081.10	77%	66%	12%	21%
Total	133	£871,000	£717,427.52	82%	67%	15%	18%

Table 2: MIS Development Programme Funding Claims by WBL Funding Band

Funding Band Level	Number Eligible	Number claimed	% number claimed
1 (£2,000)	25	17	68.0%
2 (£5,000)	32	26	81.3%
3 (£7,000)	30	26	86.7%
4 (£10,000)	2	1	50.0%
Total	89	70	78.7%

Table 2 provides a more detailed picture of the take-up of funding by banding level, showing that take-up of funds tended to be lower among the small providers than the larger ones.²²

Overall, the figures in Table 1 and Table 2 indicate that the MIS Development Programme was successful in attracting applications from providers, although somewhat uneven levels of take-up do have to be noted, especially from ACL providers and smaller providers.

We have pointed out already the challenges faced in gaining information from providers about the MIS Development Fund - many simply could not recall much about it. The data the research team could gather, however, pointed to the Fund being a welcome response to significant changes which had to be made, particularly to meet the requirements of the LLWR.

Providers' views

Having said that providers welcomed the MIS Development Fund, concerns became evident during the consultation process, including:

- Timescales for application: Providers considered that too little time was allowed for completing applications.
- Calculation of the funding allocations: The basis upon which funding allocations were calculated was thought to be too simplistic, failing to take into account the different baselines the various providers were starting from in regard to number of learners, hardware and staff skill levels. In particular, LEAs pointed to concerns that they were funded on the same basis as FE institutions, despite their relatively poor ICT infrastructure.
- Cost of new LLWR fields: Although not directly linked to the original aims of the MIS Development Programme, the introduction of new LLWR fields has direct cost implications for the providers. It was suggested that the MIS Development Programme should continue and be utilised to lessen the financial impact of these changes.

4.3 Overall

The MIS Development Programme was, for most providers, a welcome source of one-off support – although for many, it covered a limited proportion of much larger IT-related costs only. Reintroducing the Fund would be very welcome – preferably with somewhat longer application timescales, but for similar areas of expenditure (upgrades to software and hardware, staff training). Take-up is expected to be high for any future Fund – demand is likely to be at least up to the levels of the 2002/3-2003/4 programme.

²² Take-up for Level 4 providers is discounted due to the very small sample size.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

The aims of the evaluation centre on evaluating progress in the implementation of ELWa's IMS, with particular emphasis on evaluating the results from the MIS Development Programme.

The aim of the IMS has, from its inception been to "*make a real contribution to raising standards by freeing up time in schools, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and the Post-16 sector and promoting more effective use of management information*"²³.

More detailed expectations were that the IMS will:

- Raise standards and improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- Reduce the administrative burdens on learning providers.
- Develop good practice with regard to the definition, validation and exchange of data.
- Improve the knowledge base by developing a programme of research and evaluation.
- Maximise the use of all available information.
- Use resources efficiently and effectively²⁴.

Important over-arching issues to emerge from this evaluation include substantial differences between the views of ELWa and most providers about issues like opportunities for consultation, availability and accuracy of LLWR data, additional burdens placed on providers, etc. A number of apparent misperceptions about technical aspects of the IMS on the part of providers also came to light, ranging from the part played by the IMS Action Plan through to how to treat blank fields in returns.

It was notable that points made by providers during the evaluation focused much more on the LLWR and less on the IMS as a whole. These views may have skewed some of the findings, but it does seem to be generally agreed that benefits **so far** are much more apparent for ELWa than providers (although as noted earlier this is at least partly due to the structure of the IMS objectives)

Problems arising from a variety of resource constraints at ELWa and delays (including delays in getting authorisations from the Welsh Assembly Government) do need to be recognised, too.

²³ Welsh Assembly Government, (2002). *Information Management Strategy for Schools, LEAs and Post-16 Providers*.

²⁴ Op cit.

Amongst a range of critical observations, however it is important to note good working relationships between many individual providers and ELWa staff, and widespread agreement that the IMS objectives remain relevant and worthwhile.

All of this leads us to what we see as five main conclusions.

I. Communication

Although ELWa has made a number of efforts to disseminate information about the full IMS, and seek responses from other stakeholders, providers' understanding of the overall IMS (as opposed to specific elements of LLWR) is inadequate and sometimes contradictory. This is not intended to be critical of providers, who face many other pressures to deliver learning effectively, maintain their own systems and manage resources. Even within ELWa a number of different levels of understanding of IMS thinking became apparent. This evaluation points to the need for major efforts to improve communications about the IMS both internally in ELWa and externally with providers.

