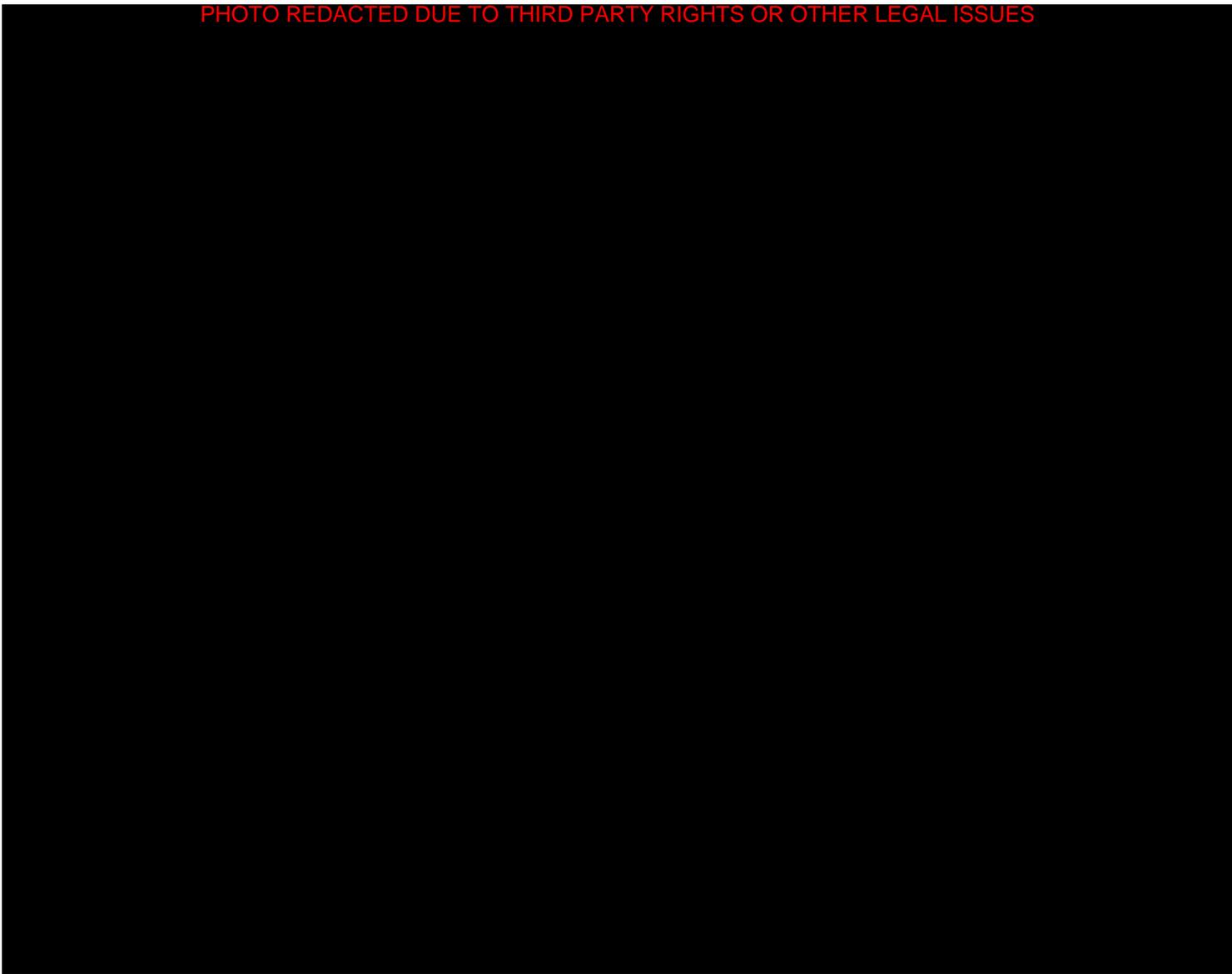# Learner support services in further education colleges for learners aged 16-19
December 2015

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The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales. Estyn is responsible for inspecting:

- ⌃ nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
- ⌃ primary schools
- ⌃ secondary schools
- ⌃ special schools
- ⌃ pupil referral units
- ⌃ independent schools
- ⌃ further education
- ⌃ independent specialist institutions
- ⌃ adult community learning
- ⌃ local authority education services for children and young people
- ⌃ teacher education and training
- ⌃ Welsh for adults
- ⌃ work-based learning
- ⌃ learning in the justice sector

Estyn also:

- ⌃ provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others
- ⌃ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence

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Introduction

This report is published in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit to Estyn for 2014-2015. The report looks at the quality, consistency and impartiality of learner support services that further education colleges provide to learners. Learner support services include coaching for learning, personal support, and careers information and guidance. The report is the second of two. Estyn published the first report on learner support services for pupils aged 14-16 in 2014 and it considered learner support services provided by schools to learners in key stage 4.

