

Section 2

Sector summaries: Further education colleges

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Context

In January 2019, there were 12 colleges providing further education courses in Wales.

Many of the further education colleges are large multi-sited institutions that cover a wide geographical area. A minority of colleges, such as Grwp Llandrillo Menai, NPTC Group and Coleg Cambria, operate under a group structure with multiple sites operating under separate college names under the overall control of one further education institution.

This year, we inspected two further education colleges. We continue to visit all colleges not inspected this year as part of routine further education link inspector visit arrangements. These visits review progress against the recommendations of previous inspections.

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Standards

Standards are excellent in one of the colleges inspected and good in the other. Where standards are excellent, learners demonstrate an exemplary ability to work independently and in groups, and to develop valuable skills and knowledge. Many exhibit particularly strong analytical and problem-solving skills, produce work of a consistently high standard, and demonstrate strong practical skills.

Where standards are judged as good, most learners make at least sound progress in lessons and produce work of a suitable standard. Many acquire new knowledge and skills. A few learners demonstrate strong analytical skills and in-depth understanding of important concepts. For example, AS chemistry learners use their knowledge of mass spectrometry to determine atomic structure. However, a few learners do not know what they need to do to improve their learning and standard of work.

A levels in sixth forms and further education colleges (Estyn, 2018a)

This reports on standards, provision and leadership of GCE Advanced Levels (A levels) in school sixth forms and further education colleges. It considers a range of factors, such as standards at A level and how these are measured, the quality of teaching and assessment, the nature of the A level curriculum offer and strategic leadership, including partnership working.



Across both colleges, many vocational learners develop valuable practical skills. For example, learners in hairdressing and theatrical make-up demonstrate strong creativity and produce a consistently high standard of practical work.

Many learners on English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses make significant progress in their English literacy skills. A few Welsh-speaking learners actively develop their use of the language and are supported well by their teachers. For example, beauty learners give bilingual presentations, and healthcare learners undertake work experience on a Welsh-medium hospital ward. Overall however, only a very few learners use their Welsh language skills regularly in lessons.

Where standards are excellent, learners achieve outstanding grades at the end of their courses relative to their prior GCSE attainment. In one college, the proportion of A level learners achieving A*-A, A*-B and A*-C grades is high, as is the attainment of high grades for vocational qualifications.

In both colleges, most learners from deprived backgrounds, minority ethnic learners and learners with learning difficulties or disabilities make strong progress relative to their starting points and achieve consistently high success rates.



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Wellbeing and attitudes to learning

Wellbeing and attitudes to learning are excellent in one of the colleges and good in the other. Nearly all learners feel safe and free from harassment and bullying at college. Many have a clear understanding of making healthy lifestyle choices and the importance of good hygiene, diet and fitness.

Where wellbeing and attitudes to learning are excellent, many learners develop highly effective work skills and behaviours. For example, learners participating in external placements and skills competitions develop very strong problem-solving skills, determination and resilience that support their career aspirations and help progression into employment or further study.

During their time at college, most learners gain an understanding of ethical, global and moral issues. They particularly value the multicultural and inclusive ethos of the colleges. Learners respect diversity very well and are highly supportive of each other. They feel valued and respected regardless of their faith, ethnic, or socio-economic background.

Most learners enjoy college life. They are ambitious and demonstrate a positive and enthusiastic attitude to their learning. Most are confident and considerate when interacting with their peers and staff in sessions and around the college.

Many learners develop valuable leadership skills through participation in activities such as peer tutoring, mentoring, charity fundraising, enrichment programmes, enterprise events and community projects. For example, ESOL learners organise food collections for local food banks and hair and beauty learners provide treatments for patients at a local hospital. A few learners demonstrate excellent leadership skills when undertaking student ambassador and course representative roles. Through these activities, learners develop confidence, decision-making and wider employability skills.

Teaching and learning experiences

Teaching and learning experiences are good in both of the colleges inspected. In both colleges, leaders have a very clear and strategic approach to planning their provision and the extent to which it helps learners to progress successfully into employment or higher education. In particular, they draw on strong links with employers, higher education institutions and their local communities to plan and develop the curriculum well.

The outcome of this approach is a broad range of courses that provide learners with clear progression routes into further and higher education as well as supporting entry into an extensive range of employment and training opportunities. The range of options available to learners includes specialist subjects and vocational pathways that are not widely available elsewhere. One of the colleges is also working well with local partners to keep waiting times for enrolment onto ESOL programmes to a minimum.



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The colleges provide useful work experience and work-related education for learners on vocational courses, either with employers or through college facilities such as commercial salons, retail outlets and restaurant facilities. In addition, learners aspiring to progress to university to study subjects such as medicine and law benefit from valuable opportunities to engage with professionals and academics in these fields. Overall however, opportunities for A level learners to take part in work experience placements are limited.

Nearly all teachers have up-to-date subject knowledge and experience. Most use a range of approaches and resources well, including digital materials, to engage learners' interest and develop their knowledge, understanding and skills. In practical vocational sessions, many teachers challenge learners to develop industry specific and wider employability skills. For example, public services teachers use realistic fitness training scenarios to develop learners' leadership skills and, in media and information technology, teachers give worthwhile live briefs to learners, such as recording live music for the radio.

Many teachers plan their lessons well and organise engaging activities to help learners develop their knowledge, understanding and skills progressively. A few teachers do not provide enough opportunities for learners to discuss and debate issues or consider alternative viewpoints. A minority of teachers do not use questioning sufficiently well to stretch and challenge learners, for example to challenge perceptions or encourage counter-arguments.

