



October 2022



# 16-19 Curriculum

A review of the current 16-19 curriculum in Wales

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## Executive summary

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In the autumn and spring terms of 2021-2022 inspectors undertook online visits to a sample of secondary and all age schools with sixth forms, further education colleges, work-based learning providers and local authorities across eight local authority areas in Wales to evaluate the current 16-19 curriculum arrangements in Wales. These meetings took place online rather than in person due to the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We spoke to learners, leaders, teachers and other key stakeholders and also looked at a wide range of documents relating to existing curriculum arrangements for 16-19 learners in Wales.

We found substantial differences in the options available to learners within their local area after they complete Year 11. The available options are also strongly influenced by a learner's preferred language choice and educational attainment.

Overall, current arrangements for curriculum planning and delivery are not working well enough. There is no clear national strategy for 16-19 learning and too much inconsistency between, and within, areas and providers. The establishment of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research aims to address this through its strategic duties.

The availability and effectiveness of Welsh Baccalaureate options and enrichment opportunities vary considerably and the Seren programme for high-attaining learners provides greater opportunities for learners on A level programmes than for those studying vocational qualifications.

We found that learners' awareness and understanding of the choices available to them varied considerably depending on the quality of information and advice provided to them. Too many learners lacked awareness of work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships.

The following recommendations should support Welsh Government in their work with the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and other bodies such as Qualifications Wales and Careers Wales:

- Review the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, taking account of issues raised in this and other recent Estyn reports on 14-19 learning, and provide coherent, strategic support for improvements in the curriculum offer for all post-16 learners in Wales
- Ensure that learning area domains and learning programme directory build on the Curriculum for Wales
- Ensure that every local curriculum offer includes a suitable number and variety of general and vocational options and that the review of vocational qualifications identifies a clear vision and shared understanding about vocational qualification routes.

- Make better use of the available data to plan and fund provision based on emerging needs
- Ensure that providers collaborate more to offer learners access to a wider range of courses that individual providers either do not offer, or offer but do not run due to low numbers (including Welsh-medium provision)
- Develop a cohesive suite of qualifications to support progression for 14 to 19-year-olds that takes sufficient account of the need for progression opportunities from entry level to beyond level 3
- Reduce the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training aged 16-25 in Wales
- Improve the quality of data collected and shared to enable full analysis of learners' destinations at 16 and beyond and their outcomes, including by a learner's protected characteristics, additional learning needs, preferred language of learning and engagement in key initiatives such as the Seren programme

The following recommendations should support post-16 education and training providers to work together in the best interests of all 16-19 year old learners:

- Ensure that all learners have equitable access to vocational options, and that these options are valued as equally as general education options
- Ensure that all learners have equitable access to Welsh-medium provision
- Ensure that all learners in key stage 4 receive impartial information, advice and guidance that covers all post-16 options available in their local area

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## Introduction

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This report is written in response to a request for advice in the Minister for Education's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2021-2022. It provides an overview of the current curriculum offer for 16 to 19-year-olds. The report also considers how effectively impartial information, advice and guidance enables young people in post-16 education and training to improve their career planning.

The report builds on previous thematic reviews that have focused on aspects of education for 16 to 19-year-olds, or advice and guidance for young people. The findings in this report reflect many of the findings and recommendations from these reports:

- Post-16 partnerships: shared planning and provision between schools, and between schools and colleges (Estyn, 2021)
- A levels in school sixth forms and further education colleges (Estyn, 2018)
- A level Welsh first language (Estyn, 2020a)
- Business and social studies at A level (Estyn, 2020b)
- Impartial advice and guidance for 14-16 year olds provided by Careers Wales advisers (Estyn, 2022)

The intended audience for this report is the Welsh Government, school headteachers, college chief executives and principals, managing directors of work-based learning providers, teachers and trainers in secondary and all age schools, colleges and work-based learning providers, local authority officers and regional consortia officers. The report draws on evidence from online visits to the range of post-16 providers in eight different local authority areas, reflecting the geographical, linguistic and socio-economic context across Wales. We talked to staff and learners in schools, further education colleges, apprenticeship and traineeship providers. We also talked to leaders in local authorities and other key stakeholders.

## Background

The Hazelkorn (2016) review reported a lack of coherent pathways and educational opportunities for learners in Wales. It suggests there is insufficient strategic thinking leading to insufficient collaboration and too much competition. In response, the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (TER Act) aims to create post-16 education and training that allows learners to move seamlessly from compulsory to non-compulsory education and training, building on the national mission for education reform. The TER Act expects to

‘create a joined up system that:

- is easy for all learners to navigate
- is valued by the public
- creates a highly skilled society
- helps tackle inequalities
- is globally renowned for excellent education, training, research and innovation
- has a civic mission at its heart.’ (Welsh Government, 2021e, p9)

The TER Act responds to these shortcomings through the creation of a Commission for Tertiary Education and Research with strategic duties, including to promote collaboration, and encourage participation in education and training. An appropriate curriculum will be crucial and this report considers whether the current curriculum offer for 16 to 19-year-olds is fit for purpose.

### The 16-19 curriculum

The Welsh Government has already reviewed the curriculum and assessment arrangements for compulsory education and developed the Curriculum for Wales. This set a vision for the pre-16 curriculum as one that is broad and balanced and enables learners to develop towards the four purposes so that they become:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society (Senedd Cymru, 2021, p.1-2)

The Curriculum for Wales Guidance (Welsh Government, 2021b) says ‘that a school’s curriculum is everything a learner experiences in pursuit of the four purposes. It is not simply what we teach, but how we teach and crucially, why we teach it’.