This report is based on visits to 12 further education colleges in Wales that provide education to learners aged 16-19. Additional evidence was drawn from inspection outcomes and from the annual performance reviews on each further education institution that Estyn published in 2014 (see Appendix 1 for further details).

Background

Secondary schools and further education colleges, but not work-based learning providers, have a statutory duty under the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 to provide learners with access to coaching for learning, personal support, and careers information and guidance. These services are intended to support learners to overcome barriers to their learning, make informed and realistic choices, and realise their potential and ambitions.

The Welsh Government's Programme for Government (2015a) identifies that strengthening youth engagement and employment is a priority for Wales. One of the Welsh Government's aims is to tackle poverty by helping all young people progress beyond compulsory education into further education, training or employment. At the heart of the Welsh Government's education reform agenda are raising standards of literacy and numeracy, and breaking the link between poverty and poor attainment.

The Welsh Government's Youth Engagement and Progression Framework Implementation Plan (2013) sets out six key elements intended to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). These elements are to:

- identify young people most at risk of disengagement
- provide better brokerage and coordination of support
- ensure stronger tracking and transitions of young people through the system
- ensure that provision meets the needs of young people
- strengthen employability skills and opportunities for employment
- ensure greater accountability for improving outcomes for young people (p.6)

This survey focuses on learners who progress into further education, and reviews how well further education colleges help learners to make effective transitions from

school and how colleges evaluate the quality of the support services they provide. In particular, the report will consider how well colleges:

- use tutorials to support young people
- support young people in their transition from school
- match the curriculum to the needs of new learners
- identify and support learners at risk of becoming NEET, including working with Careers Wales and other partners
- evaluate the impact of the support they provide and use the outcomes to improve the quality of support provided to learners

Main findings

1   Most colleges have a good range of support in place for their learners. In most colleges, senior managers monitor the performance of learning support staff well. Support staff use a wide range of interventions to make sure that learners improve their basic and essential skills. Most colleges have well-developed management information systems that track learners' attendance, progress and performance. Tutors and individual learners discuss their performance and use the data to agree improvement targets. They also use tutorials to help learners develop their career planning skills. Managers are kept well informed of learners' progress.

2   Learning support services include learning coaches, mentors, counsellors, chaplaincy services, and welfare advisers who support learners with financial issues. A minority of colleges also employ dedicated careers guidance specialists. Most colleges set clear performance targets for these learning support staff. Most colleges have well-structured tutorial systems. Tutors use learning support services to help learners who are considering leaving and improve learners' prospects of remaining in education.

3   Colleges assess and advise learners on entry to help them choose the most appropriate course and identify what support, if any, learners need to improve their basic skills. Across Wales, colleges report that between 20% and 35% of learners need support with their literacy or numeracy skills in order to cope with the demands of their chosen courses. Nearly all learners with additional learning needs receive good, well-planned support as they progress from school to a further education institution. This is achieved through effective, close partnership working between the school, institution and Careers Wales.

4   For prospective learners who do not have additional learning needs, further education colleges generally liaise well with schools and Careers Wales to promote their provision. However, Careers Wales advisers are now required to work with only the most vulnerable learners and a minority of colleges say that this restructuring of Careers Wales services has reduced the extent to which learners receive impartial [face-to-face] guidance and advice.

5   In nearly all colleges, leaders plan the curriculum well and offer a broad range of courses at levels that provide learners with flexibility and choice. They monitor learners and identify and support those who are in danger of dropping out of courses. Learners usually have the flexibility to adjust their course choices early on and tutors encourage learners to stay engaged in education. Retention rates are good.

6   Most colleges have good arrangements to support post-16 learners who join late during the year. They have identified that learners who start late tend to drop out before completing their studies and have introduced initiatives such as structured January intakes or targeted mentoring support for learners who start later in the autumn term. Many of these initiatives have been introduced recently and it is too early to judge their impact.

