

Context

In January 2021, there were 12 colleges providing further education courses in Wales. Many are large multi-sited institutions that cover a wide geographical area. A minority, such as Grwp Llandrillo Menai, NPTC Group and Coleg Cambria, operate as a group, with multiple sites operating with separate college names under the overall control of one further education institution. A few colleges, including The College Merthyr Tydfil and Coleg Sir Gar (incorporating Coleg Ceredigion), operate as wholly owned subsidiaries of higher education institutions.

A report by ColegauCymru (Buchanan *et al.*, 2020) identified that, in recent years, further education enrolments have been falling, especially amongst those studying part-time. The latest published information shows that, in 2019-2020, 94,220 learners undertook further education learning programmes (Welsh Government, 2021i). Of these, 46,290 studied on full-time programmes and 47,930 studied part-time. The number of part-time enrolments is expected to fall further in 2020-2021, due mainly to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This year, inspection activities remained suspended due to the COVID-19 crisis. As part of our engagement work with the sector, we continued our link inspector engagement with colleges remotely. Our discussions with leaders focused on the wellbeing of learners and staff, how colleges supported teaching and learning and leadership throughout the pandemic. We also gathered evidence for four thematic reviews. In summer 2021, we visited a few colleges to find out how they had adapted to the return to face-to-face delivery.

Sector summaries: Further education

Wellbeing

This year, colleges continued to make the health and wellbeing of learners and staff a key priority. They made a wide range of support services for learners available during periods of lockdown and when more on-site learning was taking place.

Following the return to on-site learning from September 2020, most colleges made face-to-face support for learner wellbeing more widely available, subject to risk assessments and adjustments to help maintain social distancing. Online wellbeing resources, guidance documents, support information and online referral processes were also available to all learners.

Colleges gradually changed their support provision as site restrictions eased. In many cases, colleges prioritised vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, including learners on independent living skills programmes, for on-site attendance and support.

Colleges maintained pastoral support throughout the year through face-to-face sessions or online tutorials, depending on whether learners were able to attend on-site. They reported a high demand for counselling and many also reported an increase in safeguarding referrals, particularly relating to self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Providers worked closely with external agencies to make sure that appropriate support was available for these learners. Colleges maintained regular contact with learners who were not engaging with planned learning activities to check on their wellbeing.

Most colleges carried out surveys of learners' wellbeing. In these surveys, many learners reported that, during periods of remote learning, they missed their friends, face-to-face contact with teaching staff and social interaction with the wider college community. Many learners identified that they were particularly anxious about the uncertainty surrounding their final assessments and the prospects of making the transition to higher education or into employment.

Colleges maintained regular contact with vulnerable learners through face-to-face meetings, telephone, text, social media, video calls and online platforms. They used Welsh Government grants to help provide support for learners entitled to free meals to afford meals during holiday periods, as outlined further in the Education Policy Institute's report, 'Education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic'. (Sibieta and Cottell, 2020)

Having shared, rather than exclusive, access to a digital device was common among learners, as was also identified by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2021 b). In addition, some households lacked internet access or reported having insufficient data allowances. To address these concerns, colleges loaned substantial quantities of equipment to learners, provided portable Wi-Fi devices or helped with the costs of purchasing mobile data.

A whole college approach to mental health and emotional wellbeing

Senior leaders at Bridgend College engaged extensively with learners, staff, trade union representatives and governors to identify specific gaps in existing support provision. This has enabled them to develop a clear and cohesive wellbeing strategy. The college strives to develop a safe and supportive environment where learners and staff can openly discuss mental health issues and access a wide range of support services.

Prioritising support for learners

Coleg Sir Gar and Coleg Ceredigion decided to prioritise and follow up all new referrals for learner support using a standard initial need evaluation tool to help determine the most appropriate support interventions. The learning support team created an 'at-risk' register of learners, including those who they had already supported. The new triaging approach helped reduce delays and minimise waiting lists.

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Staff, such as learning support assistants, provided individual and small group support to learners with additional learning needs through a mix of online and face-to-face activities. For example, when delivering learning remotely, colleges made use of features such as ‘breakout rooms’ and ‘record functions’ available through online platforms.

Teaching, training, learning and the curriculum

As lockdown restrictions eased in September 2020, most learners returned to college sites for at least some of their learning time, but many learners continued to undertake at least half of their learning remotely. A very few learners, such as those on independent learning skills (ILS) programmes, received most or all of their learning on-site due to difficulties in delivering this provision effectively on a remote basis.

Colleges followed Welsh Government guidance on bringing learners back on-site. For example, they prioritised vulnerable learners and on-site delivery of learning and assessment activities for learners undertaking licence to practise qualifications, such as for electrical and gas accreditation programmes. Nearly all learners who were unable to complete assessments for these qualifications last year were able to achieve their qualification in the autumn term.

Despite the easing of restrictions for on-site delivery in September 2020, the teaching and assessment of practical subjects remained challenging due to ongoing restrictions to group sizes to meet social distancing requirements. Colleges worked closely with ColegauCymru and the Welsh Government to agree that the overall curriculum content of most full-time learning programmes, including the range of qualifications which these include, be adjusted to focus on learners’ main qualification.

This year, further education colleges continued to extend and improve their capacity for distance learning across all learning programmes using a range of online learning platforms. Most colleges have continued to adopt a blended learning approach as an integral component of many learning programmes. They were prepared to revert to full remote delivery where necessary.

