

Post-16 education and training

Post-16 reform

As well as the reforms in compulsory education, post-compulsory education and training (PCET) is also undergoing a period of change following the Hazelkorn report 'Towards 2030: A Framework for Building a World-Class Post Compulsory Education System for Wales' (2016) and the subsequent technical consultation 'Public Good and a Prosperous Wales – the next steps' (Welsh Government, 2018d).

The resultant reform will, subject to legislation, establish the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) as a single, strategic authority responsible for overseeing all aspects of post-compulsory education and training by 2023. The rationale for setting up the Commission is to strengthen and simplify the post-16 sector in Wales to make learning opportunities more relevant and responsive to the needs of learners. It will be important that these reforms allow the post-16 opportunities and qualifications to build on the new Curriculum for Wales for compulsory education.

As well as being the regulator and funder for both further education (FE) and higher education (HE) institutions, the commission will be responsible for apprenticeships, adult learning and mainstream school sixth form delivery through local authorities. In addition, the commission will be responsible for Welsh Government funded higher level research and innovation and regulate quality of education and training in the tertiary education, training and research sectors in Wales.

Curriculum and learning experiences in post-compulsory education and training

Nearly all learners progress from school to access A levels, vocational courses or apprenticeships in schools, colleges or work-based learning providers (Welsh Government, 2017d). However, depending on where a young person lives in Wales, there are differences in the opportunities they can access in terms of choice, level of study and language medium.

In a few cases, there are strong working relationships between schools, colleges and work-based learning providers. However, incomplete information and advice remains a significant barrier to pupils in making informed choices from the full range of post-compulsory education and training options available.

Strategic planning and delivery of 14-19 provision is variable across colleges and local authorities. Funding arrangements for 14-19 provision are complex and the most effective colleges have good communication and relationships with schools and local authorities to make sure that their offer matches local needs. In many cases, committed staff and individual relationships drive how provision is developed rather than a formalised commitment at strategic level. In the best examples, 14-19 provision is part of the college's or local authority's strategic planning, and there are well-established links between the college, the local authority and schools. For example, at one large college group, the principal of each constituent college site has direct responsibility for 14-19 provision and has good links with a counterpart at the local authority. In partnerships with local authorities in its area, there is a dedicated and jointly-funded link co-ordinator with office space at the college, to liaise and manage day-to-day activity.

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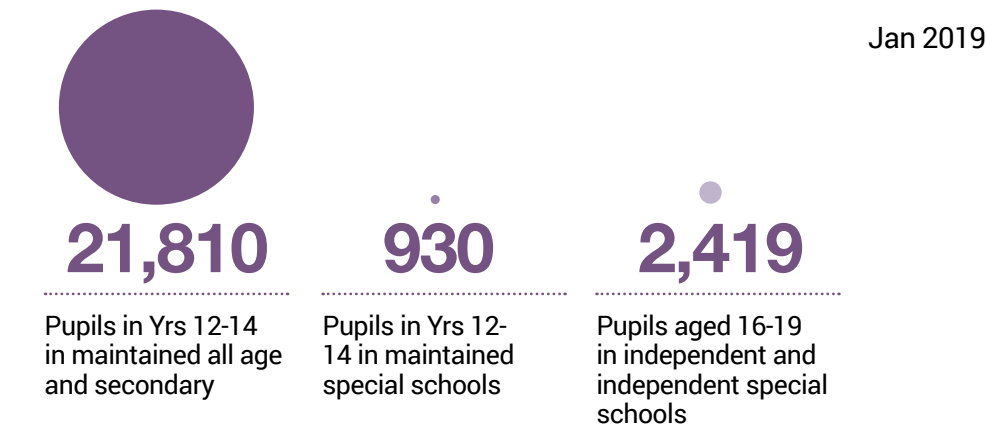