II. Availability of data to providers

A key element of the IMS (Objective 5) is giving providers prompt and easy access to analyses of key management information. Despite investment by ELWa in SuperSTAR and other systems, most providers (and some ELWa staff) perceive progress so far to have been limited. This alone is, we believe, the source of many of the concerns expressed by providers; follow-up evaluation work will be needed to ascertain whether any teething problems in these early stages of implementation have been ironed out.

Particular attention now needs to be paid to making progress with all aspects of the overall IMS, but particularly those relating to feeding back data and analysis to providers.

III. Resources within ELWa

Communication problems and the inability to meet providers' needs are thought to be partly due to the inherent complexities of some of the issues, but have also been influenced by constraints on resources to allow for regular briefing of providers, responding to queries, ensuring prompt analysis of data, and carrying out a critical review of data requirements. As well as good technical skills it would be helpful if ELWa staff improve their understanding of WBL and ACL operations.

IV. Data Collection Burden

Overall, providers have seen a need to collect more data to meet the requirements of the LLWR than under previous systems: in many cases increased requirements have been substantial.

With limited benefits apparent to providers at present, this data collection burden has become a particular cause of resentment. Both providers and a number of ELWa staff believe there is scope for reviewing the LLWR to consider whether data requirements can be reduced without compromising the key benefits a fully implemented IMS can offer (including collecting figures once, and then providing data to all who need information on education and training in Wales from a single source).

V. Impact of the MIS Development Programme

On the basis of funding take-up, the MIS Development Programme was successful, with take-up of the funds by eligible providers high (82%) - although variations in take-up were noted across the different learning strands, with full-take-up among ACL providers low compared to larger FE and WBL providers.

Assessing the impact of the MIS Development Programme was complicated by the time elapsed since funds were distributed (some consultees were unable to recall any specific MIS Development Programme details) and by the level of funds which – for some providers – represented only a limited proportion of their overall ICT budget²⁵.

Nevertheless a range of benefits from the MIS Development Programme were confirmed by the evaluation. Both providers and ELWa staff reported data transfers becoming more accurate and timely, more efficient data transfer, and improved standards in hardware, software and staff ICT skills.

5.2 Recommendations

The evaluation points to a number of recommendations for consideration by ELWa and its partners. They focus on the five themes identified in the conclusions:

I. Communications

ELWa should consider the development of a formal communication strategy for the IMS - within ELWa and externally with learning providers, and using a range of communication methods. In particular, this should:

- Describe the strategy in full, together with the Action Plan for 2005-06.
- Clarify and simplify guidance and support documentation, including information on the roles and responsibilities of both ELWa and learning providers, and data collection rules and timescales.
- Highlight contact points, summarise channels for resolving specific concerns.
- Address what seem to be differences in perception between ELWa and providers in a number of key areas, e.g. through targeted workshops.
- Explain the benefits for providers – how IMS elements can improve their operations.

²⁵ This made assessing the reasons for non-claims impossible.

- It is not clear what implications (if any) may arise from the planned merger of ELWa into the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), but ELWa should pay particular attention to communicating any implications from the merger to providers.
- Make more transparent the formulae used to calculate providers' funding allocations.

II. Availability of data to providers

ELWa should give high priority to ensuring data is made available to providers as set out in the IMS aims and objectives.

- ELWa should consider further developments to the SuperSTAR system, encouraging providers and ELWa staff to develop their own capabilities and make best use of the LLWR data.
- ELWa should consult with learning providers to assess what further analysis and benchmarking information would be of value to support learning providers' use of the LLWR data for planning and analysis.
- ELWa should discuss with providers ways of ensuring the validity of data held, particularly that passed to inspectors and auditors.
- ELWa should carry out a follow-up evaluation of progress in making useful data available to providers

III. Resources within ELWa

ELWa should consider whether the resources allocated to the implementation of the IMS are sufficient, with particular attention to data collection, data analysis support offered to learning providers. Any delays in obtaining authorisation from WAG to recruit staff to support this work need to be resolved.

