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Engaging Young Men in Learning Barriers and Motivations

A Pilot Study carried out for Community University of the Valleys

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
1 Overview.....	5
2 Methodology.....	5
2.1 Bryncynon Community Revival Project.....	6
2.2 The Catapult Project.....	7
3 Observations from discussions.....	8
3.1 The young mens comments.....	9
4. Recommendations for the future.....	16

Executive Summary.

This work is a pilot study where the overall intention was to draw together summary information to highlight areas for more in depth, longer term study.

The aim of this work was to look at the expressed reasons of young men aged between 13 and 23 for attending youth projects.

In addition, the work aims to draw base line conclusion and identify the barriers to learning of young men aged between 13 and 23, and work to uncover the main motivating or de-motivating forces leading to engagement with youth projects and education / work generally.

The work is a qualitative study, which has used focus groups to draw together base line indications of barriers to learning and reasons for low aspirations and motivation.

The groups interviewed tend to identify youth provision as a social rather than educational tool, where the informal environment provided encouraged them to take interest in some aspects of learning.

The assumption of most of those interviewed was that with the exception of entering the armed forces, they had little to work towards and they would remain in low paid, intermittent work, or on benefit for the greatest part of their working lives.

As such, those taking part expressed few aspirations for their futures, and showed little motivation to improve their overall quality of life. It can be concluded from this pilot stage that the young men taking part did not think it possible to make any changes to their lives.

Those interviewed felt that there was little point in going beyond compulsory education as employment is not available locally. Most would not consider leaving the area to improve their work options.

While most participants claimed that their primary school experience had been positive, they felt that upon entering secondary education, the structure and size of the school system

had alienated them from learning. All felt that their secondary school experience had not provided them with the learning they might have engaged in.

There is a potential for both centres to build on the aspirations, confidence and motivation of their attendees through innovative practice, providing structured learning in an informal and enjoyable manner encouraging engagement and learning through coercion. However, further funding and the building of partnerships with other agencies would be required as a means to achieve this as the examples of the Ladder (Youth) and BeWEHL (Women) projects illustrate.

It is clear from this pilot study that a far more in depth, structured and long term study is required which engages the young men in activities as part of the research process itself. A social action approach would be recommended such as that taken in the BeWEHL project where innovative and dynamic approaches to inclusion and capacity building has had a huge impact on project participants, their confidence, aspirations quality of life and educational attainment. (Pinder, 02)

1 Overview.

This is a small pilot study to identify barriers to learning and inclusion faced by young men aged between 13 and 23.

Specifically the commission was to work with the Catapult Youth Project, a Tredegar Development Trust project and the Bryncynon Community Revival Project, Mountain Ash with the following aims-

- Identify good practice in engaging young men in learning.
- Identify barriers to inclusion in learning and participation faced by young men aged 16 – 25.
- Identify the potential, and motivations for participants in youth development schemes to progress from such schemes into other areas of learning.

Conducted between September and November 2002, this report represents the finding of the work conducted.

1. 1 The Projects

The Bryncynon Project is well established and provides activities for all ages. It also benefits from a small café that is well used and offers a focal point for local people, many of whom often drop in for coffee etc. The building itself is light and airy with a very welcoming atmosphere.

Catapult has run for only 18 months and is therefore still in the early stage of its development, though has already achieved success in attracting people to the centre. It targets all ages and is based in the main Tredegar High street in a converted shop. As it is a fairly new project, plans are in hand to involve interested people in taking part in the décor of the centre, making it more obviously user friendly, creating a sense of ownership and creating comfortable an aesthetically pleasing environment for its activities.

2 Methodology.

The research was originally scheduled to start in August 2002. However, over the summer the Bryncynon Community Revival Project does not provide courses for youth so staff and indeed

project participants were unavailable until September. Although the Catapult project was open for 'drop in facilities' courses were "winding down" and attendance low. As a result, in both target projects contact with project staff and the target groups was delayed, with focus group work delayed until 26th September at Bryncynon and 7th October at Catapult.