Figure 15: Numbers in post-16 provision in Wales

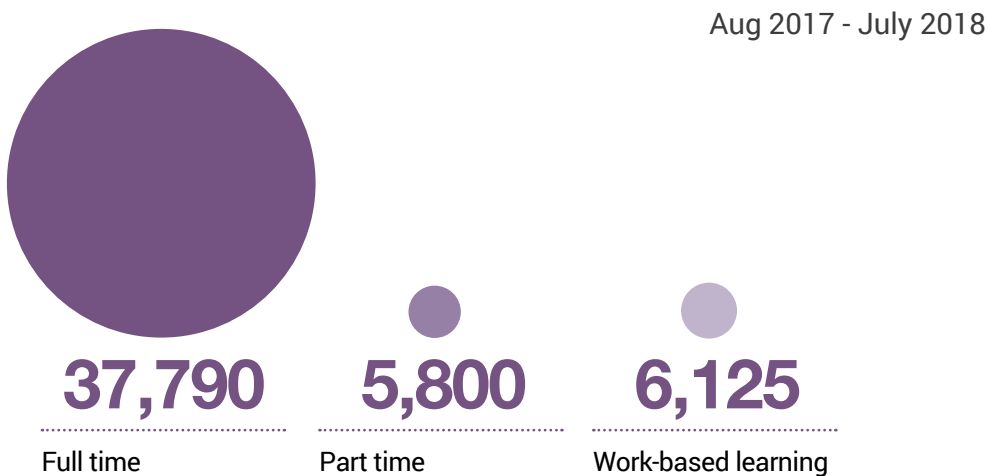


Figure 16: Further education colleges unique learners - up to and including age 19 at the start of the academic year

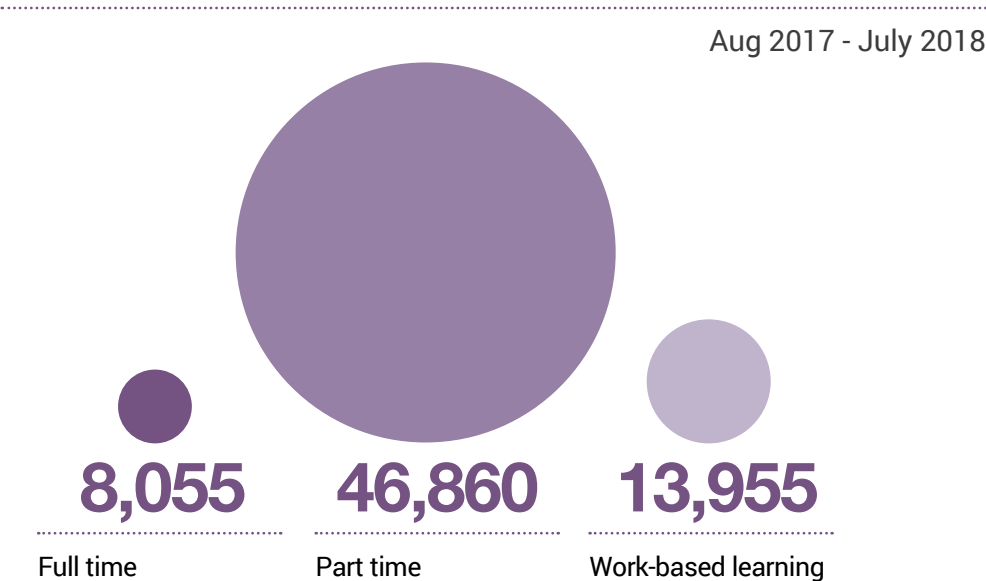


Figure 17: Further education colleges unique learners - up to and including age 19 at the start of the academic year

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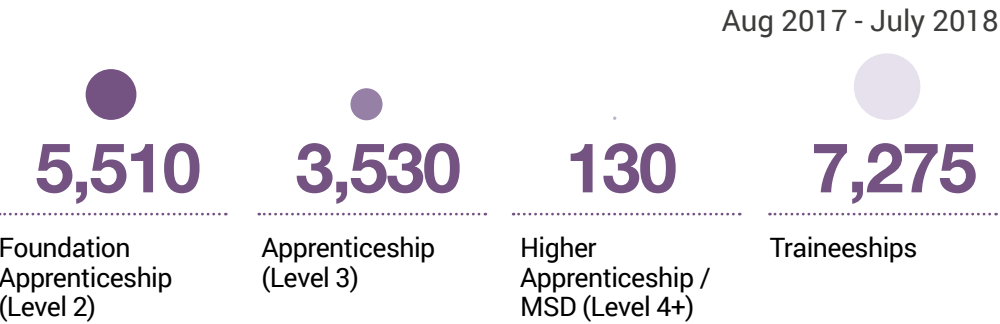


Figure 18: Work-based learning unique learners - up to and including age 19 at the start of the academic year