7   Leaders and managers use data systems to keep informed of learners' performance

and progress, and they access learner feedback to improve provision and support.   A few colleges are developing systems to measure the progress or 'distance travelled' by learners during their courses, but there is no common approach across Wales. Only a very few colleges have a system that uses data to monitor how effectively learners make progress towards the objectives laid out in the Welsh Government's Careers and World of Work Framework, (2008) (see Appendix 2).

8   Generally, colleges give learners appropriate support to make the transition to their next destination. Tutors and lecturing staff use their technical and vocational knowledge to help learners make appropriate progression decisions. Many learners have a good awareness of the progression opportunities available to them and feel that staff prepare them well for their next step.

9   Colleges gather information on learners' intended destinations when they leave, but this data is not gathered reliably enough to enable a useful evaluation of the impact of learners' career planning or to compare progress with school leavers. Most colleges use destination data as a basis for evaluating the success of their provision. However, there is no common method used by colleges across Wales. Whereas school destination data is based on tracking learners to verify their destinations once they have left school, further education institution leavers' destination data is based on declared intentions. Only a minority of colleges make systematic efforts to follow up leavers to confirm their destinations.

Recommendations

Further education colleges should:

R1 develop a common method to measure learners' achievements, including their progress against the objectives set out in the Welsh Government's Careers and the World of Work Framework (2008) (see Appendix 2)

Local authorities should:

R2 make sure all learners are aware of the full range of post-16 options available to them

R3 make sure that colleges receive timely information about the achievements and support needs of learners progressing to further education

The Welsh Government should:

R4 work with schools, colleges, Careers Wales and local authorities to develop a national system for collecting data on the destinations of 18-year-olds

The range and quality of support for learners

10   College leaders put in place a wide range of support interventions for learners. These learning support services include learning coaches, mentors, counsellors, chaplaincy services and welfare advisers to support learners with financial issues. A minority of colleges also employ dedicated careers guidance specialists. Most colleges set clear performance targets for learning support staff, and a senior manager monitors these regularly. Tutors use these services consistently to support learners who are considering leaving. This helps to ensure that learners receive a good level of support and that the institution makes appropriate interventions that improve learners' prospects of remaining in education or training.

11   Most colleges have well-structured tutorial systems that are delivered by well-trained tutors. Within these, tutors work with learners to support them and set targets that aim to develop their career planning skills. Tutors guide learners well and make good use of vocational contacts to help learners gain relevant vocational knowledge and, where appropriate to their course, work experience. Most colleges use tutorials to supplement the experience that learners gain from their courses to help them develop the skills outlined in Welsh Assembly Government's Careers and World of Work Framework (2008).

12   Colleges also liaise well with Careers Wales advisers. Many colleges receive support from Careers Wales advisers to help their most vulnerable learners. Learning support service staff have effective arrangements to refer potential leavers to Careers Wales advisers to minimise the chances of learners becoming NEET. Advisers are also invited to open days and enrolment events so that they can provide independent advice to prospective learners. However, Careers Wales advisers are now required to work with only the most vulnerable learners and a minority of colleges say this restructuring of Careers Wales has reduced the availability of impartial guidance and advice available to many learners. For example, Coleg Cambria found that, in Flintshire last year, there was a noticeable drop in full time recruitment numbers onto vocational programmes, which they attribute to fewer learners receiving independent careers advice in school. They also found that the number of last-minute and late enrolments was considerably higher than in previous years. However, other colleges, such as Grŵp Lllandrillo Menai and Pembrokeshire College, have not identified any discernible impact from the changes to independent careers guidance services to learners.

Transition into further education

13   Most colleges and schools manage transition arrangements effectively for those learners with additional learning needs and who may need specialist support. In general, staff in schools, colleges and Careers Wales' advisors work in partnership to ensure that these learners' progression is well planned from an early stage. They make sure that necessary adaptations or learning aids are in place in good time for the learners to settle into the institution quickly and make good progress in their learning. Transition arrangements for prospective learners who do not have additional learning needs are not generally as well co-ordinated or managed.

14   All colleges have well-established arrangements for promoting their courses to learners who are preparing to leave school at 16. They hold open days, which they publicise well. They regularly attend school open evenings and career fairs. Many take their current learners with them to these events so they can talk informally to school learners about college life and the work they do. This is useful in providing learners with an insight into how learning in colleges can differ from that in school.