- ELWa should review the resources which would be needed to implement the communications strategy and ensure appropriate data is made available to providers (see separate recommendations) and consider ways of meeting these requirements.
- ELWa should review the frequency of and reasons for delays in ELWa responses to requests for clarification/help by providers. It should consider identifying and implementing appropriate solutions, which may include providing additional resources.
- ELWa should assess the business case for an additional post to support WBL analysis within teams working with LLWR.

IV. Data Collection Burden

- ELWa should conduct a critical review with relevant ELWa staff and external providers of the need for, and use made of all current LLWR data fields, and simplify requirements wherever possible.

- ELWa should consider the feasibility of linking learning activities to awards.
- ELWa should review options for reducing/ removing Audit requirements for paper-based records which duplicate electronic LLWR records.

V. MIS Development Programme

It is important that Stage 2 of the MIS development programme is implemented without further delay to support providers both in the submission of electronic data, and in further training of staff so that they are able to use their MI systems appropriately.

- ELWa should re-investigate the pros and cons of developing its own software to support all providers, irrespective of size, when submitting data; alternatively ELWa could consider investigate opportunities for working with software houses to improve communication and responsiveness.
- Consideration should be given to the appropriateness of application timescales for future funding rounds.

6. Evaluation Framework

6.1 Evaluation Framework

Section 2.1 of the Invitation to Tender identifies the need for a Framework for a three year evaluation of the IMS to be designed. We have outlined below a Framework which encompasses the background for such an evaluation, what we see as appropriate aims and objectives, suggested elements for a methodology, and required deliverables.

The Framework is intended to cover both a medium-term programme of evaluation work each year, and form the basis for a further, summative evaluation after a further 3 years of IMS implementation (2008).

Any additional MIS Development Fund opportunities are treated as part of the overall IMS; all references to the MIS Development Fund should be deleted if further funding is not made available.

6.2 Background

IMS

The National Council for Education and Training for Wales (ELWa) was created in April 2001 with a remit to direct, plan and manage post-16 education and training in Wales (with the exception of Higher Education). As part of this remit, Section 40 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000²⁶, requires ELWa to “*establish systems for collecting information, which is designed to secure that its decisions with regard to education and training are made on a sound basis*”. In response to this requirement ELWa agreed with learning providers a formal Information Management Strategy (IMS). The IMS came into effect in 2002, and was revised in 2005 following an external evaluation.

The formal aims of the IMS are to:

- Raise standards and improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- Reduce the administrative burdens on learning providers.
- Develop good practice with regard to the definition, validation and exchange of data.

²⁶ Department for Training and Education, (2000). *Learning and Skills Act 2000 - Statutory Approval of Qualifications under Section 99*. Welsh Assembly Government.

- Improve the knowledge base by developing a programme of research and evaluation.
- Maximise the use of all available information.
- Use resources efficiently and effectively.²⁷

Based upon these aims, 10 objectives for the IMS have been identified:

- A framework will be developed to ensure only essential information is collected and duplication is avoided.
- The roles and responsibilities of data collectors, providers and users will be agreed and published.
- Common definitions will be used to facilitate the sharing of data which will be held electronically to assist in the transfer of data.
- Information users will be encouraged to make best use of existing data.
- Data providers will have prompt and easy access to analysis of key management information.
- Minimum standards will be agreed for administrative software and hardware.
- Minimum standards will be agreed for electronic information collection and transfer.
- Standards of competence in collecting, maintaining and using management information will be assessed and linked, where necessary, to training and inspection.
- Minimum standards for software and hardware support will be agreed and implemented where necessary.
- Change procedures will be developed to facilitate the review and updating of the strategy as necessary.

The IMS was intended to be an important step forward in the move by ELWa to simplify the collection of data on all post-16 education across Wales, promote more effective use of data, and raise the quality of data submitted.

The Welsh IMS can be seen as part of a UK wide approach to addressing the bureaucracy and data collection burdens on providers. It builds upon work already conducted by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Management Information Across Partners (MIAP) (see, e.g. The Better Regulation Task Force²⁸; The Sweeney Report: *Trust in the Future*²⁹; and “*Making a Difference*”, *Reducing Red Tape and Bureaucracy in Schools*³⁰).

²⁷ Welsh Assembly Government, (2002). *Information Management Strategy for Schools, LEAs and Post-16 Providers*.