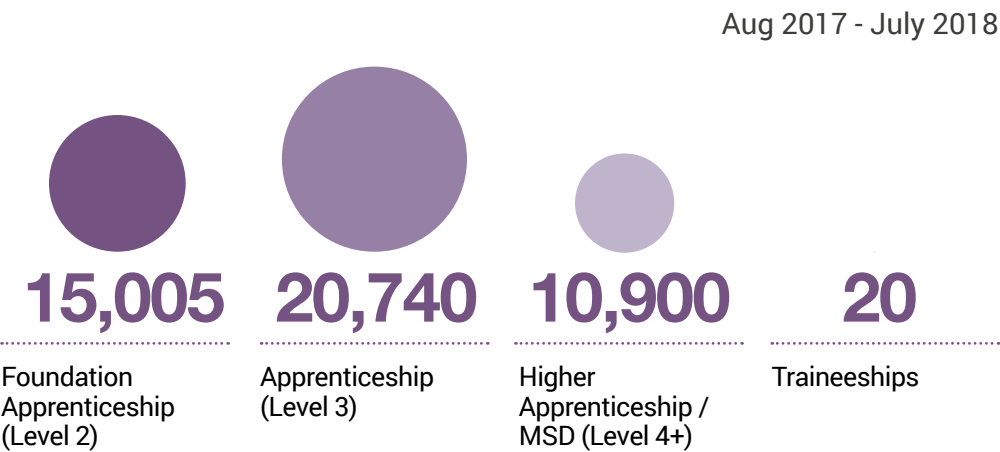


Figure 19: Work-based learning unique learners - age 20 and over at the start of the academic year

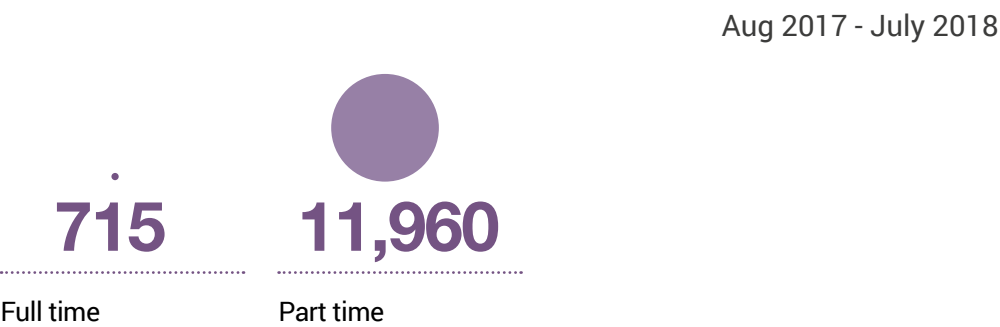


Figure 20: Local authority community learning - unique learners

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Case study: LINC Conwy and Arfon partnerships

LINC Conwy was established in 2011 and involves seven secondary schools and one further education college in the Conwy area. The Arfon partnership involves six secondary schools and two further education colleges in the Arfon and surrounding area. Both partnerships were established to increase opportunities for bilingual and Welsh-medium provision and to increase the range of options available to post-16 learners in the local areas in North Wales. They enable learners to study from a range of AS, A level and vocational courses at any of the centres involved.

For more information, please read our case study in **A levels in sixth forms and colleges** (Estyn, 2018a)

In other partnerships, the local authority negotiates directly with the college for the scale, scope and payment of the provision, so that individual headteachers do not need to negotiate directly with the college. In these partnerships, the college tries to minimise the costs to schools and maximise the impact of funding it receives, for example by not top-slicing income, by charging rates that only just meet costs, or by increasing the charge at a below-inflation rate.

In the less effective examples, provision is generally limited in quantity and poorly co-ordinated. Provision is not planned strategically to meet the needs of learners or the local area. Arrangements between colleges, schools and local authorities may be ad hoc and depend on the commitment of local managers and staff, rather than being supported by a well-planned structure or through clear memoranda of understanding.

The most effective partnerships between schools and colleges help support the transition from schools to post-16 learning. For example, a minority of further education colleges have developed and introduced a 'junior apprenticeship programme' that provides education and vocational training to school pupils, including those who have been excluded from school or who have poor behavioural or attendance records. This full-time programme typically consists of construction, hairdressing or motor vehicle programmes that lead to level 1 or 2 qualifications. Learners also undertake Essential Skills Wales qualifications in communication and number skills as well as participating in sports and enrichment activities. These learners remain registered at their secondary schools, but receive their education exclusively at the college. Although the term 'junior apprenticeship' is used, the programme is not part of the Welsh Government's national apprenticeship programme and is funded as a separate 'creative solutions' grant to colleges.

Estyn will publish a thematic report in 2020 on the effectiveness of partnerships and joint planning between secondary schools and colleges for their 16-19 provision.

