

Foreword

The last months of the 2019-2020 academic year brought challenges to Welsh education the like of which we have not seen in generations. The challenges were many, complex and unexpected. The COVID-19 pandemic changed people's lives, had a huge impact on economies, and caused major disruption to education systems worldwide and in Wales. This annual report reviews the standards and quality of education and training in Wales from September 2019 to March 2020, when schools and other education and training providers closed due to the pandemic (other than to provide care for vulnerable pupils and children of key workers). The report also offers an initial account of how schools and other education and training providers coped with the lockdown situation and strived to support pupils and students while providing continuity of learning for them remotely. This foreword sets the scene and reflects on what has been learnt from the crisis and on some implications for the future.

Prior to lockdown, we had inspected some three-fifths of the providers we had planned to visit during the year. The evidence from these inspections and other visits shows a similar pattern to recent years, with some modest improvements being consolidated and encouraging practice emerging in previously underperforming sectors. Standards are good in eight-in-ten primary schools and in a half of secondary schools. An increasingly common feature of our better schools is the way they support pupils to become resilient and independent learners who are given choices about how and what they learn, while other schools have not yet developed a shared understanding among their staff regarding what an independent learner means to them. Our recent thematic report on **Resilience** provides further detail and guidance on this matter. Successful schools also increasingly create a sense of community feeling and belonging, and develop citizenship and personal leadership skills in their pupils. Standards, provision and leadership are good across many post-16 providers too. Areas for improvement in these sectors relate to self-evaluation placing too much emphasis on learner outcome data and not taking enough account of other sources of information.

The lockdown period has been a difficult time for learners and their families, and schools and other education and training providers prioritised the safety and wellbeing of their learners, including their physical and mental health. Schools and other providers responded quickly and worked flexibly with support services to minimise risks to learners. They promoted public health guidance, shared advice with parents and learners, and included tasks relating to wellbeing in the learning activities they offered. They tried various ways to maintain relationships and a sense of community among learners by keeping in contact and in some cases by setting up opportunities for them to interact with each other. As a result of prioritising the wellbeing of learners, many schools and providers were pleased with learners' resilience and attitude to work when they returned briefly to school, college or training centre at the end of the year.



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Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of
Education and Training in Wales

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Schools including pupil referral units focused particularly on the wellbeing of vulnerable pupils. They identified those that required additional support and regular contact from external services, including those whose engagement with learning was especially low. They ensured that eligible pupils received free meals, or vouchers or payments. Some provided learning packs with items such as crayons, pencils, and resources to develop mathematical skills for children with few resources at home. Most special schools remained open for particularly vulnerable pupils throughout this period, and pupil referral units kept in close contact with their learners. Nearly all independent schools and colleges remained open to provide support for learners' wellbeing and learning on-site or through distance learning.

Schools generally developed a sharper awareness of how pupils' vulnerabilities can affect their motivation, engagement and learning during this time. For example, staff in special schools and pupil referral units quickly acknowledged that many pupils with autistic spectrum disorder do not recognise home as a learning environment, while online activities were largely inaccessible for other pupils with complex needs. Staff provided bespoke provision for different learners to meet their specific needs, for example by organising videos by a speech and language therapist to assist parents with communication routines at home. Most independent special schools that educate day pupils put in place measures to support their wellbeing and kept in touch with pupils and their families through phone calls, social media or home visits.

A particular feature of this period was the need to provide digital means of learning for the majority studying from home. Despite considerable effort by schools, local authorities and central government to provide additional equipment and support, a minority of learners were disadvantaged by lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity. In general however, this intense and prolonged period of using digital technology has meant that most learners and teachers have improved their own digital skills significantly. There was considerable variation in how knowledgeable and experienced individual schools and staff members were with digital technology before lockdown. Schools that had invested in professional development on digital learning for staff prior to lockdown were better placed than those who had not. Schools changed their patterns of provision as over time there was a drop in parental support and many schools concluded that uploading work every day was unmanageable and moved to providing longer-term tasks. Staff have learnt from this experience and from the available research. They now understand more about digital learning and are better placed to provide digital or blended learning when the need arises again. This greater understanding has also led to a better appreciation of how digital learning could complement traditional teaching and learning in future, for example to enhance the learning for more able learners, to support pupils with special educational needs, and to provide learning for those who miss school for whatever reason.