The expectations for the current 16-19 curriculum are set out in legislation through the Learning and Skills Act (2000), the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 and associated guidance. Within each local authority, a curriculum offer should contain a minimum of 30 eligible courses approved by Qualifications Wales at level 3

comprising of different elements but with a minimum of five general courses and five vocational courses from the following five learning domains:

- mathematics, science and technology
- business, administration and law
- services for people
- arts, media, culture and languages
- humanities, social sciences and preparation for life and work

The exact composition may vary according to local areas needs and priorities but the guidance stipulates that the vocational offer should include a minimum of one course of study from mathematics, science and technology (Domain A) and will fall across a minimum of three domains.

Learners who cannot follow level 3 courses must be allowed to follow courses below this level that will allow progression that is appropriate for them. The measure is less prescriptive for courses below level 3, although it states that there should be an appropriate range to meet the needs of learners and with due regard to guidance issued under additional learning needs (ALN) legislation.

In April 2014, the Welsh Government's guidance on the measure stated that the curriculum should be driven by learner demand, yet also informed by labour market intelligence and local and regional priorities. There is also an expectation that collaboration will help to reduce duplication and increase opportunities.

In certain circumstances, such as accessing post-16 courses through the medium of Welsh, joint planning that extends across local authority borders should be encouraged.

Our thematic report on post-16 partnerships (Estyn, 2021) identified a range of potential administrative, political and logistical barriers that may inhibit collaborative working and effective strategic planning of the local curriculum but also identified some examples of strong collaborative work. Our report identified a lack of systematic monitoring at a national level to assess whether the local curricula met expectations.

In practice, on leaving school, learners progress into further study in school or a further education college or onto an apprenticeship. For a small number of learners, employability programmes support them with the skills they need to progress into one of these opportunities.

## Funding

The Welsh Government (2021d) publishes a programmes directory each year to identify how funding will be allocated to further education colleges and to local authorities to fund school sixth forms. Eligible programmes and learning activity are built around a main qualification(s) listed on the Qualifications in Wales (QiW) database and a community learner industry focus (CLIF). Vocational programmes will also need to incorporate opportunities for work-related experiences and for learners to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital skills (the 'core'). Local authorities and



further education colleges must submit programme plans annually for approval. The programme model was intended to increase engagement with Regional Skills Partnerships and external providers on the configuration of provision in Wales and develop provision to meet current and emerging needs.

Core	Essential skills development in literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy.
Main Qualification	Maximum of four main qualifications such as four AS Levels or approved vocational diploma, or a combination of general and vocational qualifications.
Community Learner Industry Focus	Tailored content to meet the needs of the learner, the community or industry with the aim of developing wider skills or by developing skills to a higher level to aid progression to employment or further study. Examples might include GCSE resits, Welsh language learning or health and safety certificates.
Work-related Experience	Allows for work experience or developing work-related skills to develop learners' progress into work.

## Qualifications

Qualifications Wales regulate qualifications in Wales. The list of approved qualifications eligible for funding for 16 to 19-year-old learners can be found in the Qualifications in Wales database (Qualifications Wales, 2022). The suite of GCSE qualifications is currently being reviewed in line with the Curriculum for Wales. Qualifications Wales is engaging with stakeholders to consider what other provision should be made available alongside these GCSEs. This would include existing and new qualifications from Wales and elsewhere in the UK.

Qualifications Wales is also continuing to progress a series of occupational sector reviews as part of its vocational qualifications policy linked to the reform of vocational qualifications in Wales. The first series of sector reviews has led to the development of new qualifications for health and social care, childcare, construction and building services.

New made for Wales qualifications were commissioned in health and social care and childcare from GCSE to level 5. New qualifications in construction and building services were also commissioned in the form of foundation, progression (level 2) and apprenticeship qualifications. Criteria for GCSEs and A levels in Built Environment and Digital Technology were also developed.

Nearly all vocational programmes delivered in Wales are awarded by organisations in England under a three nation approach, regulated by OFQUAL. The Wolf review (2011) and Sainsbury's review (2016) of post-16 education in England have resulted in reforms to the vocational curriculum pathways for post-16 learners.

As part of the Post-16 Skills Plan (Great Britain, 2016), reforms have resulted in the introduction of vocational technical qualifications (T-Levels) in England, which will sit alongside A levels and apprenticeships as the level 3 curriculum options for post-16 learners. Funding for existing vocational qualifications such as BTECs will be withdrawn by 2025. The impact on the 16-19 curriculum in Wales is uncertain as

awarding organisations have yet to publish their plans to continue providing qualifications to providers in Wales.

In March 2022, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language announced that they would 'review the current offer of vocational qualifications in Wales and use the findings to bring forward reforms' (Miles, 2022, p1). Further information on the scope of this review is not yet available at the time of publishing this report.

### Regional Skills Partnerships

Wales' four Regional Skills Partnerships are voluntary bodies tasked by the Welsh Government to understand their regional skills demands in order to help align skills provision with that demand. The partnerships produce three-year Regional Employment and Skills Plans with Annual Reports on progress. They also provide recommendations to the Welsh Government for full-time further education student numbers and apprenticeship programme priorities. A report by the Welsh Parliament's Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee (2019) found that work was needed to strengthen the role and contribution of Regional Skills Partnerships.

