

Context

In January 2021, there were 17 contract holders commissioned by the Welsh Government (2020f) to deliver work-based learning in Wales. The majority of these providers work in consortia or with other sub-contracted training providers. Approximately 100 sub-contracted providers work with contract holders to deliver work-based learning. The latest published information shows that, in 2019-2020, around 52,190 learners undertook work-based learning programmes, 16,065 on level 2 foundation apprenticeships and 30,475 on level 3 apprenticeships or level 4 higher apprenticeships. Around 5,650 learners undertook other training, including level 1 traineeship and employability programmes (Welsh Government, 2021 i). The Welsh Government has completed its commissioning for the work-based learning contract that will start in September 2021, with 10 lead providers contracted to deliver apprenticeship programmes.

From September 2020, we continued to engage remotely with leaders and staff in work-based learning providers through our link inspector calls. We called most providers each term to focus on the implications of the pandemic on learner wellbeing, teaching and learning, and leadership throughout the pandemic. These engagements also supported two thematic reviews requested by the Welsh Government on remote and blended learning and on learner mental health and wellbeing. In summer 2021, we visited a few work-based learning providers to find out how they had adapted to the return to face-to-face delivery.

Sector summaries: Work-based learning

From September 2020, the work-based learning sector continued to be hit particularly hard with the furlough of staff and the closure of many businesses. Sectors such as hospitality and catering, retail and commercial, hair and beauty and areas of engineering, especially aeronautical engineering, continued to be affected the most. With many businesses being closed for such an extended period, the number of new apprenticeship entrants declined. However, in summer 2021, the situation improved significantly with sectors such as construction and hospitality seeing an increased demand for staff. As other sectors returned to their workplaces, employers reviewed their staffing and new entrant apprentice needs. An in-depth review of figures is available in 'Apprentices furloughed or made redundant during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic' series (Welsh Government, 2021 a).

Wellbeing

Learners have worried about their job security and personal finances. They faced challenges with being furloughed and feeling isolated due to lockdown restrictions. In a few cases, learners worried about returning to their workplaces. Providers have supported learners to overcome their fears and strengthen their resilience. A minority of learners, including higher apprentices, faced challenges when working and learning at home, particularly where they were home schooling their own children, sharing digital devices or not being able to find an appropriate workspace. Regular learner surveys undertaken by providers gave a useful insight into learners' experiences and concerns. Many providers were concerned about the ongoing impact of learner wellbeing and put in place specialist staff and strategies to help support learners.

Supporting the wellbeing of work-based learners during the pandemic

Wellbeing officers at the Quality Skills Alliance (QSA) consortium of work-based learning providers provide helpful support and advice to learners. This continued during lockdown periods, with an enhanced range of useful strategies applied to support learners' wellbeing.

Support staff established a remote wellbeing service using online platforms so that learners could continue meet them virtually when in-person meetings were restricted. Initially, staff identified learners at risk, or in need of additional support, by using a RAG (red, amber, green) rating system. This enabled them to tailor support to the needs of individual learners. Staff maintained at least weekly contact with their most vulnerable learners. They also provided support to over 120 new learners. Resources and essential information were sent out to all learners, including cyber safety guidance, useful tips on working from home, exercise programmes to suit a range of abilities and specific information addressing domestic violence and other forms of abuse.

Identifying and supporting the most vulnerable work-based learners

ACT uses a risk rating approach to help identify those learners who are particularly vulnerable and most at risk. This approach is then used to inform the type, level and frequency of support provided. Examples of support provided include food parcels, hygiene products, IT and other education resources. Staff also make regular wellbeing phone calls and learners can attend the learning centre for face-to-face wellbeing support even during lockdown periods.

All learners have a designated wellbeing officer assigned to them. Wellbeing officers provide learners with relevant resources to help them engage in remote learning activities where necessary. They provide contact details for specialist support agencies and the provider's counselling service and help with referrals. The wellbeing officers have provided virtual sessions on wellbeing, including specific sessions on how COVID-19 can affect individuals' emotional health and wellbeing. By identifying those learners who are particularly vulnerable and most at risk, the provider provides early interventions and support.

Sector summaries:

Work-based learning

In many cases, providers increased their contact with vulnerable learners by telephone, email and online to check on their wellbeing. Assessors generally provided learners with opportunities to talk every week, but mainly signposted external support services where required. However, in a few cases, there was two to three weeks between contact with learners. This meant that they did not always access timely support.

Teaching, training, assessment and provision

From September 2020, providers continued to deliver parts of their apprenticeship schemes to learners remotely. They maintained their focus on theory elements of the framework, such as technical certificates and Essential Skills Wales qualifications. Providers identified that learners required more guidance and support when working remotely than with face-to-face learning. Staff provide this additional support through email, telephone conversations and video meetings. Throughout the year, teachers, trainers and assessors built on the established practice of giving learners written feedback on their work via their electronic portfolios. In our thematic report on blended learning (Estyn, 2021b), we identified that there were significant challenges for work-based learning providers to provide the practical components of qualifications through remote and blended learning approaches and that that quality of teaching and learning remained variable overall.