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Post-16-providers soon moved to implement distance learning across all programmes and trained staff in online delivery. They used various online learning platforms, and ran online skills courses. Providers reported good engagement from most learners, but were concerned about engagement levels among specific groups, such as independent living skills learners, English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) learners, and older and other vulnerable learners. Many of these learners did not have access to a suitable computer or broadband connection, or a suitable area to work at home. While providers lent out equipment or provided financial support, the challenge remains for all learners to access the resources they need.

Another feature of this period was the increased communication with learners, parents, carers and families. Many providers reviewed the ways they communicated with learners' parents/carers to see how they could be improved, and started using more of video messages from school leaders, newsletters, and apps to share important information. More than ever, schools wanted to build good relationships with parents who were directly engaged in their children's education and wanted to know as much as possible about what to do and what to expect in terms of content, teaching methods, assessment and feedback. As with digital matters, schools varied prior to lockdown in terms of how developed these relationships and communication channels were with families. Where relationships were less developed, there was limited time under the pressures of lockdown to build a common understanding regarding expectations, particularly around the advantages and disadvantages of different types of online teaching and learning, such as live streaming. Our recent thematic report on **Community schools** provides further detail and guidance on building relationships with families.

Teachers and practitioners have worked hard during this difficult time to ensure that all learners were cared for and received some continuity in their learning. The additional challenges presented by the pandemic placed considerable pressure on headteachers and other senior leaders to prioritise and make rapid decisions with limited time to consider options in depth, and this sometimes affected their wellbeing. Ensuring appropriate staffing levels to balance continuity of learning as well as operating their school as a childcare hub was a challenge for many leaders, particularly in smaller schools, where losing a few staff to shielding or illness made a big difference. The number of logistical decisions that had to be made by leaders meant that monitoring of pupils' work initially focused on checking the number of tasks offered and how many were completed, rather than on evaluating the quality of the teaching and learning. Many leaders increased the amount of planning, preparation and assessment time available for teachers in recognition of the added work needed for planning distance learning. They also sourced extra professional learning for staff, for example in using digital platforms or for dealing with pupil engagement or bereavements. Even so, there remains a need for further professional learning for most teachers in using digital and blended learning methods effectively.

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Leaders faced challenges in the post-16 sectors too, including delivering operations across multiple sites. These providers maintained good internal communication with staff and often made contact on a more regular basis than before lockdown. College leaders met together two or three times a week throughout the lockdown period to plan and share experiences and responses. College and work-based learning leaders worked closely with the Welsh Government and other key stakeholders to agree guidelines for revised ways of working as lockdown restrictions were eased. In the adult learning in the community sector, most chairs of partnerships also held responsibilities in local authorities. A benefit of this was that it enabled a co-ordinated approach to support the most deprived and socially isolated adult learners. Where employers were reopening, leaders in work-based learning providers considered how they could undertake visits and assessments in the workplace safely, while complying with social distancing regulations.

Local government education services worked proactively to support their learning communities. They provided advice, in many cases adapting Welsh Government guidance to reflect local needs and to provide much appreciated practical support. There are examples of local government officers working determinedly to support school leaders in meeting the challenges of keeping their school communities safe and well. Local authorities often used their staff creatively to provide additional support for schools in working with vulnerable learners and the families. For example, they visited homes, delivered food parcels, and supported childcare hubs. There were many examples of youth workers using digital technology to provide support and guidance for vulnerable young people. Where possible, local authority officers, schools and settings, and multi-agency partners continued special educational needs statutory assessment and annual review processes remotely. Regional consortia worked with the Welsh Government and other partners to support or lead continuity of learning programmes. They provided guidance for schools on distance and blended learning, and offered professional learning for teachers and leaders. In the best examples, they also developed repositories of resources that saved time for teachers.

It has been argued that lockdown affected younger pupils particularly because the period of disrupted education was proportionately longer for these learners. Some non-maintained nursery settings worked hard to support children and their families, though the national strategy for continuity of learning for this age group was less clear than for schools. This period has proved challenging for settings and has exposed the sector's financial fragility. While schools (maintained by local authorities) were able to continue to employ staff, including nursery staff, many non-maintained nursery settings furloughed some or all of their workforce. A proportion of settings have not yet reopened and there are fears about a possible reduction in take up of early education places, which will add to concerns about the viability of these settings.