### Advice and guidance

Several Welsh Government publications emphasise the importance of the information, advice and guidance available to learners when choosing their post-16 options. The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 states that advice should be in the best interest of the young person and should not promote the interests of any institution.

The Welsh Government's National Mission action plan for education (Welsh Government, 2020a) states the intention to provide independent careers advice and guidance to all young people. This is further strengthened in the Welsh Government's Guidance on effective post-16 transitions and data sharing (Welsh Government, 2019), which states that schools and colleges should work together to advise learners on their educational pathways and career aims.

### Range of provision across Wales

The range of provision for 16-18-year-old learners across Wales includes options available through:

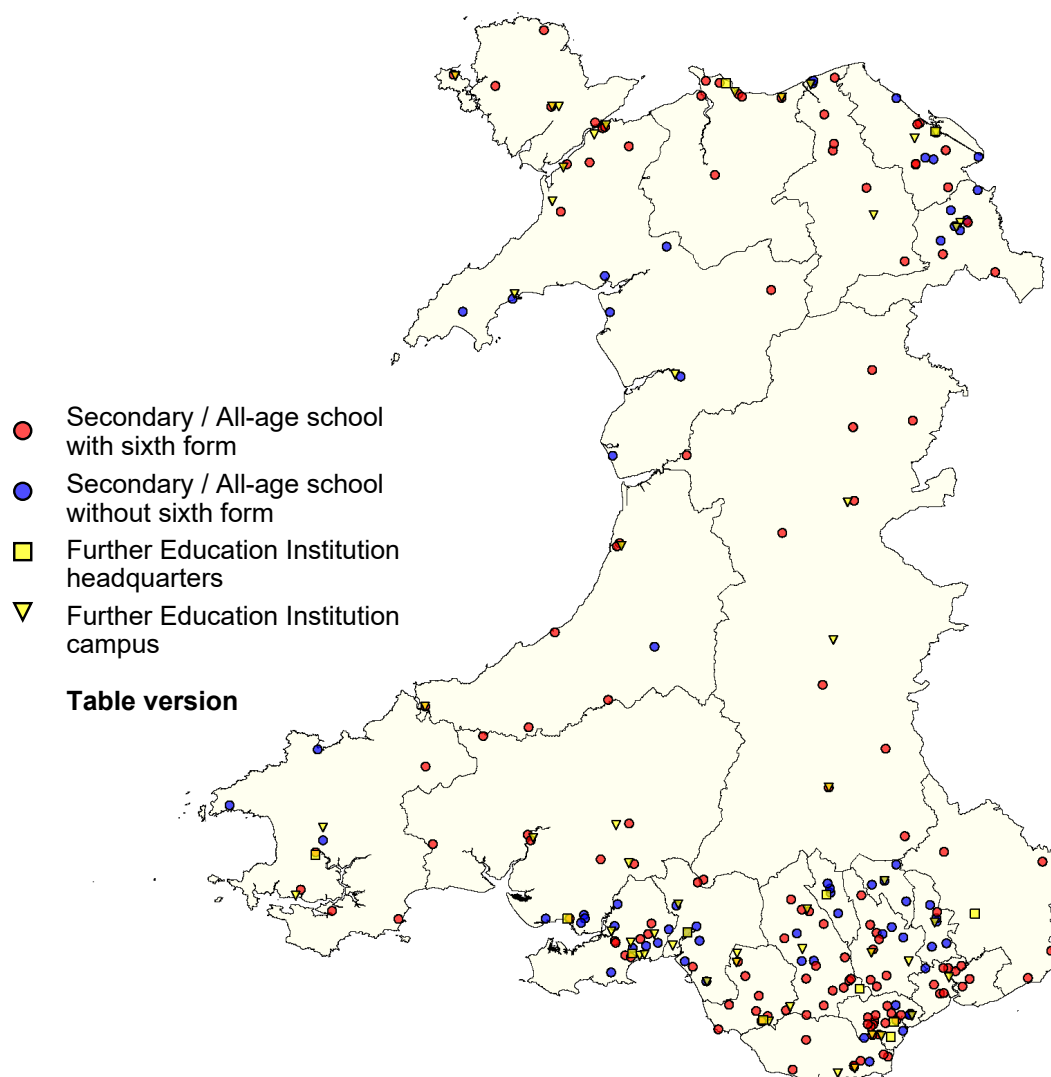
- secondary and all-age schools with their own sixth forms
- further education colleges
- work-based learning providers

Across Wales, approximately two-thirds of secondary schools have their own sixth forms. These range in size with around 40% having 150 or fewer pupils enrolled in the sixth form (Stats Wales, 2021a). All offer A Levels and most offer vocational level 3 courses alongside A Levels as hybrid programmes of study. Very few offer whole vocational programmes. About half of all age schools in Wales include a sixth form (Estyn, 2022b).

There are 12 further education colleges in Wales offering a broad range of vocational, technical and general education courses at various levels from entry level to level 3 and above.

In some areas, there is consolidated tertiary provision where schools do not have separate sixth forms and learners progress to a local college or alternative school with a sixth form after completing Year 11. Arrangements for Welsh-medium provision in school sixth forms and colleges tend to be based around collaboration between providers rather than consolidation. These schools often work together in different ways to deliver aspects of this provision in partnership. For example, they merge teaching groups to make group sizes more viable and to make the most effective use of teachers' availability.