15   Many colleges have a broad range of programmes to acquaint learners with their environment from Year 9 onwards. For example, Coleg Sir Gar offers leadership courses for Year 9 learners, as well as taster days for learners in Year 10 and Year 11. The programmes help learners become familiar with the institution and help them settle in more effectively after Year 11.

16   Most colleges offer taster events for learners to experience courses prior to committing to them. Learners find these useful in helping to develop a clearer understanding of the course content. They also give learners a clearer insight into the skills they will need to cope with coursework in further education.

17   A majority of colleges and schools make good use of local partnerships to offer provision to 14-16 learners who are still in school. For example, Coleg Cambria has over 900 learners aged 14-16 years from schools attending the college each week, taking part in a broad range of subjects that include engineering, construction, Spanish and law. This approach has enabled schools and learning networks to broaden the choice available to learners in key stage 4. Just over half of these learners continue their post-16 education at the provider, partly because they have had an opportunity to experience college life.

18   There are a few examples of colleges developing imaginative partnerships that ease transition for learners and improve their engagement with education. Coleg y Cymoedd's partnership with St David's College and Cardinal Newman Roman Catholic School has resulted in Cardinal Newman basing its Year 12 provision within Coleg y Cymoedd, enabling those learners to maintain their links with faith-based provision.

19   All colleges have developed information sharing protocols with local authorities, but in most cases these are still in the early stages of implementation and are not yet effective. Other than for learners with additional learning needs, most colleges say they do not receive enough information about the education performance, behaviour and attendance of learners. This can make it difficult for them to make adequate on-entry plans to meet the needs of all learners.

20   The formal agreement between the Gwynedd and Môn 14-19 Partnership Network and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai enables the institution's staff to access school data that the partnership holds about learners. Coleg Menai also has access to pupil data stored within schools' management information systems. The institution can look at data on learners' attendance, learning needs and other special circumstances. This data gives accurate information on which to base an assessment of learners' suitability for courses and to give better informed guidance that helps learners identify the most suitable course for their needs.

21 Merthyr Tydfil local authority has recently moved all post-16 education to tertiary provision, which has simplified and streamlined communication between schools and the college. The new information sharing protocols improves the flow of information about learners. It is too early to see the impact of this on learners' success, but the college feels that learners benefit from the more informed advice they provide.

22 Colleges generally provide good advice and guidance to learners who start with them. Learners who apply to a college generally have an interview prior to starting their course. In these initial interviews, staff discuss the career implications of the courses that learners wish to pursue and help learners to reflect on the appropriateness of their choices in the light of their academic performance.

23 All colleges have suitable arrangements for selection and recruitment. They take care to match learners' skills and abilities with the demands of the courses they hope to follow.

Basic skills support

24 Across Wales, colleges report that between 20% and 35% of learners need support with their literacy or numeracy skills in order to cope with the demands of their chosen courses. Institution leaders commit resources effectively to supporting learners who need to develop their basic skills. Systematic initial assessment gives colleges a clear picture of which learners need support. Colleges normally carry out initial assessments prior to or during learners' induction period. This is an important part of selection as it enables the institution to identify which learners need help to improve their basic skills.

25 For example, Coleg Ceredigion assesses the basic skills of learners at the time of their initial selection interview. This is enables them to make an early identification of learners who need additional help with basic skills. These learners are offered intensive "catch-up" courses during the summer. This improves their chances of a successful transition into further education.

26 Colleges manage delivery of this support with sufficient flexibility to enable learners to access drop-in sessions or programmed support to suit individuals' needs. Where learners access support to improve their literacy and numeracy, most colleges monitor their progress well.

27 Nearly all colleges have well-established systems in place to support learners who need to develop their essential skills of communication, application of number and digital literacy to level one. They achieve this through discrete provision and through tutor-based support. Learners' development of these skills is measured well in most colleges, but the tracking and development of higher-order literacy and numeracy skills is not generally done as effectively.

28 Nearly all colleges measure and analyse the impact of support to develop learners' basic and essential skills. Nearly all present strategic reports regularly to senior managers to show the progress learners make in this area. Managers use these reports well to develop and improve provision.

