

ANNUAL LECTURE

WALES – A NATION OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- Mae gen i bleser mawr bod yma heno i siarad ynglyn a sut mae addysg, yn enwedig addysg ar gyfer oedolion, wedi'i datblgu yng Nghymru. Rwy'n gobeithio bod y dathliad wedi bod yn llwyddianus a bod pawb wedi'u mwynhau.
- I am very pleased to be here this evening to join in the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the Community University of the Valleys Partnership and to have been asked to deliver the annual lecture.
- I have taken "Wales – a nation of learning communities" as the title of my lecture this evening, which is of interest in a historical sense of how learning through and in communities has developed. It is also of interest in the context of where we are today and informs the argument of why community learning matters – what is its relevance and should it continue?
- A key theme of my lecture tonight will be continuity. We have come a long way but we have never left our roots far behind. As I outline tonight we have always enjoyed strong foundations of community learning. I have

sought to build on strengths and forged developments with the interests of all learners at heart.

- During my time as Minister, I have made much of Wales as a learning country. I would argue that Wales has long been a country where there has been a strong tradition of community learning. We have enjoyed a very personal relationship with the development of learning opportunities. Since the industrial revolution, we have seen adult education as the optimum method of achieving social transformation and community rejuvenation. Whereas the development of community learning was a UK-wide one following the industrial revolution – the experience in Wales, and particularly in the industrial South Wales valleys was more concentrated and intense.
- Historically, we have had a strong sense of community and a strong sense of the importance of learning. I believe that this is as pertinent today as it was in the 19th century, and I would like to explore tonight how this has helped to shape Assembly policy today.
- Indeed, the under-lying ethos of the development of community learning in industrial South Wales was that education was seen as an emancipating

force. Education was a dynamic force – and I believe that it still remains today the key to social equality. What is interesting, and perhaps comes as no surprise, is that the development of adult education, and in particular education at higher level, coincided with fundamental changes in the nature of labour movements and patterns.

- The 19th century saw many rapid changes in Wales. Coal was the catalyst for developments across the UK and the coal industry playing a huge part in defining communities – through mass immigration and transformed Wales from a rural based economy into a heavy-industry based economy. It altered the way of life for many people living in Wales and I believe that today, we are experiencing the legacy of that transformation.
- The 19th century also saw the emergence of our university heritage in Wales with the establishment of the University Colleges– at Aberystwyth, Bangor and Cardiff. These arose from a social recognition of need for institutional parity with those across the border – a form of social legitimacy and acknowledgement of Wales as a country with a strong emerging middle class. These institutions were established with a greater contribution from the local communities than institutions in England and Scotland – it is often touted that they were built with “the pennies of the

poor". We can still see that institutions at the core, today these institutions continue to be deeply rooted in their local communities. Although historically many working people entered the portals of these institutions – they became upward socially mobile and inevitably moved from the communities where they originated. I will come back to this point later.

- At the same time, there were other developments on the adult education front in Wales. Education was seen as the great liberator, a means for talented men to escape from the hard work of manual labour often in appalling conditions. We saw the establishment of various organisations with very different philosophies but with very similar end results.
- The first of these was the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). Established in 1903, its underlying fundamental belief was that adult education equipped the individual for citizenship – that it equipped the individual with the knowledge to play a full and active part in society. No longer was it providing the escape route, but allowing the individual contribute to the community of which they were part. Indeed, the organisation's belief that there was a need for equality of opportunity through open access to education of a university standard holds a

resonance for us today, some 100 years later. This is at the centre of my policy towards widening access.

- Alongside the WEA, we also see the development of what is known as the “Independent Working Class Education” (IWCE). This had a radically different political philosophy at its root and must be seen in the context that of its largely political impetus. The driving force was the radical, socialist young leaders in the South Wales Miners’ Federation. As Keith Davies states in his essay *Classes, Colleges and Communities*:

“As they attempted to seize control of the SWMF and turn it in a more confrontational direction, they sought to use the medium of education to influence the ideas they themselves had come to embrace.”

- Education was seen as the vehicle to influence others – a philosophy that my visit to Aberystwyth last week showed me is still very much alive and kicking! This view was substantially more radical rather than liberal in its origins – with the purpose being very much to educate men and women to raise the entirety of their class – rather than educate them out of it. The important development of the IWCE was the evening class network that it

initiated in the coalfield area in 1909 – an inheritance that exists to this day.

- It was also instrumental in the establishment of libraries in Miners' Halls and Institutes, the creation of cradles of learning prior to the establishment of public libraries in the 1920's. These libraries underpinned the introduction to learning, ideas and literature for many men and women at this time, who would not otherwise have had the opportunity.
- The second important development of the IWCE was the attendance of individual miners at Ruskin College, Oxford and later the Central Labour College (CLC). The primary objective of the CLC was to develop an adult education movement with solely working-class support, which met working class needs, demands and aspirations. The CLC established a lectures-by-post scheme to supplement the growth of local, non-residential colleges throughout the country. This is important, as it provided the opportunity for the working classes in industrial South Wales to access a level of education hitherto undreamed of – a "second chance". Today I support equal access to all. But no one can question the importance of this development at its time.