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A level provision

A level courses are offered by school sixth forms and by further education colleges in Wales. The range of subjects offered at A level varies according to geographical location, staff expertise, language medium, provider size and whether or not there are partnerships between centres. In general, colleges and large schools offer a broader range of subjects than smaller providers, most of whom depend on partnership arrangements to offer a wide range of subjects. In addition to the generally popular subjects¹⁹, many colleges and schools with large sixth forms deliver low take-up AS and A level subjects such as philosophy, electronics, geology and the classics. Colleges and schools generally use the Welsh Baccalaureate award to broaden the skills and experiences of their A level learners. They enrol nearly all A level learners onto the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate qualification. Colleges across Wales are increasingly making pastoral sessions and the Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate available to learners in Welsh. However, very few colleges deliver A level subjects bilingually or in Welsh.

While most learners who choose to study A levels are offered a number of A level subjects, the choices for individual learners can be restricted by a number of factors. This is often the case in areas or centres where post-16 options other than A levels are limited. These factors include centres requiring learners to study more subjects than they wish to and centres not offering particular subjects due to a lack of subject expertise or poor results in a subject over time. In a few cases, learners are reluctant to travel to other centres. Many centres stipulate, often appropriately, minimum grades for studying certain subjects. This particularly affects learners of relatively modest achievement at GCSE because their choices are restricted by entry requirements and leave them with a limited range of options that may not match their needs or interests. These factors lead to a few learners choosing a course they have not studied before, such as psychology, without fully understanding the demands of the subject or choosing subjects in which they have little interest.

Class sizes vary greatly across centres, from one to about 30 learners. In very small classes, it is difficult for learners to learn from each other, although they can benefit from the time staff can give them. Conversely, very large classes pose challenges in terms of teacher workload and it is difficult for teachers to give individual learners sufficient attention.

Many centres offer a wide range of enrichment opportunities to their A level learners, including cultural and academic activities as well as sports and hobbies. More able learners benefit from dedicated events and activities that nurture their curiosity and stretch their understanding. In most schools and colleges these activities include participation in the Welsh Government funded Seren programme established in 2015 to support more academically able young people in Wales to gain access to

¹⁹ Subjects such as mathematics, English literature, biology, history, chemistry, religious studies

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leading Welsh, UK and International universities. The Seren Network was originally established in a direct response to the need to halt the decline in the number of successful applications being made by students in Wales to attend Oxford and Cambridge Universities. In the best cases, schools and colleges provide dedicated additional support for learners applying for entry to university courses that have wider entry requirements or entry examinations. Such support takes the form of university visits and guest lectures as well as mentoring, mock examinations and interviews. Learners enjoy meeting like-minded young people and having the opportunity to have additional sessions on a specific field that is of interest to them. They appreciate the opportunities to attend summer schools at leading universities in the UK, the US and China. Those aspiring to study a science-based subject at university, such as medicine or dentistry, have found the programme particularly helpful. Learners value the support they receive to apply to university. Cambridge made the highest number of offers to state-educated Welsh students in 2019, an offer rate of 31%, and applications to Oxford have increased by 13% since 2016. In 2019, the Seren programme was extended to learners in Years 8 to 11.

Vocational provision

The further education colleges in Wales deliver a comprehensive range of vocational courses at different levels across many subject areas. They use a range of information to inform curriculum planning, including consideration of annual recommendations received from Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs) to reflect regional skills needs. In addition to these recommendations from RSPs, many colleges plan their course offer on the basis of the previous year's recruitment or the current demand from existing learners rather than an analysis of current or future skills and employer needs. Progression pathways to the next level are available on many courses. Very few courses are delivered in Welsh or bilingually and there are too few opportunities for learners to develop Welsh as an employability and life skill.

In nearly all colleges, the delivery of many vocational courses is enhanced through the provision of realistic work environments such as hair and beauty salons, training restaurants or motor vehicle and engineering workshops. Apart from a few courses that require work experience as part of their qualification, many colleges do not work well enough with employers to provide meaningful programmed work experience or other useful work-related experiences for learners.

Although colleges are generally successful in supporting learners to achieve their qualifications, they do not always do enough to develop their life skills. Many learners complete courses without developing the key employability and social skills often identified by employers. This means that in some cases learners are not sufficiently prepared for the demands of the industry they have trained in. As a result, these learners tend to leave the industry after securing employment and have to re-train in another vocational area.