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It has been an anxious time for older students too as they faced uncertainty about examinations and completing their studies without the usual end of course assessments. The challenge this summer of allocating grades to A level, GCSE and vocational learners without sitting examinations or undergoing final vocational assessments proved as difficult in Wales as elsewhere. Every year, examination grades are standardised and most commentators had agreed that maintaining broadly comparable grade outcomes for this cohort of learners would avoid grade inflation and avoid any suggestion that the process was less rigorous this year, which could disadvantage the cohort in the longer term. The 2020 summer events suggest that there is a need to review how we assess learners' knowledge, understanding and potential in the round. Examinations are an effective and efficient way of assessing certain categories of skills, but it is time to reconsider how other means of assessment, including standardised tests and tasks, moderated coursework and teacher assessment, or portfolios of student work, could also contribute to a rounded picture of student achievement.

In post-16 sectors, while staff worked flexibly to provide feedback to learners on the work they completed online, the main challenge was prioritising support for learners to complete practical assessments for vocational qualifications. Since the start of the pandemic, work-based learning apprentices have been furloughed or made redundant across most learning areas, but those most affected have been apprentices in small private sector companies in hair and beauty and in hospitality and catering. The pandemic provides an opportunity for a renewed focus on how providers in the post-compulsory sectors can work together to support learners aged 16-19 in the transitions between school, college, workplace and university.

Welsh-medium schools have worked actively to support children whose parents do not speak Welsh to sustain and extend their language skills during lockdown. In the best cases, they used online platforms, often through Hwb, to provide activities for pupils, to promote oracy skills in particular. For example, staff recorded themselves reading Welsh stories and singing nursery rhymes so that pupils would continue to hear spoken Welsh. Schools provided guidance to parents to encourage their children to use Welsh with friends, siblings and other Welsh-speakers. Mudiad Meithrin delivered online circle time daily in Welsh to support the youngest learners and they produced guidance to support parents with their child's Welsh language development at home. Even so, non-Welsh-speaking parents of children attending Welsh-medium schools have been anxious about their ability to support their children's learning. In terms of Welsh for Adults, the National Centre for Learning Welsh accelerated work to launch blended and online courses. For example, it streamed beginners' lessons daily, attracting 2,000 learners.

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Wales had some advantages in dealing with the crisis in terms of having a well-established national digital platform (Hwb) for schools, a growing tradition of collaborative working between education bodies, and an equitable education system with a focus on pupils' wellbeing. Nevertheless, as with other countries, the scale of the challenge meant that policies and practices had to be developed at speed and at short notice at school, authority, region and national level. That this was done in a collegiate way confirmed the growing strength of inter-relationships between education organisations.

The period of lockdown has implications for preparing for the Curriculum for Wales. On the one hand, there has been a delay in reform activity, especially for schools that were already actively preparing for it. On the other hand, the period of home learning has meant that all schools have had to think from first principles about what learners really need. They have thought afresh about how pupils learn and what can best be provided to help them while taking into account their home contexts. The three or four weeks of partial return to school at the end of the year obliged leaders to think how face-to-face teaching can best promote the learning-to-learn skills that pupils need to cope with distance learning. All this has led to a greater understanding of how to develop children and young people to be independent, autonomous learners, who are resilient and motivated to learn, which is a core ambition of the Curriculum for Wales. The pandemic has presented providers with the need and the opportunity to evolve and innovate. Networks have been established for practitioners to share resources and ideas, including in Welsh. The re-thinking that the lockdown required of schools, combined with deeper engagement with families and support services, has arguably put schools in a better place to co-create with these stakeholders a common vision for realising the Curriculum for Wales.

The challenges posed by the pandemic are various and complex, and include looking after the physical and mental wellbeing of learners, providing continuity of learning using digital means, communicating more with families, caring for the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, and dealing with examinations and qualifications. The pandemic also affected different groups of learners in different ways, including the youngest children, those with examinations, pupils moving from primary to secondary or undergoing other transitions, pupils with additional learning needs, the children of key workers, and Welsh and English medium learners. During this relatively short period, expectations and requirements also evolved and changed. The crisis went through different phases – from initial lockdown, to continuity of learning by digital means, to partial reopening and preparation for full reopening, while many schools were also serving as childcare hubs. These challenges have required staff across the Welsh education system to work in new ways. Strong leadership, with a clear insight into the developmental and wellbeing needs of staff, has been crucial. Where we saw innovation, it often built on previous programmes of professional learning for staff that providers had put in place for other purposes, but meant that they were now better placed to deal with the pandemic.