During the spring term, nearly all learning was delivered online for most learners, with a small but gradually increasing number starting to return to college sites to complete practical assessments and Essential Skills Wales (ESW) confirmatory tests. Most colleges increased the proportion of face-to-face teaching for learners substantially following the Easter break.



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Summative assessment posed a major challenge to colleges, teaching staff and their learners. The revised assessment arrangements across the range of vocational qualifications were more complex to implement than those for GCSE and A levels, especially where practical assessments and work placement activities were still required. Work placement opportunities remained severely restricted due to the pandemic, despite the gradual easing of restrictions across many occupational sectors. During this year, college leaders again voiced their concerns about the lack of timely, clear guidance from regulators and awarding organisations on the amended arrangements for assessment and accreditation for 2020-2021.

Learner and staff 'quick surveys' and frequent staff meetings provided useful feedback to inform the ongoing evaluation of blended learning models and helped identify areas for improvement. Throughout the year, colleges continued to manage on-site attendance of learners and staff cautiously, through the continued application of social distancing requirements in and around college buildings. For example, they reduced group sizes, prioritised practical sessions and alternated learners' days of attendance to help manage the risk of virus transmission.

Leadership

This year, college leaders continued to respond quickly and positively to the many challenges presented by the ongoing pandemic. They identified that positive working relationships with trade unions helped to facilitate the flexibility in working practices to cope with changing circumstances throughout the year. College leaders continued to meet regularly throughout the year to plan and share responses to COVID-19. They worked closely with the Welsh Government and other key stakeholders to update guidelines for revised ways of working as the COVID-19 situation evolved.

College leaders maintained communications with external stakeholders, including parents and employers, mainly through their websites and social media posts. They maintained good internal communication with staff, for example by holding weekly staff briefing sessions online and circulating weekly staff bulletins. Leaders continued to make use of virtual meetings to cut down travelling and help reduce the risk of virus transmission. They reported that most staff had shown great flexibility and resilience in adjusting to changing ways of working, including the transitions between remote and on-site activities.

Colleges provided ongoing support to develop and update the digital skills of all staff, including extensive professional learning for staff on pedagogy specific to distance and blended learning. For example, staff delivering initial teacher training programmes for post-16 teachers have increased their focus on blended and remote delivery methods since the outbreak of the pandemic. Leaders gave careful attention to providing guidance and support to staff on implementing arrangements for centre determined grades across many qualifications.

Providing A level learners with a holistic view of their progress

In September 2020, Grwp Llandrillo Menai strengthened its use of formal monitoring points twice each half-term. Learners submitted a substantial piece of assessed work, and teachers collated grades centrally via an electronic mark book. When learners accessed the system, they could see their progress over time and access personalised feedback about their assessments. Learners reported that these methods had improved their understanding of their progress since courses moved online.

Safe face-to-face learning

During periods when learners were allowed on-site during the pandemic, staff at St David's Catholic Sixth Form College divided each teaching group in two and used a blend of remote and on-site face-to-face delivery simultaneously. One half of each teaching group attended lessons during the first two-and-a-half days a week, while the other half of the group joined the lessons remotely from home, using a live link to the classroom. Teachers reversed the arrangements for the second half of the week to enable all learners to benefit from attending on-site provision.

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Colleges provided strong support for staff wellbeing during periods of home working and during the transition back onto campuses. For example, they made counselling services available to staff, either via the colleges' own counsellors or via external employee assistance programmes. Recruitment of further education learners for 2021-2022 has been conducted through a mix of online and face-to-face activities, with staff delivering a range of virtual open day events, online taster sessions and scheduled site visits.

Quality assurance arrangements continued to evolve to reflect the use of blended learning approaches. Overall, the approaches adopted placed a strong emphasis on mutual support and sharing effective practice rather than overly focusing on learner outcomes and performance data. For example, many observations of teaching and learning were peer led rather than conducted by line managers. Colleges continue to use feedback from surveys of learners and staff to evaluate and help improve the effectiveness of provision.

Governing boards and board sub-committees of colleges continued to meet regularly throughout the year. Meetings took place via online platforms and leaders reported that governors had been kept well informed of the main developments in relation to the COVID-19 situation, as well as its impact on key decisions.

The Welsh Government provided substantial financial support to colleges to help with staff and learner wellbeing, to provide catch-up sessions for learners and to address digital deprivation and other extra costs arising from COVID-19. As a result, colleges generally maintained a strong financial position despite the pandemic.

Follow-up activity

No follow-up activity was required for any further education colleges this year.

Online professional learning

The College Merthyr Tydfil has focused on professional learning sessions that have a common broad format; they are hosted online and last for 30 minutes. Feedback from teachers suggested that the various sessions provided a menu of quick-fire opportunities to learn about useful techniques and strategies to aid their overall teaching. Staff felt that the sessions helped them to plan and deliver remote and blended learning sessions more effectively.

Evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning

In December 2020, St David's Catholic Sixth Form College introduced 'lesson reflections' arrangements for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Teaching staff choose from four methods of evaluating their teaching, learning and student experience. The aim of these arrangements is to maintain a focus on continuous improvement and to share effective practice, irrespective of whether teaching is delivered remotely or face-to-face. Using these methods, the college reports that staff have significant ownership of the process, which supports their wellbeing.