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Apprenticeship provision

Most work-based learning providers in Wales deliver a wide range of apprenticeship programmes across many learning areas, including higher apprenticeships. These apprenticeships are delivered to meet the growing demand of employers and learners. This year has seen the launch of the degree apprenticeship programme. Currently, this programme is delivered in the two priority areas of engineering and advanced manufacturing, and information technology.

Apprenticeships are generally in demand at level 2 and level 3, and many higher apprenticeships are offered at level 4. Health and social care, business administration, engineering and manufacturing technologies, and construction and the built environment continue to have a high demand at level 2 and level 3. The most successful training providers work with employers to match learners carefully to the training programmes that best suits their job roles. They also use feedback from employers to improve and update provision. In the best cases, learners are programmed for both on and off-the-job training. In a minority of cases, on and off-the job activities are not matched carefully enough to assessment opportunities and requirements.

There remains a significant variation in the quality of the coaching and mentoring that learners receive from their employers in the workplace. This aspect of learner development is important for ensuring learner support and successful progress through the apprenticeship, particularly for higher apprenticeship learners.

Providers are attempting to work more closely with schools in their local geographical areas to promote apprenticeships. There is also still considerable scope to raise awareness of apprenticeships with learners, teachers and parents as a viable and suitable option to undertaking A levels or attending further education or university.

A right to lifelong learning – skills provision for second chances

In 2019, the Minister for Education committed to exploring how the Welsh Government could deliver a right to lifelong learning for Wales. Community-based adult learning partnerships offer a wide range of literacy, numeracy and digital skill courses along with English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) through which learners can develop their basic skills. These courses are usually free to learners. Most community-based adult learning partnerships take good account of learner needs and work together effectively to share resources, minimise duplication of classes and ensure progression opportunities.

Those working in adult learning partnerships have a strong commitment to providing learning for hard-to-reach learners, such as the long-term unemployed, single parents, minority ethnic groups, those with physical and mental problems, the isolated, the abused and the elderly as well as those with poor experiences of statutory education.

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Most adult learners have a range of commitments in their lives and, as a result, most community-based adult learning partnerships work hard to ensure that an appropriate level of courses takes place in venues at different times of day to meet adult learners' differing needs. The venues are usually easily accessible to most learners. However, siting and timing of classes are often challenging where the partnership covers a large rural area and where public transport runs infrequently.

Many community-based adult learning partnerships work well with voluntary organisations, or with other organisations such as prisons, to provide tailored courses to meet the diverse needs of their learners.

Most community-based adult learning partnerships offer a broad range of classes linked to developing learners' interests, for example furniture upcycling, international cookery classes, languages and art classes. The community-based partnerships are responsive to updating their curriculum offer each year. Learners usually pay the cost of non-certificated general interest and activity courses in full. In other cases, senior leaders identify long-running courses in which learners are making limited progress in new learning, but attend regularly for social reasons. In many cases, they help these courses to become clubs, which appoint and pay their own tutors, and by providing venues where the club can meet at an appropriate cost. Many older learners continue to attend regularly at the interest courses and clubs and this helps them to maintain their wellbeing through active participation in a social group.

In adult learning in the community, adult learners often enrol on literacy, numeracy and digital skill courses to improve their skills prior to entry into work or to revive their skills if they have been workless for a period of time. They may also be learners who are already working, but who would be able to access managerial posts with higher-level skills in literacy and numeracy. Overall, adult learners develop their skills well and successfully complete their courses and qualifications at good rates. Many learners gain accreditation through their studies.

The range of opportunities for learners in the justice sector has improved year on year in most prisons in Wales. In the prisons that Estyn inspected this year, leaders and managers use labour market information effectively to develop a broad range of opportunities to help learners gain skills that will help them progress into work. For example, a useful partnership with an employer, who has developed a warehouse training facility in the prison, enables learners to receive employment interviews on their release. Call centre facilities in two prisons provide valuable opportunities for learners and a specialist railway maintenance programme in one prison gives learners opportunities of employment with a rail employer. One prison has refined its construction multi-skills training in partnership with a construction company to provide customised training in dry-lining skills, with the partner employer offering opportunities to progress directly into employment when prisoners are released. Learners in vocational training in prisons have good opportunities to gain qualifications recognised by employers. Most also have opportunities to develop their literacy and numeracy skills alongside their vocational training.