## Sixth forms and colleges in Wales



Sources: [Boundaries and postcode lookups](#): Office for National Statistics. [Address list of schools](#): Welsh Government. All licensed under the [Open Government Licence v.3.0](#).

Work-based learning refers to programmes that are delivered in the workplace and usually include an off-the-job element where learners attend a training centre or college for the theory parts of their programme. From August 2021, the Welsh Government has contracted ten lead training providers to deliver apprenticeships across Wales, six of which are college-led consortia or partnerships. These lead providers work with several sub-contractors to deliver apprenticeship programmes. Apprentices aged 16-18 enter their training at different levels depending on their job, their previous experience and the needs of the employer.

Employability programmes for 16 to 18-year-olds give learners the skills needed to gain employment or go onto further learning or an apprenticeship. They often give learners a taste of a job they might be interested in before progressing to an

apprenticeship. From April 2022, the Welsh Government has contracted a network of training providers to deliver a new programme for these learners called Jobs Growth Wales Plus across four regional areas, north Wales, south west and mid Wales, south central and south east Wales (Working Wales, 2022)

### Performance data and learner outcome measures

Due to the disruption to the work of schools and colleges caused by the pandemic and the related cancellation of traditional examinations, the Welsh Government decided not to calculate or publish performance measures for Year 11 or sixth form cohorts in 2019-2020 or 2020-2021 ([WG data statement](#)).

The Welsh Government's '[My Local School](#)' website makes information about overall learner outcomes at individual school sixth forms, but not colleges, available to the public. The website presents the percentage of learners achieving the level 3 threshold of two A levels or equivalent at A\*-E grade. A second sixth form measure, the 'average points score', depends both on the volume of qualifications and the grades achieved by learners. It gives a broad indication of the strength of overall qualification outcomes at individual school sixth forms. Neither of these measures take into account the prior attainment of learners or the proportion of learners who withdraw from their studies before being entered for examinations. The Welsh Government's decision not to publish learner outcome data for individual schools during the COVID-19 pandemic means that the most recent year included on the website is for the 2018-2019 academic year. The Welsh Government intends to consult on the withdrawal of these legacy measures ([2022 WG CM newsletter](#)).

In 2018 The Welsh Government introduced a suite of post-16 consistent measures to provide the same information to school sixth forms and FE colleges about the outcomes of their 'sixth form' learners. The suite comprised of:

- Achievement measure – this wide-ranging data set provides comprehensive information about the retention and grade outcomes for each provider's Year 13/college year 2 cohort alongside national averages. AS/A level, vocational and Skills Challenge Certificate qualification outcomes are included.
- Value added measure – compares the level 3 qualification grades achieved by each learner with the grades achieved by learners with similar starting points (as determined by their GCSE results) undertaking the same level 3 courses nationally. This provides an indication of the strength of learners' level 3 outcomes in the context of their differing abilities, this is achieved by taking their prior attainment at GCSE into account.
- Destinations data – Shows the proportion of learners who progress to further study and/or work together with national averages for comparison. This information is drawn from a range of national data sources and reports on the work and further study status of each learner where this has been sustained over the autumn and spring terms of the academic year following the end of their learning programme ([CPM overview](#)).

Note that Careers Wales separately collates and analyses the intended destinations of learners leaving school in Years 11, 12 or 13, as part of its [annual survey of school leavers](#). It does not include further education college learners. From this information



a figure for the proportion of learners who do not intend to progress to education, employment or training (NEET) can be gauged. The most robust estimates of the proportion of young people who are NEET in the 16 to 18 and 19 to 24 age groups are given by the [statistical first release](#) (Welsh Government, 2022e). An [explanation](#) of the different ways in which the number of NEET learners are estimated has been made available by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2020c).

In response to the pandemic, the Welsh Government suspended the use of the consistent performance measures. The achievement data reports will be reintroduced for 2021-2022 academic year and made available to providers in the spring of 2023; these will not be published or shared with Estyn. These refined achievement reports will incorporate new demographic benchmarks to take account of the characteristics and prior performance of each provider's learners. The Welsh Government intends to work with providers to review future arrangements for any value-added measure, but the reintroduction of any such arrangements would apply to the 2024-2025 academic year at the earliest. The Welsh Government does not publish the post-16 consistent measures at provider level. The work to develop a 'post-16 choices' online portal to allow prospective learners to access elements of this information has been deferred in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

For apprenticeships, the Welsh Government publishes activity and framework success rates for each main contract holder. For traineeships, positive progression and activity success rates are published (ref [LOR](#)). However, publication of this information has also been suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore the most recent data available refers to 2018-2019.

As well as preparing outcomes information for all individual providers, the Welsh Government regularly analyses and publishes the outcomes of the full cohort of Welsh learners on a national level ([WG results analyses](#)). Raw data about learners' A level and equivalent results are can also be accessed via [StatsWales](#) and the [Joint Council for Qualifications](#). In contrast to the provider level measures, analysis of the national cohort's data has been maintained throughout the pandemic. In addition, the Welsh Government has also produced dedicated outcomes analyses of post-16 learner cohorts affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Main findings