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Overall, individuals and the education and training system as a whole have risen well to these challenges, and there has been an increased appreciation of the work of the teaching profession and of the importance of schooling and lifelong learning. There is a lot to learn from this experience and this annual report is intended to contribute to identifying the good practice developed during these unusual times. There are considerable challenges remaining, as initial findings for this autumn term suggest that many pupils may have regressed in their literacy and numeracy skills for example. Helping learners, particularly the vulnerable and disadvantaged, to catch up will be a major task for the education and training system for the future. During the next academic year, we will continue to engage with providers and to publish our findings in a series of reports on our website.

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Estyn guidance and thematic reports relating to the COVID-19 pandemic

Guidance

- [Advice for school and PRU leaders and governors on how to continue with school and PRU business during the Covid-19 pandemic](#)
- [Arrangements for September 2020 Planned approaches across maintained schools and PRUs](#)
- [Cameos and ideas for continuity of school business during Covid-19](#)
- [Cameos and ideas from schools and PRUs on continuing with school business](#)
- [Key principles to support the continuation of school and PRU business](#)
- [Supporting wellbeing and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from adult learning in the community partnerships](#)
- [Supporting wellbeing and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from further education colleges](#)
- [Supporting wellbeing and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from primary schools](#)
- [Supporting wellbeing and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from PRUs](#)
- [Supporting wellbeing and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from secondary schools](#)
- [Supporting wellbeing and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from special schools](#)
- [Supporting wellbeing and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from work-based learning providers](#)
- [Engagement work: Primary sector update – autumn 2020](#)
- [Engagement work: Secondary sector update – autumn 2020](#)
- [Engagement work: All-age school sector update – autumn 2020](#)
- [Engagement work: Maintained special school and pupil referral unit \(PRU\) sector update – autumn 2020](#)
- [Engagement work: Post-16 sector update – autumn 2020](#)

Estyn guidance and thematic reports relating to the COVID-19 pandemic

Thematic reports

- [Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life thematic report and training materials](#)
- [Insights into how independent schools and specialist colleges have responded during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [Learner resilience - building resilience in primary schools, secondary schools and pupil referral units thematic report and training materials](#)

Blog posts

- [Adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\) - how can schools support children and young people who live in difficult circumstances?](#)
- [Is your school one that puts families and communities at the heart of its work?](#)
- [Now learners have returned to schools and colleges, what part have we played and how will our role change in the future?](#)
- [Our support for Welsh education and training in the current climate](#)
- [What can schools and PRUs do to strengthen pupils' resilience?](#)
- [Working together to support teaching and learning during COVID-19](#)

Publications to which Estyn has contributed

- In collaboration with Regional School Improvement Consortia, Central South Consortium, EAS, ERW, GWE [Developing integrated approaches to support blended learning for the phased opening of schools](#)
- In collaboration with Regional School Improvement Consortia, Central South Consortium, EAS, ERW, GWE [Models of Blended Learning](#)

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In 2019-2020, we recognised the excellence of those providers that achieved 'excellent' in the majority of their inspection judgements.



Non-maintained nurseries	Meithrinfa Cae'r Ffair Ltd Alphabet Playgroup Puddle Ducks (South Wales) Limited Cylch Meithrin Penparc Cylch Meithrin Ynys Y Plant Felinfach Ysgol Feithrin Sant Aubin
Primary schools	Rogerstone Primary School Ysgol Gynradd Talsarnau Ysgol Tregarth Birchgrove Primary, Swansea Bedwas Infant School Nant Y Parc Primary School Oakfield Primary School Barry Island Primary Ysgol Gynradd Dyffryn Dulas Cogan Nursery School Puncheston C.P. School Glasllwch C.P. School Penllergaer Primary School Ysgol Bro Carmel St Philip Evans R.C. Primary School Woodlands Community Primary School Y.G. Cwm Gwyddon
Secondary schools	Ysgol Brynrefail
Independent schools	Teresa House Bryn Tirion Hall School
Independent specialist colleges	Coleg Elidyr Camphill Communities
Welsh for Adults	Dysgu Cymraeg Gogledd Ddwyrain / Learn Welsh North East
Special schools	Ysgol Bryn Derw Portfield School
Learning in the justice sector	YOI Parc