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Cymraeg 2050

Post-compulsory education and training providers have a key role to play in sustaining and developing learners' Welsh language skills to meet the growing need for a bilingual workforce as set out in the 'Cymraeg 2050' Strategy (Welsh Government, 2017a). The extent to which local authorities, further education colleges and work-based learning providers plan their Welsh-medium or bilingual post-16 education and training varies too much. There is a need to encourage more Welsh-speaking learners to continue some or all of their learning in Welsh. In 2019, the Coleg Cymraeg Cendlaethol launched its 'Further Education and Apprenticeship Welsh-medium Action Plan' (2018), which sets out the steps it will take to develop learners' awareness, understanding, confidence or fluency. The plan identifies the need to significantly increase the post-16 workforce's bilingual skills. Currently, only 7.7 % of work-based learning practitioners and 15.2% of further education teachers are able to work through the medium of Welsh (Education Workforce Council, 2019).

In further education colleges, many learners who learn in Welsh or bilingually have good oral Welsh language or bilingual skills (Estyn, 2017c). They speak confidently and correctly, and show a good grasp of vocabulary and subject terminology. However, around a third of learners say that they are only fairly confident orally at best, despite following courses in Welsh or having attended Welsh-medium schools. In the better examples, learners and their teachers converse informally in Welsh during classes and around the college. In a few cases in work-based learning training providers, reviews and assessment are undertaken in Welsh, but this is often dependent on the geographical location and the provider having Welsh-speaking staff.

In Estyn's inspection reports on further education and work-based learning providers, a common recommendation in recent years has been to improve the focus on developing learners' Welsh language skills as an employability skill and to encourage learners to use and develop their language skills in the workplace. Across the post-16 sector, leaders and managers have not clearly linked the benefits of using the Welsh language to employment opportunities, despite competence in the Welsh language being in demand in a number of geographical regions and learning areas. This is notably the case in health and care sectors, especially in the care home sector. It is also a very desirable employment skill for learners on vocational programmes who visit the homes of Welsh-speaking and bilingual customers to undertake work.

Following recent structural changes at national level, the Welsh for Adults sector is beginning to make an important contribution towards helping deliver some of the aims of the Welsh Government's 'Cymraeg 2050' Strategy (2017a), which sets out a long-term approach to achieving the target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050. Providers are now developing provision across Wales to support courses for the workplace and the family, and to extend the use of technology in support of learning.

Learners in the two Welsh for Adults providers inspected between 2017 and 2019 acquire the Welsh language more quickly and effectively than pupils at the corresponding levels in English-medium secondary schools. Tutors at these

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providers succeed in ensuring that lessons focus well on improving standards of oracy and, as a result, most learners become increasingly confident in their use of Welsh, particularly understanding and speaking the language.

Teaching and training

Overall, the quality of teaching and training is good or better in all further education colleges and many work-based learning providers.

In many colleges, teaching and learning mentors have been introduced to improve the quality of teaching, training and assessment. These staff usually undertake their role with a remission from their teaching commitments. Examples of the type of work they undertake include working to support inexperienced or underperforming staff, facilitating reflective practice sessions with groups of staff, leading good practice showcase events, or developing pedagogy with teachers delivering higher education courses within further education colleges.

Most colleges plan worthwhile opportunities to develop the teaching and assessment skills of their staff. A few teaching staff participate in cross-college activities to share best practice. In general, colleges make good use of their internal resources, such as teaching and learning mentors, to support underperforming staff and departments. Most work-based learning providers place a strong focus on developing the core teaching and assessment skills of staff, reflecting increased recognition of the integral nature of teaching to the assessors' role. In both colleges and work-based learning providers, only a very few teachers, trainers or assessors undertake industry placements to keep their skills and knowledge up-to-date.

In the majority of college and work-based learning providers, line managers observe teaching and learning. These observations then feed into individual performance reviews. The majority of providers no longer use graded observations, but typically identify those teachers below a quality threshold and in need of additional support. In the best cases, individual professional development activities are identified as part of this process. Many colleges use 'learning walks', for the purpose of gaining a quality overview. These walks include class visits and talking to learners, and give a useful snapshot of the quality of teaching and learning.

In many cases, colleges and work-based learning providers do not have a detailed overview of the impact of their professional development activities. In most cases, individual events have a user evaluation form, but few colleges and providers encourage staff to reflect on the training they have undertaken. Senior leaders generally gauge the impact of professional learning via practitioner reflection, lesson observations, learner surveys and provision review. Very few providers clearly link learner feedback via questionnaires and surveys to the effectiveness of teaching, training and assessment. Only a few teachers undertake learning walks or are involved in peer observation activities and they do not benefit from this valuable learning opportunity. In a few providers, managers do not use the information gained from these processes to develop a clear picture of their strengths and areas for improvement.