- 1 A learner's options to continue learning at age 16 vary considerably depending on where they live in Wales, what language they wish to learn in and what their educational attainment was at age 16.
- 2 Overall, the national, regional and local structures to bring coherence and support improvements in the curriculum for 16 to 19-year-olds in Wales are not working well enough. There is no clear national vision or strategy for education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds in Wales. Schools, colleges and work-based learning providers in the post-16 sector, along with local authorities, are influenced by different departments in the Welsh Government, have different funding delivery arrangements and are not subject to the same statutory duties or guidance. The creation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research is based on a recognition of these issues and the need to address them.
- 3 Despite the lack of coherent direction from the Welsh Government for learners aged 16-19, providers and local authorities in a few local areas work well strategically to overcome some of the barriers and provide a broad and relevant curriculum offer that meets the needs of learners at all levels and responds to employers' skills needs.
- 4 Although nearly all learners make an initial transition to education, employment or training at age 16, a considerable number of learners do not sustain this initial destination. Around 11% of young people (around 11,300 young people) aged 16-18 in Wales were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in 2020 (Welsh Government, 2022e).
- 5 The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 positively influenced the range of learning programmes and subject choices available locally to young people aged 16 to 19 in Wales. However, the breadth of choices that developed as a result of the Measure has reduced in some parts of Wales in recent years, particularly where collaboration has declined. In a few cases, while the number of subjects available in the local curriculum offer meets the requirements of the Measure, this would not be case if subject options that do not run were excluded. The impact of this is that learners in these providers effectively have a more restricted range of options than the Measure requires.
- 6 The impact of the Measure is most positive for those learners who attain at least 5 GCSEs at grade C or above. The impact of the Measure is much less evident for other learners because the Measure is overly focused on level 3 qualifications.
- 7 Although the Measure is overly focused on level 3 qualifications, the structure of learning area programmes set out in the programme directory provides a useful overall framework for the design and delivery of learning programmes across all levels from pre-entry level through to level 4.
- 8 The Curriculum for Wales and changes to qualifications for 14 to 16-year-olds will have implications for the curriculum and qualifications post-16. Providers at both

phases are keen for certainty about qualifications in particular to support their curriculum planning.

- 9 There are worthwhile opportunities available for learners when the Welsh Baccalaureate is successfully planned, integrated and delivered providing an additional package of learning to enhance their post 16 experience. Many providers require their learners to undertake the Welsh Baccalaureate alongside their other option choices. However, in other cases it is optional. Learners are not always clear about the rationale for these differences and a few learners express dissatisfaction about not being able to make a choice about this.
- 10 The range of enrichment programmes was impacted by the pandemic restrictions, with fewer opportunities for sports and community participation. Many schools and colleges have now returned to a programme of sports, and there are often learner-led societies or peer-support groups, for example for LGBTQ+ learners. However, a few learners reported that there were not enough opportunities to develop their personal and social skills.
- 11 The Seren provision for high-attaining learners provides learners with interesting enrichment activities that may support their studies and future prospects of higher education. However, drawing conclusions on the overall impact Seren has nationally on future destinations of learners is difficult as higher education destinations for those participating in Seren activities are not evaluated systematically. The Seren programme does not focus well enough on supporting high attaining learners studying vocational qualifications.
- 12 Learners across Wales have access to a wide range of A level courses through the medium of Welsh, but opportunities to learn through the medium of Welsh on vocational courses and work-based learning are far more limited. Around six in ten Welsh speaking learners that responded to our survey feel that they are able to access course or assessment activities through the medium of Welsh always or most of the time.
- 13 There are substantial differences in the extent to which local authorities engage with the full range of education and training providers within their locality. In a few cases, local authorities provide effective strategic co-ordination for the local curriculum and monitor provision delivery appropriately. However, in a few cases strategic options for collaborative or consolidated provision are not given sufficient consideration.
- 14 Where there is transparent, effective and strategic planning in the relationships and collaboration between schools and other providers, learners have a broad and balanced post-16 curriculum offer. For example, the Post-16 Education Consortium for Gwynedd and Anglesey provides a coherent set of collaborative post-16 options across all providers.
- 15 Secondary schools and further education colleges provide learners with access to a range of support services, these include coaching for learning, personal support, and careers information and guidance. These services are intended to support learners to overcome barriers to their learning, make informed and realistic choices, and realise their potential and ambitions, but the availability and quality of services is variable.

- 16 Under the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, work-based learning providers do not have a statutory duty to provide learners with access to coaching for learning, personal support, and careers information and guidance. Learners in work-based learning may miss out on similar opportunities for support as learners who are at school or college.
- 17 All schools and colleges provide tutorial support, often in groups on a weekly or fortnightly basis. These sessions tend to be used for the Welsh Baccalaureate programme, UCAS applications and career support, as well as sessions that support learners' personal and social development. Where individuals have particular needs, this personal support is often tailored and more specialist support, such as counselling, is available.
- 18 What learners choose to learn at age 16, and with what provider, is influenced by the quality and impartiality of information, advice and guidance they receive about the options in their local area and the pathways these provide for future education, training or employment. Many learners also told us that they also took information from friends and family members into account when deciding on where and what to study after completing their Year 11 studies.
- 19 There remains too much variation in the quality of careers and work related education and impartial advice and guidance to support all learners in schools fully in making choices about their education and training options post-16. A minority of learners that responded to our survey and who studied at schools with their sixth forms do not feel that the advice and guidance they received about post-16 options was comprehensive enough or sufficiently impartial. A majority of learners also feel that they are not given enough information about work-based learning pathways, including apprenticeships. Although online advice and guidance succeeded to an extent during the pandemic, learners did not have access the same range of work-related experiences, taster sessions or guest speakers to help them understand the full range of post-16 options.
- 20 There is too much variation between local authorities in information sharing arrangements to support transition between schools and other providers. In a few providers, the Welsh Government has funded work to improve transitional work from schools to post-16 providers, which is starting to have a positive impact in these pilot areas. Learners transitioning to other providers would benefit from a much wider range of information being shared, not just their academic attainment, in order to inform and provide effective future provision.
- 21 Information sharing arrangements to support the transition of learners with ALN between schools and other providers is strong. Suitable support and guidance ensure that ALN learners have a beneficial understanding of the options and pathways 14-19. The ALNCo, pastoral staff and specialist careers advisers work well together to help learners transition smoothly.
- 22** Data is not readily available to support comprehensive analysis of learner destinations and progress post-16, including analysis by characteristics of learners. The data that is currently available is not collected or used well enough at provider, local, regional or national level to evaluate provision and plan for improvements and future needs.