²⁸ <http://www.brtf.gov.uk>

²⁹ http://www.lsc.gov.uk/National/Documents/Keyinitiatives/SuccessforAll/Report_BureaucracyTaskForce+.htm

³⁰ http://www.dfes.gov.uk/iru/uploads/schools_red_tape_report2.pdf

MIS Development Fund

Consultation workshops and a survey of provider MI systems conducted by ELWa in 2002 highlighted the need for financial assistance to help in the transition to electronic data submission required by the LLWR. In response to these needs, the MIS Development Programme was set up and ran over the financial years 2002/03 and 2003/04. It provided support for:

- The purchase and installation of MIS Software upgrades or new systems.
- The purchases of new hardware required to support the new or upgraded MIS.
- Technical training for staff in the use of their new or upgraded systems.

Interim Evaluation

The interim evaluation carried out in 2005 found that the overall aims, and the 10 IMS objectives, remained valid but, up to that point, progress had been uneven – with benefits much more apparent to ELWa than providers.

The 2005 evaluation made recommendations in 5 areas:

I. Communications

ELWa should consider the development of a formal communication strategy for the IMS - within ELWa and externally with learning providers. In particular, this should:

- Describe the strategy in full, together with the Action Plan for 2005-06.
- Clarify and publish more information on roles and responsibilities of both ELWa and learning providers.
- Highlight contact points, summarise channels for resolving specific concerns.
- Address what seem to be differences in perception between ELWa and providers in a number of key technical areas (e.g. the availability of comparative statistics, treatment of missing data, links with software houses, audit requirements, opportunities for reviewing 'own' data) .
- Explain the benefits for providers – how IMS elements can improve their operations.
- It is not clear what implications (if any) may arise from the planned merger of ELWa into the National Assembly for Wales, but ELWa should pay particular attention to communicating any implications from the merger to providers.

II. Availability of data to providers

ELWa should give high priority to ensuring data is made available to providers as set out in the IMS aims and objectives.

- ELWa should consider further developments to the SuperSTAR system, encouraging providers and ELWa staff to develop their own capabilities and make best use of the LLWR data.
- ELWa should consult with learning providers to assess what further analysis and benchmarking information would be of value to support learning providers' use of the LLWR data for planning and analysis.
- ELWa should discuss with providers ways of ensuring the validity of data held, particularly that passed to inspectors and auditors.
- ELWa should carry out a follow-up evaluation of progress in making useful data available to providers

III. Resources within ELWa

ELWa should consider whether the resources allocated to the implementation of the IMS are sufficient, with particular attention to data collection, data analysis and support offered to learning providers. Delays in obtaining authorisation from the National Assembly to recruit staff to support this work need to be resolved.

- ELWA should review the resources which would be needed to implement the communications strategy and ensure appropriate data is made available to providers (see separate recommendations) and consider ways of meeting these requirements
- ELWa should consider providing the resources needed to minimise delays in responding to requests for clarification/help by learning providers.
- ELWa should assess the business case for an additional post to support WBL analysis within teams working with LLWR.

IV. Data Collection Burden

- ELWa should conduct a critical review of the need for and use made of all current LLWR data fields and simplify requirements wherever possible.
- ELWa should review options for reducing/ removing Audit requirements for paper-based records which duplicate electronic LLWR records.

V. MIS Development Programme

ELWa should consider further 'tranches' of the MIS Development Programme to: support providers both in the submission of electronic data, and in further training of staff so that they are able to use their MI systems appropriately.

- ELWa should re-investigate the pros and cons of developing its own software to support all providers, irrespective of size, when submitting data.
- Consideration should be given to the appropriateness of application timescales for future funding rounds.

6.3 Aims and Objectives of the Proposed Evaluation

The proposed evaluation should:

1. Review the progress being made by the IMS in relation to its overall aims of
 - Raising standards and improve the quality of teaching and learning.
 - Reducing the administrative burdens on learning providers.
 - Developing good practice with regard to the definition, validation and exchange of data.
 - Improving the knowledge base by developing a programme of research and evaluation.
 - Maximising the use of all available information.
 - Using resources efficiently and effectively
2. Review the extent to which the 10 objectives for the IMS remain valid, and assess progress towards these objectives since the interim evaluation report.
3. Review the progress made by ELWa in relation to:
 - Communicating effectively with providers
 - Making useful MI data available to providers
 - Devoting sufficient resources to implementing the full IMS appropriately
 - Minimising the additional data collection burdens placed on providers
 - (If the MIS Development Fund is extended) Providing appropriate additional financial support to providers to support improvements in the software, hardware and training needed to implement the IMS
4. Assess the impact from work to implement the IMS, including identifying outcomes for ELWa, providers, learners and other stakeholders, including an identification of additionality achieved, and an assessment of potential deadweight and displacement effects.
5. Compare progress made by ELWa in implementing and enhancing its IMS with good practice achievements in other parts of the UK.
6. Suggest areas for further development and enhancement to the IMS and associated delivery strategies.
7. If additional tranches of the MIS Development Fund are released, assess:
 - The extent of provider responses and overall takeup.
 - Activities undertaken as a result of the funding: did they align with wider IMS goals? Might they have been carried out anyway?

- What impact did the funds have in relation to improving the accuracy of data submitted; the timeliness and relevance of data to support providers' planning and monitoring functions; reductions in the data submission burdens on providers and ELWa?

Both formative and summative elements are required. It is envisaged that data for Objective 3 should be collected and analysed in mid-2006 and again in mid-2007. A full review against all objectives should take place in mid-2008. This might lead to the kind of work programme summarised in Table 3.

6.4 Method

Those carrying out the evaluation should suggest what they see as the most appropriate and cost-effective ways in which the objectives listed above may be met, but as a guide, a suitable methodology might include:

- i. A review of information management systems and strategies employed in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland by ELWa's counterparts there. The review should highlight problems/solutions encountered and areas of best practice.
- ii. Interviews with stakeholder agencies. Proposed stakeholders include, but are not limited to: the National Assembly, Estyn, Fforwm, software development houses, LSC and DfES. Areas to be covered include:
 - How does the IMS fit with the aims and objectives of the relevant agency.
 - Is the data produced by the LLWR appropriate and meet the needs of the agency.
 - What systems are in place to facilitate data sharing.
 - To what extent were the agencies consulted on the development of the IMS.
 - What processes are in place to ensure effective communication between ELWa and the relevant agencies.
 - Are the timescales for changes to the LLWR realistic and appropriate.
 - What costs are incurred by the relevant agencies by the introduction of changes to the LLWR.
- iii. Interviews with representatives from ELWa departments involved in or affected by the IMS e.g. Information Management Team, Quality Team, and Funding. Topics should cover:
 - Progress against the Strategy's objectives.
 - The extent to which the Strategy is having a positive impact on ELWa departments.

- What, if any, negative impacts are there for the department due to the introduction of the IMS.
 - What the objectives need to be adjusted to meet the strategy.
 - Whether the objectives need to be adjusted to more fully meet the needs of the department
 - How the MIS Development Fund was promoted, managed and disbursed (if appropriate)
- iv. A review of Estyn Inspection Reports and ELWa audits of learning providers to assess the competence in, and use of MI data. The review should pay particular attention to the accuracy and timeliness of data submitted by providers.
- v. Development of case studies of a sample of learning providers, the sample to be based upon the findings of element iv, and to be representative of FE institutions, WBL providers, Local Authorities and ACL providers. Case studies should highlight areas of good practice in the collection, analysis and use of management information produced by the LLWR.
- vi. A series of regionally based focus groups with learning providers to be held to feedback provider's views on the progress of the IMS objectives and their experiences and views of how the IMS has effected them – and the impact from the MIS Development Fund, if appropriate. The option for sector specific (WBL, Local Authority, ACL and FE) focus groups if required.

6.5 Deliverables

Evaluators will be required to provide:

- Interim reports in mid-2006 and 2007 identifying progress against the recommendations in the interim evaluation report
- A comprehensive evaluation report in mid-2008 meeting in full the objectives given in 6.3 above
- Regular updates and presentations to the evaluation steering group
- Facilitated workshops for ELWa staff and providers to agree joint actions following the interim and draft final reports.

6.6 Suggested Timeframe

Table 3 below provides a suggested timeframe for the evaluation framework.