Many teachers provide learners with valuable verbal feedback in lessons and a majority set them useful targets. Many also provide useful and constructive written feedback, including an appropriate focus on learners' literacy skills. A few teachers do not give learners effective guidance to help them improve their work and few learners are aware of their short-term targets, especially in relation to improving their literacy or numeracy skills. As a result, these learners are unclear about what they need to do to improve their work.

Both colleges have appropriate pathways for learners needing to re-sit mathematics and English GCSE examinations. However, this provision is not consistently good enough, especially in mathematics. Overall, there is a need to improve the planning and evaluation of how learners develop literacy, numeracy and digital skills through their vocational programmes.

Both colleges offer useful 'Iaith ar Waith' courses for learners following vocational programmes. They also work well to implement useful initiatives such as providing Welsh-medium pastoral support or Welsh Baccalaureate sessions, and hosting bilingual subject conferences to support the very few learners who previously attended Welsh-medium secondary schools. In general, only a few teachers provide opportunities for learners to develop their Welsh language skills.

Cardiff and Vale College

Cardiff and Vale College embeds employer-linked work-related education into its vocational courses. All vocational learners have the opportunity to take part in 'real, not just realistic' work-related activities formally linked into their programmes of study. This helps learners develop valuable personal, employability and leadership skills.

For more information, please read our [case study](#)



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Care, support and guidance

Care, support and guidance are good in both of the colleges inspected. The colleges have effective arrangements to help potential learners understand the opportunities that they offer and how individual support needs will be met. They provide useful information and advice about provision to help potential learners make informed choices. Learners benefit from being able to attend open events, taster sessions and guidance interviews at various times throughout the year.

College staff have developed strong links with schools, and learners with prior statements of special educational needs are supported well. Staff make good use of the information they receive about learners to help put specialist arrangements in place and provide assistive technology where necessary. Examples of this support include the provision of a customised chair, specialist support workers and a sign language interpreter.

Staff track the progress of learners with other support needs regularly and there are effective links between specialist support teams, pastoral staff and teachers. This enables support to be responsive to changes in learner needs. The colleges have effective systems to monitor attendance, progress and behaviour of all learners. A minority of staff do not monitor and challenge punctuality well enough and the effectiveness of target setting is also variable, especially in relation to learners' personal development.

Wellbeing staff in specialist learning support centres and across the colleges provide a wide range of helpful and easily accessible services to support learners. For example, counselling services help to support learners with mental health and emotional wellbeing needs, although waiting lists for appointments are sometimes too long.

In one college, work with local community groups is particularly successful in engaging learners who are hard to reach. For example, provision within minority ethnic communities is extensive. Other initiatives to improve parents' numeracy skills, enable better identification and support of young carers and widen participation in college provision and regional networks for more able learners are also effective. In the other college, support for learners who are aiming to progress to higher education is particularly strong, and many learners take part in worthwhile community volunteering activities, such as sports coaching in local schools and youth groups.

Both colleges have established a strong multicultural ethos, and staff help learners to understand issues such as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. This encourages learners to work together in a respectful and mutually supportive manner.

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Leadership and management

Leadership and management are excellent in one of the colleges and good in the other. Where leadership and management are excellent, the principal and senior leaders apply the college’s distinctive ‘servant leadership’ principles particularly well. This approach promotes a harmonious multi-faith and multi-cultural environment and secures sustained high standards.

Where leadership and management are good, senior leaders have a clear vision that is highly focused on meeting the education, training and business needs of the local community and city region. The college’s partnership arrangements with employers, local authorities, schools and community groups are exceptionally strong and impact on economic growth and skills development within the region.

In both colleges, the chief executive or principal is well supported by the governing body. Governors take an active role in shaping their college’s strategic direction and providing appropriate support, scrutiny and challenge. They monitor the performance of the college effectively.

College leaders are ambitious for the colleges and their learners. They have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and provide effective strategic leadership. Middle leaders benefit from targeted training and professional development opportunities to develop their leadership experience and help them undertake their roles effectively. This enables them to play a proactive role in monitoring and improving the quality of provision in their departments.

Colleges have a wide range of practices to support the professional development of their staff. These include valuable college-wide development activities and tailored programmes for individual staff. One college focuses its professional learning on six clear pedagogical principles of challenge, explanation, modelling, practice, feedback and questioning. It has also developed a useful online ‘learning observatory’ of teaching and development resources, including video of effective practice across the college. The other college has identified clear and widely-understood key priorities for professional learning as leadership, inspiring teachers and commercial business support. In both colleges, teaching observation processes and appraisal systems link effectively to college priorities and the identification of professional development needs.

St David’s Sixth Form College

College leaders at St David’s Sixth Form College use the servant leader methodology to develop highly effective, engaged teams of staff that work together to secure outstanding outcomes by learners. This supportive leadership approach models and promotes professional values and behaviours that secure college-wide improvements, including strong collaboration between staff members.

For more information, please read our **case study**



St David’s Sixth Form College

St David’s Sixth Form College’s professional development work improves teaching through an emphasis on observation, deep self-reflection, coaching and collaboration. This approach fosters a culture whereby staff strive for excellence and engage positively in activities to improve the quality of their teaching and help learners reach their full potential.

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Where arrangements for quality improvement are excellent, the college's self-evaluation processes at all levels are comprehensive and robust. They use well designed criteria to arrive at secure judgements in a transparent and self-critical manner. These arrangements help to inform detailed and effective improvement plans. Overall, the college's cohesive leadership approach across all levels has helped it sustain strong outcomes over time.

College leaders demonstrate strong understanding of resource planning and manage resources well. They undertake significant capital investments to ensure that their estate is fit for purpose and forms a stimulating learning environment.

Follow-up activity

Neither of the colleges inspected this year requires follow-up activity. No specific follow-up visits to consider further education provision in colleges took place this year.