Using data to target support for learners

29 The rate of learners completing courses in colleges is good overall. The national average for course completion was 92% in 2013/14, (Welsh Government, 2015b). To minimise the number of learners who drop out of courses, most colleges monitor learners in their early weeks in college. Many have methods to identify and monitor learners who may be at risk of leaving early. For example, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai used European project funding to develop a useful 'engagement matrix' that helps to identify vulnerable learners at risk of leaving courses early. Staff assign identified learners a mentor. This helps 84% of these learners to complete their courses and succeed in meeting their learning goals.

30 Most colleges have useful management information systems that enable them to track learners' attendance, progress, and performance. Tutorial systems make effective use of this data, and most tutors use the information well with individual learners to discuss their progress and to agree learning targets.

31 Staff intervene promptly if patterns emerge that indicate individuals need support. All colleges monitor the performance of vulnerable groups, such as minority ethnic learners or looked after children/care leavers well and most have good systems in place to ensure that targeted support for these groups is effective.

32 All colleges monitor learners' attendance thoroughly, in particular paying close attention to those whose attendance pattern indicates a risk of dropping out. In nearly all cases, managers receive regular reports on the reasons for individuals' absence and on what staff have done to support these learners to maintain their engagement. This approach usually results in learners receiving prompt support or guidance to help them improve their attendance.

33 Many colleges encourage learners to view the data the institution holds about them by accessing their personal records through learner portals on institution websites. This helps learners to focus on the progress they are expected to make. Many find this motivating and helpful in planning their coursework.

34 Many colleges make appropriate and regular use of systems to gather feedback and information about learners' views. Senior leaders and managers evaluate this feedback and use it to inform curriculum planning, to adapt support services to meet learners' needs and to enhance provision.

Support for learners who change courses or start courses late

35 A minority of learners change courses during the first eight weeks of their first term in their new institution. While data on these changes is not analysed consistently across colleges, many of these new learners have had an opportunity to re-evaluate how well their chosen courses match their aims or abilities. The breadth of provision that colleges offer at a range of levels enables most of these learners to move successfully

to higher or lower level courses, or courses with a different content or vocational focus. These opportunities to change courses within the same institution helps these learners to remain engaged in learning.

36   Colleges identify that those learners who start courses late tend to drop out before completing their studies. Many have introduced initiatives such as structured January intakes to further support late starters. Most have good arrangements for supporting these learners, often using learning coaches or mentors to ensure learners can catch up on work they have missed. Colleges are not required to collect data that identifies whether learners start courses late and there is no analysis to show whether learners who start courses late attain their qualifications at the same rate as other learners.

37   Nearly all colleges have good curriculum planning processes in place. This results in offering a broad range of courses at levels that give learners flexibility of choice. In the majority of colleges, this range of provision has recently been extended to take account of post-16 learners who join late during the year. This intake often offers learners opportunities to pursue a range of activities customised to their interests or progression needs so that they maintain an involvement in education and can progress onto a mainstream course in the following September. This is useful in the short term by keeping learners engaged in learning and ensuring that they do not become NEET.

Measuring learner progress

38   Many colleges measure the progress, or 'distance travelled', that A-level learners make during their courses. A few are developing systems to measure the progress that learners make during other courses. This is a useful initiative as colleges cater for learners from a broad range of backgrounds and abilities, and it can help motivate learners and provide valuable data for leaders. However, approaches are not yet consistent or embedded across Wales to ensure that there are common ways of measuring this aspect of learners' progress.

39   Many learners have a good awareness of the progression opportunities available. Most learners feel that staff prepare them well for their next progression step. However, only a very few colleges have a clear, strategic system or data to monitor how effectively learners make progress towards the objectives laid out in the Careers and World of Work Framework (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008).

40   Most colleges gather information on learners' intended destinations when they leave, but this data is not gathered reliably enough to enable a useful evaluation of the impact of learners' career planning or to compare progress with school leavers. Most use destination data as a basis for evaluating the success of their provision. However, there is no consistent method used by colleges across Wales. Whereas school destination data is based on contact with learners once they have left school, institution leavers' destination data is based on declared intentions. Only a minority of colleges make systematic efforts to follow up leavers to confirm their destinations.

Support for learners as they move on at 18

41 Generally, colleges give learners appropriate support to make transitions to their next destination at age 18. Tutors and lecturing staff make effective use of their technical and vocational knowledge to help learners make progression decisions. Learners are generally well informed about higher education options or progression options that the institution itself can provide. Tutors assist well in providing this advice. Grŵp Llandrillo Menai enhances its support for learners aiming for higher education by purchasing additional advisory service from Careers Wales. Many vocational learners have a good awareness of the local labour market, and this is enhanced by the information they gain from tutors.