Table 3: Evaluation Framework Timeframe

Work Element	2006				2007				2008			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Review of IM systems												
Stakeholder interviews												
ELWa staff interviews												
Review of inspection reports												
Case studies												
Provider focus groups												
Interim Report (formative)												
Final Report (summative)												

Appendix I

Topic Guides

Evaluation of: Information Management Strategy (IMS)

Topic Guide 1: Key Informants

Name of interviewee: -----

Job Title: -----

Interview Date: -----

Interviewer: -----

Interviewer briefing

Under Section 40 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000, “*the Council (i.e. ELWa) must establish systems for collecting information, ... designed to secure that its decisions with regard to education and training are made on a sound basis.*” In response ELWa has agreed with providers an Information Management Strategy, which sets out the framework under which data will be managed.

An MIS Development Programme was run over two financial years (2002–3 and 2003-4). This programme supported the purchase and installation of MIS software, upgrades of new systems, the purchase of new hardware required to support the new or upgraded MIS; and technical training for staff in the use of the new or upgraded systems. It is hoped the MIS Development Programme will be extended again to form a ‘mop’ up stage.

ELWA has addressed the need for an IMS strategy by outlining ten objectives:

- 1. A framework will be developed to ensure only essential information is collected and duplication is avoided*
- 2. The roles and responsibilities of data collectors, providers and users will be agreed and published*
- 3. Common definitions will be used to facilitate the sharing of data which will be held electronically to assist in the transfer of data*
- 4. Information users will be encouraged to make best use of existing data*
- 5. Data providers will have prompt and easy access to analysis of key management information*
- 6. Minimum standards will be agreed for administrative software and hardware*

- 7. Minimum standards will be agreed for electronic information collection and transfer**
- 8. Standards of competence in collecting, maintaining and using management information will be assessed and linked, where necessary, to training and inspection**
- 9. Minimum standards for software and hardware support will be agreed and implemented where necessary**
- 10. Change procedures will be developed to facilitate the review and updating of the strategy as necessary**

The aims of the project being carried out by CRG are to:

- *Design and carry out an interim evaluation for ELWa's Information Management strategy, with emphasis on the MIS Development Programme; and*
- *Draft a specification for (but do not undertake) a 3 year evaluation framework of the IMS.*

More detailed objectives stem from separating out the Strategy and the Development Programme:

Information Management Strategy (August '02 – March '05)

- *Process against the Strategy's objectives; (each objective would be analysed individually)*
- *The extent to which the Strategy is having a positive impact on providers and learners;*
- *Obstacles to implementing the overall strategy (e.g. resources, approval delays);*
- *Whether the actions are meeting the objectives or whether they need to be adjusted;*
- *What impact the actions are having on the strategy*

MIS Development Programme (January '03 – March '04)

- *To what extent claims from providers are more accurate and timely as a result of the programme;*
- *The quality of the hardware, software and other ICT support purchased by providers;*
- *Difficulties experienced by ELWa staff in getting quality, relevant data from the providers;*
- *The proportion of eligible providers making claims for MIS funding and reasons for non-claims and underclaiming*
- *Areas for improvement or adjustment and areas of good practice in the design and implementation of the Scheme.*

Data is being collected through:

Desk Research
 Face-to-face interviews with ELWa staff
 Focus groups with providers

ELWa project manager is Susan Edwards.

Involvement with/ awareness of IMS

1. Please describe your role in relation to the IMS
(How does this link into other aspects of your role?)
2. Were you involved with the development of the IMS?
(If so, in what capacity?)
3. How well do you think the IMS aligns with other policies/ programmes (what does it support?)
4. Are there any points of conflict/ overlap/ duplication?)
5. How did you learn about the IMS? Not appropriate for ELWa staff
6. Do you think the IMS has been explained/ disseminated as well as it should have been?

Involvement with/ awareness of MIS Development Programme

7. Please describe your role in relation to the MIS Development Programme
(How does this link into other aspects of your role?)

8. Were you involved with the development of the MIS Development Programme?
(If so, in what capacity?)

9. How well do you think the MIS Development Programme aligns with other policies/
programmes (what does it support? Are there any points of conflict/ overlap/
duplication?)

10. How did you learn about the MIS Development Programme? (May not be relevant Q for
ELWa interviewees).

11. Do you think the MIS Development Programme has been explained/ disseminated as
well as it should have been?

IMS Implementation

12. What do you think are the main objectives for the IMS?

13. To what extent do you believe the objectives identified in the IMS have been achieved?

14. Are you aware of any obstacles that have hindered the implementation of the IMS (e.g. resources, approval, delays)?

15. If obstacles were identified, what actions were taken in response?

16. What was the impact of these actions?

17. Has the IMS impacted upon your role, i.e. have you seen any benefits or drawbacks?

18. What impact do you think the IMS has had on providers/ ELWa? i.e. have there been any benefits or drawbacks? This is quite vague – any prompts?