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Professional standards and professional learning

The Welsh Government (2017c) published a set of professional standards for further education teachers and work-based learning practitioners in Wales in 2017. These were developed in collaboration with representatives from the post-16 sectors and recognise the goal of 'dual professionalism' in the role of practitioners in the post-16 sectors, as both subject and vocational specialists as well as experts in teaching, learning and assessment.

The professional standards are helpful to further education and work-based learning staff in recognising the skills required to be an effective teacher, trainer or assessor. Significant challenges remain, especially for work-based learning staff as they have a diverse and wide range of skills. These staff carry out a multitude of tasks including training, assessment, progress reviews, and essential skills delivery, safeguarding and mentoring.

Most colleges and training providers have reviewed the professional standards and are beginning to incorporate them into their professional learning policies and practices, for example by linking staff training and professional development days to themes in the standards. At present, there is relatively little supporting material available to help providers interpret the standards or to use them in developing practice. For example, no teaching qualifications have yet been developed based on the standards. A few providers have identified that the post-graduate certificate in further education programme has not kept up-to-date with the significant changes in education and training. As a result, they have reviewed the delivery of the programme and are working with their university partners on updated content to meet the changing requirements of teaching and learning in the post-16 sector.

The Welsh Government has recognised the need to further develop the national approach to professional learning in post-16 education and training and commissioned a recent scoping study (Welsh Government, 2019d).

Historically, professional learning in the post-16 sector has been a function of the human resource department and most emphasis has been placed on the individual's compliance with corporate professional development requirements. In many colleges and work-based learning providers, the responsibility for professional learning has now transferred to the quality function. This has allowed a change from a mainly corporate compliance approach to more of a quality improvement focus with development activities tailored to individual and team requirements and being more closely matched to job roles and departments.

Across colleges and work-based learning providers, including sub-contractors, staff are appropriately registered with the Education Workforce Council. Only a very few, generally smaller, providers use the Professional Learning Passport as the main record keeping system. Most providers and their sub-contractors use their own well-established systems. These systems are usually maintained and updated by the provider's human resource department and are linked to the member of staff training and performance management records. Teachers, trainers and assessors show a wide variation in their awareness and understanding of the professional standards.

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Equity and wellbeing

Many providers work in culturally diverse geographic areas. In the best cases, providers have formed helpful relationships with local community representatives. This relationship has been useful in providing up-to-date information about apprenticeships to the local community. Even so, the number of black and minority ethnic and female learners choosing to enter training via the apprenticeship route remains low (StatsWales, 2019c). In a very few cases, providers work well to identify role models to share information about apprenticeship programmes.

Although the majority of providers make employers aware of the benefits of employing learners who have a disability, the take up rate remains low (StatsWales, 2019b). In the best cases they share information about adaptations and modifications that can be undertaken to support learners in the workplace. In many work-based learning providers, black and minority ethnic learner recruitment is similar to the local level of population in the area. Many providers have encouraged greater recruitment by using a diverse range of marketing and media channels, working with community groups in areas with the higher black and minority ethnic population.

Across all post-16 sectors, most adult learners of English for speakers of other languages make strong progress in developing the skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. At entry level, learners quickly gain confidence in speaking and write simple sentences correctly. At more advanced levels, learners speak English relatively fluently with correct pronunciation and intonation. They are able to refine the language they use effectively in accordance with the situation and audience. They have a good understanding of how to adapt their writing for different purposes. Where full-time learners have the opportunity to attend courses related to a job, for example, hospitality courses, adult learners of English for speakers of other languages learn and apply their linguistic knowledge well. In the best examples, the provision of English for speakers of other languages is used very effectively to engage learners into further education or training.

As in other sectors, colleges and work-based learning training providers are experiencing significant increases in the demand from learners for support with mental health issues and often struggle to meet demand in as timely a way as possible. Currently, too many learners drop out of programmes in the very early stages, often before a full assessment of needs has been undertaken and support put into place. On apprenticeship programmes, delays in diagnosing and meeting support needs also contribute to the number of learners who do not complete their frameworks in a timely manner. Although attendance is generally good in most colleges and training providers, on a few programmes too many learners arrive late for sessions and do not show the necessary attitudes and skills to demonstrate employability and work readiness.