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Appendix 1 – Evidence base

The findings and recommendations in this report draw on visits to:

- Bridgend College
- Coleg Sir Gar
- Coleg Ceredigion
- Coleg Gwent
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
- Merthyr Tydfil College
- Pembrokeshire College
- St David's Catholic College
- Gower College Swansea
- Coleg Cambria
- Coleg y Cymoedd
- Grŵp NPTC Group

This sample represents all colleges in Wales that focus on providing education to learners aged 16-19, except Cardiff and Vale College, which was preparing for an inspection.

In these visits, inspectors:

- met representative groups of learners
- held discussions with middle and senior leaders
- met with those providing learner support services

Inspectors drew additional evidence from:

- inspection reports that Estyn published on www.estyn.gov.wales
- annual review of performance reports that Estyn published on www.estyn.gov.wales
- data on the destination of institution leavers and published data on the destinations of school leavers at 18

Appendix 2 – Careers and the world of work framework

The learning objectives for Post 16 learners that are set out in the Careers and the world of work: a framework for 11 to 19-year-olds in Wales are listed below.

Skills

Learners should be given opportunities to:

1 work both independently and cooperatively in a wide range of settings

2 listen attentively and respond effectively, making significant contributions to discussions

3 access independently a wide range of sources for help, support and advice

4 select, summarise and synthesise key ideas and information

5 select, compare and interpret data from a variety of situations relevant to their own needs

6 use ICT selectively and efficiently to find, develop and synthesise information so that it is fit for purpose

7 explore their own and other people's assumptions and aspirations and make best use of this in their decision-making

8 use innovative approaches to identify opportunities and solve problems

9 communicate confidently and coherently, in English or Welsh, as appropriate, about careers and the world of work in a wide range of contexts

10 present information about themselves effectively in a variety of forms for different audiences

11 plan, set targets across several time spans and review/reflect on learning

12 manage time independently, meeting tight deadlines

13 adapt to challenging new situations

14 be able to apply learning in a wide range of familiar and unfamiliar settings

15 show increasing awareness of customer needs

Range

Learners should be able to develop their skills, attitudes and values through a range of contexts. They should have the opportunity to:

Personal achievement

1 review their achievements and their work/career/study plans

2 continue to develop an ongoing curriculum vitae (CV) based on their achievements, experiences, interests and skills in order to enhance their employability

Seeking information

3 research and evaluate a range of information about careers and the labour market within Wales

4 explore how opportunities in Britain, Europe and the rest of the world might impact upon their career ideas

5 expand their knowledge of business and self-employment opportunities in order to inform their career horizons

6 discuss the impact of current trends in working patterns on their career plans

Understanding the world of work

7 discuss the benefits that diversity can bring to the workplace and the disadvantages that can be created by stereotyping

8 engage in activities that encourage an entrepreneurial approach to work and wealth creation

9 understand their responsibilities and rights as employees and know how to follow safe working practices

10 use work-focused experiences to gain a better understanding of what skills and qualities employers require and any implications for their career/work plans

Guidance

11 access and analyse realistic, impartial guidance on education/career/work routes

12 consider the financial and lifestyle implications of their career ideas

Making and implementing decisions

13 understand, analyse and make decisions about individual pathways in education, training and work

14 be able to explain and justify their choices both to their peers and to appropriate adults

15 review, synthesise and present information about themselves in relation to learning and work in order to negotiate a career plan

16 promote a positive self-image in a range of formal situations including applications and attending interviews

Glossary

Level 1
A qualification equivalent to grades D-G at GSCE

Level 2 qualification
A qualification equivalent to grades A*-C at GCSE

Level 3 qualification
A qualification equivalent to grades A*-E at A level

NEET
Not in Education, Employment or Training

Explanation of words and phrases used to describe our evaluations

The words and phrases used in the left hand column below are those that we use to describe our evaluations. The phrases in the right hand column are the more precise explanations.

nearly all	with very few exceptions
Most	90% or more
Many	70% or more
a majority	over 60%
half or around half	close to 50%
a minority	below 40%
Few	below 20%
very few	less than 10%

The remit author and survey team

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