As an incentive to encourage the young men to take part in the group discussion, they were invited to take part in free confidence and team building sessions, including activities such as quad biking. The sessions were held independently for both projects; however, in hindsight it may have been a good idea to arrange the activities with participants from both Bryncynon and Catapult together, as there could have been competition between the two projects and possibly a greater incentive to attend the focus group sessions.

Additionally, having youths from both areas together could have provided the opportunity to observe any comparisons between the two groups and the commonalities shared between them.

2.1 Bryncynon Community Revival Project

The focus groups at Bryncynon were arranged into 3 sessions and took place over two days. The length of the meetings varied in time from 45 minutes to 90 minutes.

To account for the different interests, different levels of maturity and potential different experiences held by different age groups they were arranged according to age, these being –

Age (years)	Number attending
13 – 15	7
15 – 17	5
18 – 23	8

Sessions were very informal with the first meeting (18 – 23 year olds) conducted in a recreation room away from distractions. Interviewees sat on easy chairs, with coffee provided and smoking allowed. Two members of the Project staff sat in on the interviews. Although there was concern about project staff observing the meeting, as perhaps participants would not be as open in their

presence, the interviewees appeared more relaxed with them there and it is felt that their presence was of benefit.

All sessions commenced with a series of very general questions such as asking how often they used the facilities, what they used and how they benefited from the activities provided. Once they started to feel comfortable more in-depth questions about their school and work experience as well as their hopes and aspirations were asked.

Unfortunately, the key to this room was mislaid, so the other meetings took place in a classroom and computer study suite. Due to the lack of space in these rooms, furniture could not be moved to provide an informal seating arrangement, so the interviews in the classroom took place across tables, which was not ideal. In the computer suite it was easier to arrange the chairs in a semi-circle, which worked better. However, as these rooms were on the first floor at the front of the building, looking out of the window was a distraction, even after the blinds were closed. Once again a member of the Project Staff sat with the group.

2.2 Catapult

Due to the summer break and pressures on staff resources, there was not enough time to arrange separate focus group sessions for different age groups at Catapult. Although Catapult had contacted a number of centre users by putting up posters in the window, few users in total turned up for the sessions. (Good weather rather than any lack of enthusiasm or support from Catapult staff was felt to be the cause of the low turn out.)

As a result, a single group of nine participants was identified by the development worker at the Catapult project covering the whole age range. The group included individuals aged from between 13 and 21. While some were in school or college, some were working and the remainder unemployed.

The diversity of ages, levels of maturity and different experience of participants naturally had the effect of stilted conversation and limited the potential of the group to bounce ideas and views off each other. The group sat in the evening, meeting on one occasion. The meeting lasted for around 90 minutes but late-

comers (from the amusement arcade 'over the road') joined the groups and this also caused conversation to be fragmented.

The participants sat on three-piece suites, in a large upstairs room, which was a non-smoking area. The room had an open stairway and the acoustics were very poor. In hindsight, it is felt that it would have been better to choose a private room, more conducive to focus group activity. Project Staff did not sit in on the interviews and refreshments were not available.

Catapult had requested the interviewees to be asked if they would like to smoke within the building, instead of having to stand outside during their regular sessions. They also wanted to know if there would be any interest in attending more formal sessions on Maths and English. Apart from these questions, more general questions were asked such as how often participants used the project, what they liked about it and what they would like to see provided. Later more in-depth questions were asked about their hopes and aspirations.

3 Observations from discussions.

Due to project timescale constraints and difficulty in arranging meetings, due in part to the summer break and staff commitments, the Focus Group session at Catapult did not work as well as at Bryncynon. As all age groups were involved, the session did not flow, as those in school became restless when the older ones were talking and the older ones appeared bored when the younger ones were speaking.

Although the timescales given for this project were tight, focus groups were deemed to be the best way of obtaining information and to draw in as many views towards young men's motivations / aspiration as possible in the time allowed. In hindsight, it is felt that one to one informal unstructured interviews of about 10 to 15 minutes would have worked better and possibly produced more relevant information. It was evident that unstructured one to one interviews would have worked better with the younger age group, as their attention span in a group setting was short. In addition, as their peers were in the room they tended to compete against one another to say the most outrageous thing. An example of this came in Bryncynon, when asked if there was anything they would like Bryncynon to provide that wasn't currently on offer one replied

he would like to see street-fighting (this being said purely for effect and to get a response from his peers, which of course he did.) The shy ones remained silent, perhaps fearing they would be made fun of later.