- Again I agree with Keith Davies, where he states with regard to the influence of both the WEA and the IWCE:

“True, their political visions differed greatly, but their ultimate ends were not so fundamentally dissimilar. In their ways, each was to make a significant contribution to the development of adult education in South Wales.”

- What is obvious to me in setting the historical context of how adult education has emerged and evolved in South Wales, is that adult education has grown **because** of the community, rather than simply in it or because of any outside forces. I am aware that there is an ongoing academic debate regarding the definition of community – what in essence is it? I am happy to use the word in its simplest sense, as defined in the Collins Concise English Dictionary. Here it is defined as “the people living in one locality, a group of people having cultural, religious or other characteristics in common, common ownership”. I identify with the focus on self identification which continues to typify our determination of communities today. Taking this as my starting point, in many ways, the older industries of coal and steel have defined the communities of South Wales. What we have seen over recent decades is that economic restructuring has led to the decline of these older, unsustainable

industries, which has led communities to question how they define themselves, but not to undermine those communities themselves. There is value in something we must fight to protect.

- Importantly, the impact of the Miners' Strike of 1984-85 has led to industrial South Wales redefining itself in the wake of the changing social and economic environment. Indeed, this is not confined to industrial South Wales, as rural communities across Wales also struggle to come to terms with the demand of a changing social and economic environment. I see the role of education very much as enabling these communities to continue to define themselves.
- In direct response to the consequences of the Miners' Strike, we see the emergence of the DOVE Workshop and the evolution of the Community University of the Valleys. It adopts the traditions of the past – using education as the means to adapt to changing circumstances and articulating the community's need for betterment.
- In emphasising the continuity of educational developments in Wales, I would like to quote the opening words of Kenneth O Morgan, spoken at the inaugural lecture of the Community University of the Valleys,

“It is vital, for social and cultural as well as educational reasons, that the university remains in close touch with local grass-roots initiatives within the community.”

- I believe these words are as relevant today as they were ten years ago. There are many schools of thought on the university’s role in wider society. Certainly the interface between the community and the university is complex. However, I believe that the University should in some way reflect the cultural values of the community it serves.
- At the core of my policy for higher education is the belief that a higher education should be accessible to all with the potential to benefit. This has been called into question, where the justification for higher education is increasingly that the world is now a knowledge-driven economy and that only a learning society can survive. Is education the key to economic growth? Governments of all colours and across the world believe that it is. I am not here to argue if it is or is not – I simply wish to state that in the context of a learning community, it is only one part of the jigsaw.

- However, I certainly believe that a university education should not be the preserve of the elite. The opportunity for a higher education should be available to all with the potential to benefit, regardless of social or economic class. This underpins my beliefs of equality and fairness. It is clear to me that equal opportunity strategies will be expedited by the growth of part-time, flexible study and student centred learning, which recognise and responds to the diversity of students' needs and aspirations.
- Taking aside the debate that education is the key to unlock economic growth, I would argue for the intrinsic value of education, both to the individual and communities at large. That is at the heart of a learning country. We want people to learn throughout their careers for their development needs – but those are measured in terms of career objectives as well as personal fulfilment. What do we gain from education, and in particular, higher education? It is too easy to be deflected by the economic argument – economic growth, earning potential and employment stability can be easily measured. However, the intangible value of higher education – the ability to appreciate and the confidence to question are immeasurable. This is not simply the pitting of private returns versus social/economic returns of education. Self-confidence and self-belief add

value to the community and workplace as well as to the individual. Neither should the sense of personal achievement be undervalued. This is linked in with self-belief but I would argue that it convinces individuals not to accept the boundaries that circumstances have placed around them.

- Education is also an iterative process. It feeds as much into the community as the community gets out of it. For me that is very much an end in itself, but it is also a guiding principle behind my education policy.
- And what is the relevance of adult learning, particularly at higher education level, to our communities across Wales? There can be no doubt that communities themselves have identified the need for community learning. I have touched on the emergence of initiatives such as the DOVE Workshop at Banwen, where women responded to changing social and economic practices and identified the real need to re-skill, re-train and re-educate themselves.
- Those pressures exist today. The reality is that Wales, similarly to elsewhere in Europe is facing the challenges of changing working practices, an ageing workforce and advancing technology. The world of work demands different skills and different approaches and certainly

university outreach in the communities provides the route to equipping individuals with the necessary skills. These pressure have been identified in Assembly strategy documents such as *Winning Wales* and programmes such as Communities First have been developed to specifically address these issues in disadvantaged communities. Community learning plays an active part in addressing some of these issues. And these are more than just words. I have personally met with people who have benefited from higher education, when they never expected to be involved. And I have seen those people pass that experience and love of learning on to their families and friends.