The recent Estyn thematic report on 'Provision for young carers in secondary schools, further education colleges and pupil referral units across Wales' (2019d) found that provision for the learner varies widely across providers. Where provision is effective, providers have a named lead member of staff for young carers to make sure that a high level of care, support and guidance is

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in place for this group of learners. They also use an information management system well to track and report on the progress that these learners make compared with their peers in order to minimise the risk of early withdrawal and non-completion.

Leading education and training reform

Many further education colleges have grown significantly since the publication of the Webb report 'Promise and Performance' (2007), which made a series of recommendations about the future of the further education sector. Growth has been achieved mainly through merger of further education colleges and, more recently in a few colleges, through acquisitions of previously independent training providers in both Wales and England. A few further education colleges have also merged with higher education institutions although continuing to operate as subsidiary organisations with their own corporate identity.

Governance arrangements in further education institutions have also been strengthened following the publication of the 'Independent Review of Governance Arrangements for Further Education Institutions in Wales' (Humphreys, 2011). The resultant legislative changes enhanced the autonomy and decision making abilities of further education institutions by removing and modifying existing legislative controls on them.

As the scale of operations and financial turnover in further education colleges have risen, colleges have increasingly adopted new organisational structures and redefined key senior roles. For example, a minority of colleges now operate under a group structure incorporating several different colleges or divisions, often with a separation of the roles of chief executive officer and college principals. This separation usually reflects the increasing involvement of college senior leaders in external local, regional and national groups alongside other senior figures from the public and private sectors, such as economic forums and skills partnerships.

Similarly the structure of the work-based learning sector and the number of providers has undergone significant change. This is linked mainly to changes in Welsh Government contracting arrangements, which have progressively reduced the number of primary contract holders. Nevertheless, many of the previous contract holders continue to operate under partnership and sub-contracting arrangements within consortia arrangements led by the prime contract holders.

The Welsh Government has recently consulted on proposals for restructuring the delivery and funding of community-based adult learning in Wales. In recent years, reductions in funding of the partnerships have meant that many senior and operational leaders have either moved into new jobs or have left the sector. This reduction in expertise is providing strategic leaders with a significant challenge in assuring the quality of the service in general and the quality of teaching in particular, as there are fewer operational leaders to carry out the work. In July 2019, the Minister for Education announced a two-stage approach by first introducing a revised funding model that ensures an equitable distribution of funds across Wales, focusing planning on essential skills provision, and

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restructuring the existing community-based adult learning partnerships to align with the regional skills partnerships. The second stage will involve developing a national strategic body for community-based adult learning (Welsh Government, 2019o).

Most further education colleges and many work-based learning providers have well-established self-evaluation processes, including an appropriate cycle of quality assurance activities. Nearly all view the production of annual self-evaluation reports and associated development plans as being useful. They use a wide range of first-hand evidence to identify their main strengths. A minority of providers are less effective in identifying key areas for improvement and, as a result, are overly positive in their overall evaluation of some aspects of their performance. For example, a minority place too much emphasis on learner outcomes data when evaluating standards and identifying areas for improvement and do not take full account of the standards from observations and scrutiny of learners' work.

Where self-evaluation processes are particularly strong, providers make good use of a comprehensive range of performance indicators and useful quality probes to evaluate most aspects of their performance. They adopt an openly self-critical approach, give full consideration to the contribution made by any sub-contractors and delivery partners and reflect this appropriately in their evaluations. A minority of providers have effective arrangements in place to moderate and validate findings of self-evaluation processes. For example, a few providers involve peer inspectors from other providers or other external stakeholders in processes such as quality reviews and moderation or validation panels.

Further education colleges are beginning to integrate the use of recently introduced 'consistent performance' measures developed by the Welsh Government into their self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. In mainstream 14-19 courses, course quality is often measured primarily by learner outcomes. Arrangements to measure the other improvements made by learners or the distance they have travelled from their starting points remain underdeveloped, especially on vocational programmes. Few providers measure the overall quality of individual programmes including the standard of teaching and learning and the development of learners' communication and numeracy skills.

Although self-evaluation processes are generally strong, the effectiveness of improvement planning processes varies too widely between providers. A majority make sure that most important shortcomings are addressed through carefully targeted strategies and improvement actions supported by appropriate timescales and milestones. They are also clear on the allocation of specific responsibilities for implementation and monitoring. A minority of providers focus on actions that are generic and do not develop robust plans for implementation and follow-up. Arrangements for sharing good practice between departments and across sub-contractors or delivery partners are also often underdeveloped.