In hindsight, given the experience of this pilot study, and assuming focus groups were used to gather information, it would have been better to hold three focus groups at the Catapult project as in Bryncynon. This would have improved opportunities to draw comparisons between the groups. Alternatively, informal interviews (e.g. over a game of table tennis) with those who did attend may have allowed the individuals involved to participate in conversation more readily.

The next section illustrates some of the comments of the young men; discussion goes on to draw conclusions from the investigation as a whole.

3.1 The young men's comments.

A surprising outcome was that without exception, all the boys said they enjoyed or had enjoyed their experience in primary school.

'It was more fun'. (Catapult)

'... stayed in one classroom'. (Bryncynon)

Many felt that the security and enjoyment they found at Primary school changed greatly when they entered the large and impersonal Comprehensive system.

'It's stinking, vinegar, that's all you can smell init?'. (Catapult)

'I just don't get on with the teachers'. (Bryncynon)

'...computers – my 'ead do go'. (Bryncynon)

'I gotta walk 4 miles just to go to science'. (Bryncynon)

The teachers at comprehensives were felt to be unhelpful and too much time was wasted moving from classroom to classroom between lessons where participants would become bored and 'mess around'. As a result truanting was very common among

respondents, with local parks in both Bryncynon and Tredegar being popular places to 'hang out' smoking and drinking during school hours.

'I just don't like the way the teachers do talk to you'. (Bryncynon)

Most of the young men interviewed appeared to be lacking in motivation having no clear view of their future and little in the way of aspirations when asked what they would like to do in the future.

'anything' (Bryncynon),

'nothing' (Bryncynon),

'buying and selling' (Catapult),

'I see myself in the same spot in five years time'. (Bryncynon).

However, one had decided to join the forces as a way of seeing the world and gaining experience.

'Join the Army, go as a driver. My father'd want me to go in the Army. See a bit of the world like. Sign up for three years and if I don't like it.....' (Catapult)

One of the participants had previously left the forces to rejoin his girlfriend. However, in his comments it seemed to some extent he regretted this decision.

'I stayed on at school, did A Levels. I went in the RAF. I was married and couldn't stay away from the wife. I still wanna go back in'. (Bryncynon)

Most of those taking part assumed that they might never find work in the area, or, their working lives would be fragmented, made up of unskilled, employment, perhaps even on a part-time basis, on short-term contracts, and with poor financial reward.

The young men's opportunities for employment are recognised as very limited in the area.

'There's not enough jobs, just lots of part-time jobs'. (Catapult).

'I can't get a job within 15 miles of where I live. I've applied but they don't take me on'. (Bryncynon).

Participants recognising that many of the jobs available are in factories, on short-term contracts, working on production lines and usually obtained through employment agencies, which limited their long and short-term opportunities. Relatedly wages offered are low and when taking into account work expenses such as travel and lunch costs many felt there was little value in working, and little value in 'having an education'.

Although the participants stated that part-time employment is often available, (e.g. in the supermarkets), however, for those aged under eighteen the wages are extremely poor.

'In the Jobcentre there's not enough jobs, only lots of part-time jobs for a few quid'. (Catapult)

In addition to the perception of low financial gain for work, given the nature of agency work they felt they were likely to be working alongside permanent workers doing the same job with none of the benefits such as holiday or sickness pay, which makes for insecure employment with the threat of being laid off at any time.

'Agencies don't 'elp, they lay you off'. (Bryncynon)

'You're on the minimum wage next to someone on £5.00 per hour, doing exactly the same thing. It makes you look small like'. (Bryncynon)

None of the participants appeared to think of work as anything other than insecure, low paid and low skilled, and none appeared to be motivated or aware that improving their education could benefit them.