- Before moving on to the opportunities that advancing technology offers to the learning community – it is interesting to note that the Carnegie Trust harnessed the use of technology as early as the 1930s to tackle social exclusion in the South Wales valleys. It is easy to imagine the difficulty that the geographical formation presented to the delivery of education in the early decades of the last century. The Trust funded the provision of radio sets to Miners' Institutes and Halls throughout the area, so that local community listening groups could take part in the adult education output broadcast by the BBC.

- This attempt to overcome geographical remoteness and lack of opportunity for study is relevant to us today. Of course, the equipment is different – but the principles are the same. Technology offers opportunities and we need not rely on individuals owning the technology. Community centres provide an important function in allowing adult learners to access PCs, the internet and other aids to learning – once again, a central role for the communities and community resources. These centres provide the support required and indeed, promote community learning in its purest sense.
- This is the point at which I focus on the questions I asked at the start of this lecture. Why does adult learning matter and why should it continue. I consider that it is beyond dispute that devolution has allowed us to focus more clearly on education provision across every sector and across the whole of Wales. Indeed, it is trite but nevertheless true that we are developing policies in Wales, tailor-made for Wales. We can see this quite clearly in our divergence on policy on variable fees for higher education. It is likely that these will be introduced in England from 2006 onwards. I have made a commitment that they will not be introduced during this Assembly Government's lifetime. Of course, I cannot bind further elected Assemblies. Our flagship Assembly Learning Grant is also a clear demonstration of our responding to the needs of Wales.

- As Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, my vision for Wales as "A Learning Country" was articulated in the paving document of the same name in 2001. The document sets out the steps that the Welsh Assembly Government proposes to take – and this is key – in partnership with our local communities to strengthen the foundations for learning.
- The Assembly's Committee for Education and Lifelong Learning undertook a fundamental policy review of higher education and published its findings in January 2002. The Committee heard, as part of the evidence presented, that university community activities were geared to building confidence and bringing people into contact with higher education, either on campus or in the community. The Committee identified lifelong learning as increasingly important because they attract people into higher education, provide learners with new skills and foster a culture of learning that is not confined to one age group.
- We must acknowledge that adult education provides learning opportunities for individuals who would otherwise be barred from accessing higher education and is a doorway to other opportunities and a lifelong relationship with education. The part-time delivery of course is

very definitely the most appropriate form of delivery for adult learners with other responsibilities and commitments.

- I believe that the idea of progression through a structured framework incorporating non-award bearing and award bearing courses with multiple exit points, which was implemented in the 1990's, transformed the delivery of adult education. In my strategy for higher education, *Reaching Higher*, published in March 2002, I stated my ambition that I wanted to see a society where knowledge is valued in its own right, as well as for the benefits of its application.
- The Community University of the Valleys Partnership itself arose from the needs and desires of the community, which it serves. It is a community in the true sense of the word – it is a community of diverse social partners, delivering student negotiated, locally based, student-centred self contained higher education learning opportunities. The Community University aims to provide a learning experience that is flexible, supportive, interesting and meaningful to people's lives.
- As Hywel Francis stated in "*Do Miners Read Dickens?*" *Communities, Universities and a New Beginning*:

“The concept of a Community University with an emphasis on strategic partnerships with employers, trade unions, local government, social movements, communities and above all adult learners is one way forward to address the growing democratic deficit in Wales.”

- The fact that the Partnership is celebrating its 10th anniversary more or less speaks for itself, that it is responding to a strong need in the community. We have not left our Welsh learning traditions behind us.
- More generally, there are challenges facing the higher education sector. I referred earlier to my strategy for higher education in Wales *Reaching Higher*. We are embarking on a road to strengthen the higher education sector, to ensure that the quality of higher education matches any that is delivered anywhere in the world. Higher education does operate on a global basis and we must always be aware of this and take actions that make the sector as competitive as possible – whilst not losing the focus on our communities.
- This is good news for learners – whether they are part-time or full-time because in pursuit of this agenda, institutions are focusing on the delivery

of excellence. Indeed, I believe that the *Reaching Higher* will strengthen the Community of the Valleys Partnership even further – with its partner higher education institutions consolidating their positions in the UK-wide sector.

- My personal belief that the future of adult education in Wales is assured. It has an active role in upskilling individuals so that they can compete more effectively in the labour market as well as its role for personal fulfilment. It also promotes and sustains the community, which it serves and enriches that community for the people who live in it.
- Wales is indeed a nation of learning communities.
- Diolch i bawb an wrando.