## Recommendations

### **The Welsh Government should work with the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research and other bodies such as Qualifications Wales and Careers Wales to:**

- R1 Review the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, taking account of issues raised in this and other recent Estyn reports on 14-19 learning, and provide coherent, strategic support for improvements in the curriculum offer for all post-16 learners in Wales
- R2 Ensure that learning area domains and learning programme directory build on the Curriculum for Wales
- R3 Ensure that every local curriculum offer includes a suitable number and variety of vocational and general courses and that the review of vocational qualifications identifies a clear vision and shared understanding about vocational qualification routes.
- R4 Make better use of the available data to plan and fund provision based on emerging needs
- R5 Ensure that providers collaborate more to offer learners access to a wider range of courses that individual providers either do not offer, or offer but do not run due to low numbers (including Welsh-medium provision)
- R6 Develop a cohesive suite of qualifications to support progression for 14 to 19-year-olds that takes sufficient account of the need for progression opportunities from entry level to beyond level 3
- R7 Reduce the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training aged 16-25 in Wales
- R8 Improve the quality of data collected and shared to enable full analysis of learners' destinations at 16 and beyond and their outcomes, including by a learner's protected characteristics, additional learning needs, preferred language of learning and engagement in key initiatives such as the Seren programme

### **Post-16 education and training providers should work together to:**

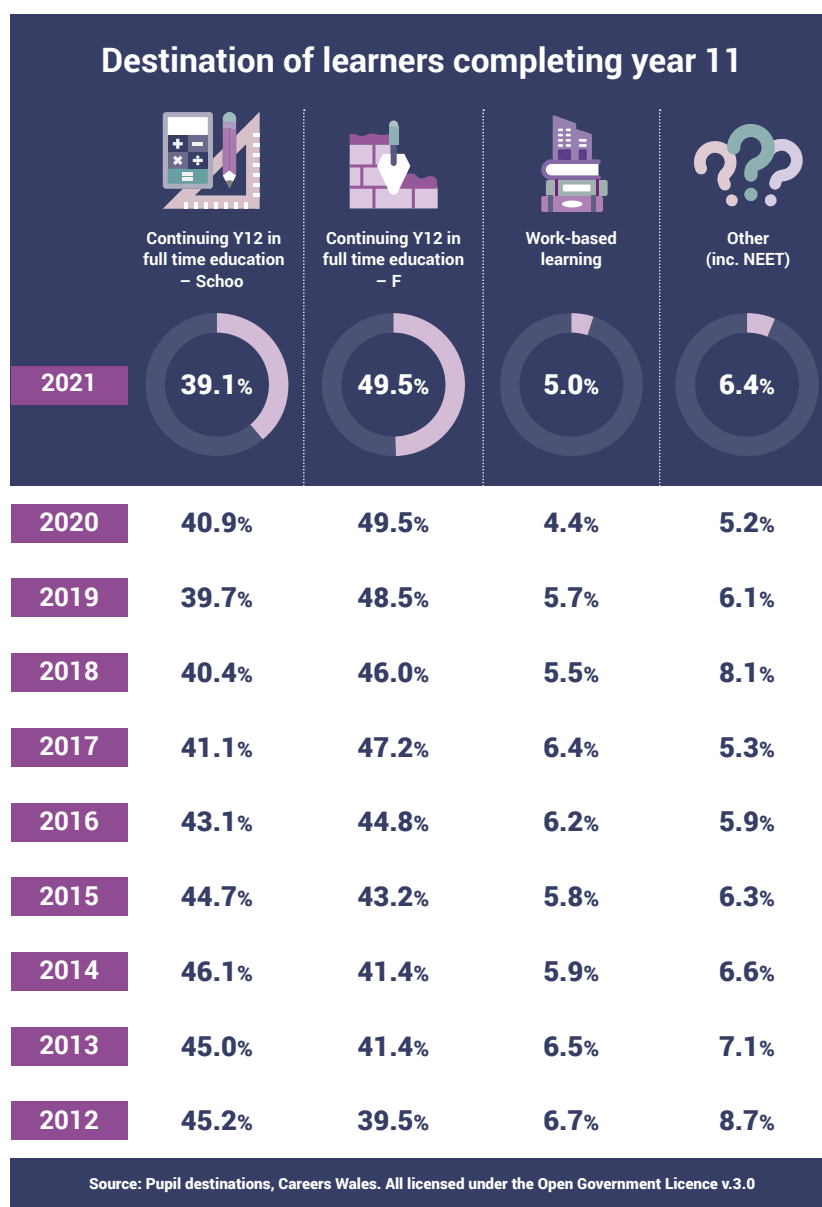
- R9 Ensure that all learners have equitable access to vocational options, and that these options are valued as equally as general education options
- R10 Ensure that all learners have equitable access to Welsh-medium provision
- R11 Ensure that all learners in key stage 4 receive impartial information, advice and guidance that covers all post-16 options available in their local area