Relatedly, rather than seeing work as having the potential to have positive benefits on their quality of life, work appeared to be seen more in the Marxian model of 'slave labour' and oppression. One of the respondents referred to such places as "cardboard prisons", and he described the factories as generally pre-fabricated 'sheds' on local industrial estates with little or no daylight.

'I worked in a cardboard prison. Making chairs'. (Catapult)

'If the Jobcentre offer you a factory job, you gotta take it. I've done that, yeah (taken a factory job), but you can only stick it for so long'. (Bryncynon)

'.....dead end job in a factory, it's just cheap labour'. (Bryncynon).

Most respondents were found to be totally lacking in motivation and far too accepting of the perception that they might never work, and/or, their working lives would be fragmented, made up of unskilled, employment, perhaps even on a part-time basis, on short-term contracts, and with poor financial reward.

'Where's the motivation? What's the point of being in work, [and then] comin' home and no money?' (Bryncynon).

Lack of transport or reliable public transport was also identified by participants as problematic, with few having cars or access to their own transport. One participant had to give up a job he enjoyed in a Cardiff hotel as the local bus company changed the timetables. This meant that he would arrive in Cardiff two hours before his shift was due to start, and if he was on a late shift he had no means of getting home. Before the timetable changes there was also a problem of unreliability with buses not turning up or being cancelled without notice.

'Buses are rubbish, they stop at 6'. (Bryncynon)

'We need a good bus service, on time, all the time like'. (Bryncynon).

For those who had given thought to a working future, the jobs they aimed for, with the exception of the Armed Forces, tended to be concentrated in the low skilled and manual areas. Many expressed a wish to become builders or mechanics, but would prefer to learn their trade *'on the job'*, earning and learning at the same time.

Local colleges were deemed too big, or too much like school and some prevented them from doing the courses they chose as they had few, if any qualifications or thought of themselves as *'too thick'* to achieve.

'I tried to go on a Mechanics course, they said you need 5 GCSEs, I've only got one. I'm dull'. [Much laughter]. (Bryncynon).

Where some had re-entered college they continued to experience difficulties in concentration and engagement with the courses.

'[I] Got chucked out'. (Catapult)

Many stated that they would not consider going back to formal 'institutionalised' education.

'I wouldn't go, no'. (Bryncynon)

It is here that their comments towards the work of the youth projects illustrated the value of both as a resource. All felt that the provision offered by both facilities was welcoming and although they sometimes were bored, the projects were a valuable resource to socialise, meet friends and stay off the streets. Despite being drawn on the sort of courses they would like to take, none of the participants commented other than to state that they would like courses in manual skills such as car mechanics and building.

As is common everywhere, the lack of available apprenticeships was evident and the governments 'New Deal' was felt to be a far from ideal alternative, causing further de - motivation. In particular one participant on a young persons scheme stated that although he did not like the work he was given, he remained with the employer as he wanted to work if he could. However, eventually he was laid off with his age given (therefore employers being unable to claim subsidy) as the primary reason.

'I was on a work placement making hoses. I stuck it, but then at the end they told me I was too old to have the job'. (Bryncynon)

For some participants the greatest motivation found during the discussion sessions was to be able claim long-term sickness benefit. This would, it was felt, be a viable option to low-paid employment, as not only would they receive a regular income, their housing costs would also be met. They would also have plenty of free time available to see their mates.

'Been bad I 'ave. Done my back in, worked for four years, (painting and decorating). Fell on a fish tank.... gotta book, I 'ave.

You 'ave to pay your gas, electric, food, it soon goes, that's why people do hobbles'. (Bryncynon)

'You need a £300 a week job. They offer you £140 by the time you pay expenses you find you're better off on the dole. Try explaining that to the Jobcentre'. (Bryncynon).

In common with the findings of Lloyd Jones (2002), the young men showed a definite reluctance to look outside their local area to find work. Moving out of the area all together to find work was not considered, indeed for some participants even travelling to a nearby town or valley for a social purpose was considered a big 'trip'.