IMS and MIS Development Programme Results

25. Have you experienced any difficulties in obtaining quality, relevant data from providers?

26. Do you believe the data submission burden on providers has changed? if so how?

27. Are providers using the data to inform planning decisions?

28. Have “minimum standards” been applied in relation to administrative software and hardware?

29. Have minimum standards been applied in relation to electronic information collection and transfer?

Evaluation of: Information Management Strategy (IMS)

Topic Guide 2: Telephone Interviews

Name of interviewee: -----

Job Title: -----

Organisation: -----

Interview Date: -----

Interviewer: -----

Interviewer briefing

Under Section 40 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000, *“the Council (i.e. ELWa) must establish systems for collecting information, ... designed to secure that its decisions with regard to education and training are made on a sound basis.”* In response ELWA has agreed with providers an Information Management Strategy, which sets out the framework under which data will be managed.

An MIS Development Programme was run over two financial years (2002–3 and 2003-4). This programme supported the purchase and installation of IMS software, upgrades of new systems, the purchase of new hardware required to support the new or upgraded MIS; and technical training for staff in the use of the new or upgraded systems. It is hoped the MIS Development Programme will be extended again to form a ‘mop’ up stage.

ELWA has addressed the need for an IMS strategy by outlining ten objectives:

A framework will be developed to ensure only essential information is collected and duplication is avoided

The roles and responsibilities of data collectors, providers and users will be agreed and published

Common definitions will be used to facilitate the sharing of data which will be held electronically to assist in the transfer of data

Information users will be encouraged to make best use of existing data

Data providers will have prompt and easy access to analysis of key management information

Minimum standards will be agreed for administrative software and hardware

Minimum standards will be agreed for electronic information collection and transfer

Standards of competence in collecting, maintaining and using management information will be assessed and linked, where necessary, to training and inspection

Minimum standards for software and hardware support will be agreed and implemented where necessary

Change procedures will be developed to facilitate the review and updating of the strategy as necessary

The aims of the project being carried out by CRG are to:

- *Design and carry out an interim evaluation for ELWa's Information Management strategy, with emphasis on the MIS Development Programme; and*
- *Draft a specification for (but do not undertake) a 3 year evaluation framework of the IMS.*

More detailed objectives stem from separating out the Strategy and the Development Programme:

Information Management Strategy (August '02 – March '05)

- *Process against the Strategy's objectives; (each objective would be analysed individually)*
- *The extent to which the Strategy is having a positive impact on providers and learners;*
- *Obstacles to implementing the overall strategy (e.g. resources, approval delays);*
- *Whether the actions are meeting the objectives or whether they need to be adjusted;*
- *What impact the actions are having on the strategy*

MIS Development Programme (January '03 – March '04)

- *To what extent claims from providers are more accurate and timely as a result of the programme;*
- *The quality of the hardware, software and other ICT support offered to providers;*
- *Difficulties experienced by ELWa staff in getting quality, relevant data from the providers;*
- *The proportion of eligible providers making claims and reasons for non-claims and underclaiming*
- *Areas for improvement or adjustment and areas of good practice in the design and implementation of the Scheme.*

Data is being collected through:

Desk Research

Face-to-face interviews with ELWa staff

Focus groups with providers

ELWa project manager is Susan Edwards.

Introduction

My name is ... from CRG. We are an independent research company working on a project for ELWa looking at ELWa's strategy for collecting information from Training Providers in a consistent way - designed to reduce the burden on providers. ELWa has also provided funds to Training Providers to assist in the move to effective electronic transfers of data by providers, linked to this strategy. (It is called the MIS Development Programme).

I'd like to ask you some questions about the Development Programme. I must stress that all individual responses will be treated in full confidence. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers – it's your own thoughts and perceptions we need to talk about.

Is now a convenient time to talk to you (for about 10-15 minutes)?

If there's a need to call back, note new time on front cover).

Involvement with/ awareness of MIS

1. Were you aware of the MIS Development Programme? If so, how did you know about it?
2. Did your organisation apply for funding from the MIS Development Programme?
3. If your organisation did apply what, if any, difficulties did you encounter during the application process?
4. If your organisation did not apply for funding, what were the reasons?
(e.g. Timescales, already equipped at an adequate level, terms and conditions)
5. If applied for funding but did not claim...why not?