## Curriculum experiences of young people aged 16-19

### Destinations of learners at 16

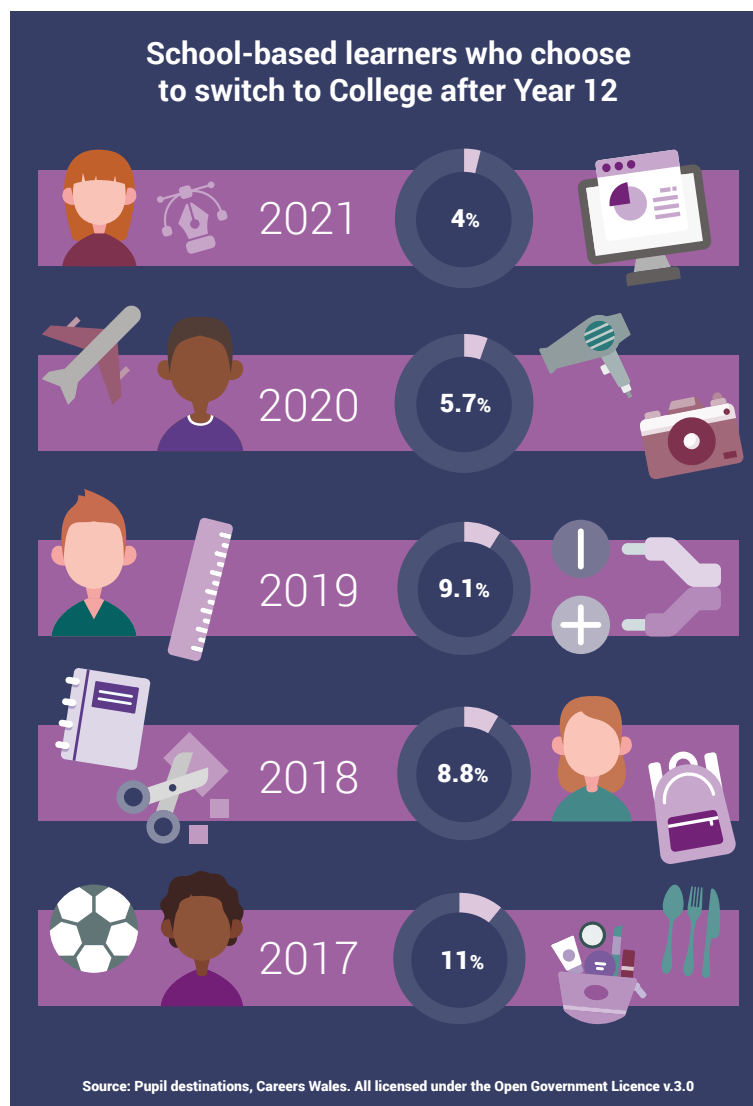
At age 16, a very high proportion of learners in Wales continue in education, with a very few learners starting work-based learning or going directly into employment. A very few learners are known not to be in education, employment or training (NEET) in the first few months after finishing Year 11 at school. The chart below summarises the most common destinations of learners aged 16, based on the annual destinations surveys carried out by Careers Wales ([source](#)):



The proportion of learners continuing in full time education at school gradually reduced since 2013 until 2021, while the proportion continuing at college has

increased. This partly reflects a gradual reduction in the number of schools with their own sixth form over this period. Overall, the proportion of learners that remains in full time education has steadily increased over time to nearly 90% in 2021. The proportion of learners continuing into school sixth forms has increased since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this may be due to the extraordinary circumstances rather than suggesting a reversal of the underlying trend.

Careers Wales publishes annual data on the destination of learners at the end of Year 12 and Year 13 in schools but not colleges. The data for a learner's initial destination at 16 should be considered in light of whether or not they successfully sustain this destination. However, there is no routinely published data that enables such analysis. Data is available for learners that continue in full time education at school post-16. The Post-16 consistent measures suite of data matches education and longitudinal education outcomes (LEO) datasets for destinations but the data that is available is not routinely published or used for analysis. Most learners who continue their education at school at 16 progress to Year 13 at school after Year 12. However, some learners leave school at this point and switch to a course at a college as shown in the chart below.



Prior to the pandemic, around 10% of Year 12 learners would, on average, go on to enrol at an FE college for the subsequent year rather than remain at school. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, fewer learners left school after Year 12 to study elsewhere.

Tracking and analysing all learners' destinations beyond 16 across different data systems is not undertaken systematically. The rate of learners who are NEET at 16 is very low when the survey is carried out at the end of October following completion of Year 11. However, the Welsh Government uses two other methods to estimate the proportion of those who are NEET aged 16-18 and 19-24 in Wales. These methods suggest that in 2021 around 11% of those aged 16-18 are NEET (around 11,300 young people) and around 15% of those aged 19-24 are NEET. Some of these young people are unable to enter education, employment or training due to illness, childcare and other reasons, although it is not possible to quantify this precisely (Welsh Government, 2022e).