In many learning areas, providers could not undertake on-site assessments due to business closures or COVID-19 restrictions. Sectors such as health and care, hospitality and catering, retail, engineering and manufacturing technologies, and hair and beauty were the hardest hit. Learners across all learning areas made slower progress than expected. This meant that they needed to stay on their training programme for longer to complete their frameworks.

When training centres closed, the majority of traineeship learners did not have the necessary computer hardware nor, in a number of cases, internet connections to access remote learning. Providers supported these learners by supplying laptop computers and internet access dongles when required. This support meant these learners could continue to engage with their learning throughout the lockdown. Most providers recognised learners on traineeship programmes as a priority group to return to face-to-face learning when sites re-opened.

As businesses re-opened and learners returned to the workplace, providers worked with employers to complete risk assessments to enable face-to-face assessments to be carried out where possible. This continued to be a challenge in the health and care sector with assessors not being allowed into care homes and similar settings during the pandemic. Across all sectors, where appropriate, providers carried out assessments remotely or used alternative methods of portfolio evidence collection, such as video or voice recording of learners undertaking practical tasks in their workplaces. Learners sat external examinations according to lockdown rules and procedures that allowed learners to return to their off-the-job colleges and training centres safely.

Most Essential Skills Wales delivery was conducted online, mainly through one-to-one remote sessions. In a few cases, providers brought learners together into groups for online sessions.

The design and use of specialist training resources

Staff at Cambrian Training Company designed a suite of training modules for learners who have been made redundant. These modules include job applications, letter writing, interview skills, confidence building and finance management. Staff hold live question and answer sessions with learners who have been made redundant to give them an opportunity to learn about opportunities in alternative learning areas. One example of this focuses on what it is like working in hospitality within the health and care sector, with information about working conditions, work and management opportunities and salary packages.

Using a range of resources to engage learners

Two providers, Cambrian Training Company and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, have adapted resources to make sure learners have access to them by using different methods. For example, they use a range of digital meetings, together with printed resources or face-to-face meetings, to support their learners. Staff send learners paper resources, such as digital literacy and English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) grammar workbooks where necessary. They have significantly increased the availability of literacy and numeracy sessions by delivering online classes in the evening as well as during the day.

Sector summaries:

Work-based learning

This gave learners the opportunity to work on tasks in small groups with their peers once again. Across providers, there was variability in the progress learners made and the rates at which they achieved their Essential Skills Wales qualifications.

As lockdown restrictions eased during the summer, several sectors saw a high demand from customers. This was especially the case in the construction sector where builders were experiencing a high demand for their skills. This is likely to expand the opportunities for apprentices in the sector.

Leadership

Leaders across work-based learning responded quickly to the challenges brought by the pandemic. They developed their communication with staff at all levels, giving them a wide range of information to keep them up to date. They placed a high priority on the wellbeing of learners and staff. Leaders recognised the need to support staff in many aspects, including professional learning to develop their understanding and skills in delivering programmes remotely.

Managers focused strongly on the wellbeing of staff during the pandemic. In the best cases, providers strengthened their communication with staff at all levels. This included regular input from senior managers, along with useful staff meetings and electronic communications. However, communication with, and sharing of information between, subcontractors was variable. Across the sector, providers supported their staff to develop their skills with a useful range of professional learning activities. These activities focused on delivering remote training sessions and supporting learners' health and wellbeing remotely. In most cases, providers brought forward elements of the framework that could be delivered online. However, many learners joined work-based learning programmes because they want to do practical work. As a result, providers often found it difficult to maintain learner motivation and engagement.

In general, the work-based learning sector found that it is more difficult to take apprenticeship programmes online due to the large practical components of the programme and assessments related to qualifications that demonstrate occupational or professional expertise. To support the sector, Jisc, funded by the Welsh Government, developed a pilot digital pedagogy course for a small number of work-based learning staff to help them to develop sector-specific online teaching and assessment skills. Each lead contract holder was invited to send a representative to the course. The course was designed as a 'train the trainer' programme with the aim of participants sharing their knowledge with others. Participants report that they found the course of great value and that they have shared their professional development with other staff in their organisations and companies. The same digital pedagogy course is also being trialled with adult learning in the community partnerships.

Follow-up

Two providers remained in follow-up during the period of the pandemic. We engaged regularly with these providers throughout the year. In July, we reviewed the progress both providers have made on recommendations from their core inspections through Estyn review improvement conferences. As a result of the progress made by these providers, we removed both from follow-up.