6. Did your organisation seek any advice or support on the MIS Development Programme?
If so from whom (e.g. Software and Hardware suppliers, ELWa)?

7. If you did not seek advice and support do you now wish you had?

8. If the funding is made available again in the future would you apply?

Evaluation of: Information Management Strategy (IMS)

Topic Guide 3: Focus Groups

Introduction

ELWa has developed a strategy to collect information from Training Providers in a coherent, consistent way, designed to reduce the burden on providers. We want to discuss your experiences of and views about this strategy. ELWa has also provided funds to Training Providers to assist in the move to effective electronic transfers of data by providers, linked to this strategy.

There are 10 objectives for the strategy, I'd like for us to look at each in turn and for the group to discuss:

- i) What progress you have seen so far in relation to each of the objectives, and
- ii) Whether they are still relevant or maybe need changing).

interviewer note: each objective is listed below with a series of prompts to be covered if appropriate.

A framework will be developed to ensure only essential information is collected and duplication is avoided.

*In your experience does ELWa collect only essential information?
Has ELWa clearly explained why the data is required?
Does ELWa overburden providers with data requests?*

The roles and responsibilities of data collectors, providers and users will be agreed and published.

*Are ELWa's role and responsibilities clear?
Are your roles and responsibilities as providers clear?
What guidance/information is available and do you use it (ELWa website)?*

Common definitions will be used to facilitate the sharing of data which will be held electronically to assist in the transfer of data.

Have common data definitions been agreed – are these consistent across organisations such as ELWa, National Assembly etc?

What impact has the move to electronic data formats had?

What impact did the ELWa funds to support providers in the switch to electronic data have - was it useful?

How was the money used?

Were the timescales for application appropriate?

Was the funding allocated fairly?

Information users will be encouraged to make best use of existing data.

AND

Data providers will have prompt and easy access to analysis of key management information.

Is ELWa making the data held sufficiently accessible?

Is the data held in the right format for you as providers?

What can ELWa do to facilitate access to the data for you as providers?

Who within your organisation uses the data?

How is the data being used?

Standards of competence in collecting, maintaining and using management information will be assessed and linked, where necessary, to training and inspection.

Do your staff have the skills to use/maintain the data?

What support was offered to you, if any, and by whom?

What was the quality of the support offered to you from ELWa (e.g. workshops)

Do you require further support?

Change procedures will be developed to facilitate the review and updating of the strategy as necessary.

Is further consultation on the strategy required?

What changes to the strategy would you like to be made?

Minimum standards will be agreed for administrative software and hardware.

AND

Minimum standards will be agreed for electronic information collection and transfer.

AND

Minimum standards for software and hardware support will be agreed and implemented when necessary.

Have these minimum standards been achieved?

Have the standards been set at an appropriate level?

Appendix II

List of Consultees

ELWa Face to Face Interviewees

ELWa Interviewees	Job Titles
Richard Spear	Head of Funding
David Bailey	Principal Analyst
Adam Cox	Data Manager
Rhian Haggett	IM&T Projects & Compliance Executive
Frances Good	Head of Information Management and Technology
Marian Jebb	Senior Quality Manager

Organisations Represented in Focus Groups

Adult Community Learning Providers (ACL)
Vale of Glamorgan Council
City and County of Cardiff Council
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council
City and County of Swansea
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

Representatives of Six Form Education Providers
Flintshire County Council

Work-based Learning Providers (WBL)
PRP Training Ltd
Acom Business Services Ltd
Acorn Learning Solutions
Tydfil Training Consortium Ltd
Newport and District Group Training Association
Network Training Services Ltd
BTS Cardiff
Qualtech
NW Training
Wrexham ITEC
Cambrian Training Company
Powys Training
Arfon Dwyfor Training Ltd
Bangor University
Mon Training
Rathbone CI
CITB
Vision Training and Recruitment Ltd
ACE Training

Further Education Institutions (FEI's)
Pembrokeshire College
Swansea College
Ystrad Mynach College
Bridgend College
Merthyr Tydfil College
Coleg Gwent
Welsh College of Horticulture
Coleg Llysfasi
Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor
Deeside College
Dysgu Bro Ceredigion Community Learning
Barry College