'No, no chance, leave everything behind, friends, family? No'. (Bryncynon)

'I wouldn't move from Aberdare'. (Bryncynon)

'I like it 'ere'. (Catapult)

Many of the older male generation, who would normally provide the young men with role models and examples of expectations, have been unemployed over the long term. This appears to have resulted in the young men internalising unemployment and low achievement as a way of life, with their own experience of education and work reinforcing this view. The role models in the area, including family members, tend to underpin the lack of motivation and aspiration found in the young men as it is considered tenable to live quite adequately on the dole or on sickness benefit.

However, in contrast to this at Bryncynon, those taking part in the KEYSTART project enjoyed attending, mostly because the Youth Leader they were assigned to was *'nuts'*. Participants claimed they liked him because he did not treat them like kids, but as equals, thus he became a positive role model and had their respect.

'He's like one of us'. (Bryncynon).

All though the provision of both the centres was felt to be 'good' and attending worthwhile in general the participants spoke of them in terms of '*somewhere warm to go*' '*to chat with your mates*', '*meet girls*' and to generally take advantage of the free use of the facilities.

'[IT] Keeps us off the streets init... 'It's warm'. (Catapult).

'Good for meeting people'. (Bryncynon).

'We're with our friends'. (Catapult).

As previously stated, although attempts were made to draw them on the activities they would like to engage with, their comments did not venture beyond the current provision of Play-stations, computer and table-tennis, which seemed to be the most popular options.

From the exploratory work conducted with the groups it is clear that both centres offer them a valued service which to some extent helps them to overcome their worst feeling of social isolation, providing central points for meeting, chatting and sharing experiences. However, this pilot phase has not been able to clarify to any great extent, what courses or activities beyond those stated in previous sections the young men would like to engage in. Rather and provisionally, from this study, it appears that at least on the surface of it, it is this social amenity that is of most value to those attending the centres.

What is clear is that the young men do respond to a certain style of delivery where youth workers are seen as being one of them, rather than paid providers. Overall, from this preliminary finding, it is felt that there is a potential for both centres to provide both activities and work leading to more formal outcomes if this reaction to the personality, and openness of the facilitator is built upon. Projects elsewhere have had great success in encouraging participants into formal learning to degree level, through inclusion, providing a high degree of support breaking through both structural and perceived barriers to inclusion in learning. (See Pinder, 01, 02).

4. Recommendations for the future.

This pilot project aimed to identify some base line indications for further work with young men within the two centres. To some extent due to the reticence of the participants to comment on the work of the centres over and above the superficial, together with the limitations placed on the study itself, this work has been unsuccessful in achieving this. However, the study has identified that the participants have the potential to respond to a delivery format, which overtly includes, values and encourages them.

It is evident that as the longer established Bryncynon project has gone some way to provide this type of delivery through the youth worker involved in KEYSTART, and it is suggested that further work could look towards taking a Social Action approach to provision and delivery in both centres, as has been successful elsewhere.

For example, one of the most successful projects in the Welsh Valley communities has been the People and Work Units 'Ladder Project' commencing in 1997. The five-year project¹ set out to work with disadvantaged young people aged 16 to 25 years. This action research project was designed to develop an understanding of the needs of these young people and how these needs might be addressed. From 1997 to 2002, the Ladder Project worked with 1361 young people.

The Ladder Workers were all employed from within the community, some had qualifications, some had work experience, some had not, but all were unemployed. These people therefore, had a good knowledge and a strong awareness of the needs of their community and demonstrated the commitment to help others. In addition using people from within the community increased the economic potential of the community itself in addition to the confidence, well-being and motivation of the young people employed.

Ladder Workers became fully involved with the young people in their day-to-day lives, for example accompanying them on visits to the doctors, social workers and housing associations providing

¹ led by Sarah Lloyd Jones

necessary support to enable participation in all areas of social well-being.

'They sat with young people in classes at college, helped them find childminders and cope with being away from their children, negotiated with employers for work placements and sometimes successfully intervened when there was a danger of a young person being sacked.'
(Lloyd Jones, 2002:93).

In addition to providing and supporting training, education and employment opportunities, The Ladder process works to assist in helping young people to become active citizens through the 'hand-holding' approach of their allocated Ladder Worker. As the Ladder Workers have themselves first hand experience of the same difficulties and barriers they are able to empathise and provide the necessary understanding and needed support from a bottom up model.

The Bettws Womens Health Education and Lifestyle Project (BeWEHL) has gained an extremely high success rate in engaging, retaining and enabling women with low confidence, aspirations and motivation to gain qualification to degree level through a social action approach. The BeWEHL model is felt to be of particular significance here given the participants comments that the centres provide them with a social outlet. It works through coercion, by providing a venue where women can meet to chat in the first instance, by leading them slowly into identifying for themselves an issue of importance to the group, then leading them through the learning process, very informally. It offers a structure where, in the first instance women feel they are having fun and chatting rather than learning. There is a potential for an adaptation of this model working in partnership with more formal education providers and community groups having a strategic role in breaking through the individuals lack of motivation and confidence, leading to positive outcomes.

There is an obvious lack of motivation and lack of aspirations amongst all the participants. None felt that realistically they had a part, or opportunity to earn a 'decent wage' in the immediate area, and few expressed a wish to look further a field for employment or improved access to the workforce or education.

It is obvious that those who attend both projects do gain social support and an identifying point to their day, however as those interviewed feel that there is little to be gained from working, and little opportunity to work, traditional courses are not considered as relevant to their futures. Rather, they expressed a view that they would be interested in manual and / or semi-skilled work. This type of work could be adapted to personal use as well as providing interest and would be more relevant to their needs and their perceived abilities. Bricklaying in particular was mentioned across the groups as of interest to them.

As reflected by the above findings, most of the boys' interests lie in manual and practical skills, rather than formal accreditation. There may be an avenue here where courses leading to NVQs can be provided in an informal setting to help them achieve credit for practical work. In turn this may lead to increased confidence and aspirations and in the long run participation in the labour market.

There is a need to improve the motivation and aspirations of the people interviewed. Repeatedly, and in most groups, lack of transport was cited as a barrier to work. The ability to drive, and own a car was seen as absolutely necessary to work, however, the costs involved in gaining a driving licence and purchasing a car were cited as prohibitive and public transport unreliable and expensive. The jobs on offer, they said, often did not pay enough to cover transport and lunch costs, over an above what is available on Jobseekers Allowance. Most participants felt that they would never realistically be able to afford and maintain their own car under present circumstances.

There are obvious comparisons that can be drawn between the Bryncynon and Catapult projects. Both provide a secure, relaxed and trusted environment to talk with peers, take part in activities and learn new skills in an informal setting. Undoubtedly, from participants' comments, both projects play a central part in providing alternative activities for young men and preventing the boredom that can lead to involvement in crime and vandalism.

In future work it is recommended that as far as possible investigation over the summer period is avoided as project staff and centre users are often unavailable at this time.

As a pilot study, findings are provisional. However, while on the whole, the outcomes might be seen as negative in terms of future provision and inclusion, this is not necessarily so. Future resources should concentrate in working with the young men to provide innovative, and experimental ways to encourage participation. Such work needs to be resourced over the long term (5 to 10 years) with the aim of building a model of good practice and inclusion.

Best Practice elsewhere

The People and Work Unit are due to start a new project called 'Build-It' in January 2003. It aims to engage young adults in acquiring a trade such as bricklaying or plumbing, providing them with the necessary training, employment and paying them a living wage. Bearing in mind the findings of this project with many of the young men expressing a desire to work in building developing this type of training approach might benefit the communities served by the Bryncynon and Catapult Projects.

The Arts Factory in the Rhondda is an example of another successful community led project. Here members can learn about graphic design, building a website and developing community art projects in addition to receiving help and guidance with job search activities. Once again training is provided in an informal student led environment.

In St. Mellons Cardiff a church group has recently bought and converted a double-decker bus into a mobile youth centre. The bus and its Youth Workers tour the estate on a number of evenings offering bored young people the opportunity to try their hand at playing the decks, or playing instruments, thus preventing these young people aimlessly wandering the estate and perhaps getting into trouble. The project is very much in its infancy but is already proving to be very popular.

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