### **The local curriculum offer**

At 16, learners should be able to choose from at least 30 courses, including vocational courses, covering a range of subjects. Our Post-16 Partnerships report (Estyn, 2021) highlighted that post-16 providers and local authorities do not use the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 well enough in planning a local curriculum offer that features a broad range of relevant learning opportunities. The report noted that 'a minority of school leaders are not confident that the offer available to their learners meets the requirements of the measure'.

In a few cases, although the basic requirements of the measure are being met in terms of sufficient general and vocational options being offered to learners, the number of subject options actually being delivered is often several below the number required. This means that the local curriculum offer is not always a realistic offer, and learners affected by decisions not to run courses are left disappointed and forced to choose alternative courses. Almost a third of learners that responded to our survey feel that the range of options available to them post-16 was moderate or poor.

Schools and colleges structure their curriculum provision based on the requirements set out in the programmes directory, which is published and updated annually by the Welsh Government. This requires providers to follow a programme based on approved packages of learning with an intended outcome for the learner of progression into either employment or onto further or higher education. These requirements are widely understood by providers and are seen as providing a common framework without being overly prescriptive. A few leaders feel that there is scope to enhance the content of a very few vocational programmes and increase the associated funding to provide learners with additional qualifications. They suggest that such changes would add value to the overall programmes in terms of improved employability prospects.

### **Learning through the medium of Welsh.**

Learners across Wales generally have access to an appropriate range of A level courses through the medium of Welsh, but opportunities to learn through the medium of Welsh on vocational courses and work-based learning are far more limited. In some cases providers cite difficulties in recruiting appropriate staff able to teach

specific subjects through the medium of Welsh. Around six in ten Welsh-speaking learners feel that they are able to access course or assessment activities through the medium of Welsh always or most of the time.

Over the last three years, just over 20% of activities are delivered through the medium of Welsh in school sixth forms. This is similar to the proportion of learners who are taught through the medium of Welsh at key stage 4 in schools. However, over the same period only around 5% of activities are delivered through the medium of Welsh in colleges. Grŵp Llandrillo Menai provides around 35% of its activities through the medium of Welsh compared to less than 10% in all other colleges.

Various work is underway to support the growth of Welsh-medium post-16 provision. Qualifications Wales incentivises the development of Welsh-medium qualification development through grants and Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol is working with the post-16 sectors to develop capacity. However, there are still fewer opportunities overall for post-16 learners to continue studying and being assessed for qualifications through the medium of Welsh.

Our Post-16 Partnerships report (Estyn, 2021) includes findings about how well post-16 providers work together to develop Welsh medium provision and explores the reasons behind the inequitable availability of provision in Welsh compared to English. Although colleges are outside of the scope of local authority Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs), the latest WESPs for several local authorities note their intention to work with local colleges as well as schools to increase options for post-16 provision through the medium of Welsh.

## A level curriculum

In our report 'A levels in sixth forms and further education colleges' (Estyn, 2018), we noted that some A level subjects are more frequently required for entry to degree courses at university than others. These are commonly known as 'facilitating subjects' because they open a wide range of options for university study. These subjects are: biology; chemistry; English literature; geography; history; mathematics and further mathematics; modern and classical languages; and physics. Many of the most popular subjects in both schools and colleges are the facilitating subjects. Our report included a table listing the 'top 10' most popular subjects ranked in order of number of examination entries at A level. The table below shows the most popular subjects at A level in schools in 2021, with the number of entries providing a sense of scale, and the subject's popularity ranking in 2017 (Stats Wales, 2022).

**A level entries (pupils aged 17) by subject group**

A level subject area	Subject popularity ranking (entries in brackets)	
	2021	2017
Social Studies (inc. psychology, sociology, and law)	1 (2,764)	2 (2,166)
Mathematics	2 (2,758)	1 (2,530)
Biological Sciences	3 (2,217)	4 (1,462)
Chemistry	4 (1,646)	7 (1,258)
History	5 (1,378)	3 (2,003)
English Literature	6 (1,263)	5 (1,360)
Physics	7 (1,252)	10 (923)
Art & Design	8 (1,174)	8 (1,231)
Geography	9 (959)	9 (1,231)
Business Studies	10 (762)	16 (509)

Source: [StatsWales](#). All licensed under the [Open Government Licence v.3.0](#).

Religious studies was 6<sup>th</sup> in the top 10 in 2017, but with 734 entries in 2021 has moved down to 11<sup>th</sup>.

The table shows the rising popularity of sciences and that learners are more likely to choose social studies and less likely to choose English, history or religious studies.



A level entries (pupils aged 17) by subject group						
Subject popularity ranking 2020-21		Ranking in previous years				
		2019-20	2018-19	2017-18	2016-17	
1	<b>Social Studies</b> including psychology, sociology and law (2,764 entries in 2021)		2	2	2	2
2	<b>Mathematics</b> (2,758 entries in 2021)		1	1	1	1
3	<b>Biological Sciences</b> (2,217 entries in 2021)		3	4	4	4
4	<b>Chemistry</b> (1,646 entries in 2021)		5	5	7	7
5	<b>History</b> (1,378 entries in 2021)		4	3	3	3
6	<b>English Literature</b> (1,263 entries in 2021)		7	6	6	5
7	<b>Physics</b> (1,252 entries in 2021)		8	8	10	10
8	<b>Art &amp; Design</b> (1,174 entries in 2021)		6	7	5	8
9	<b>Geography</b> (959 entries in 2021)		10	9	9	9
10	<b>Business Studies</b> (762 entries in 2021)		*	*	*	*

\*Not ranked in top 10

Source: StatsWales. All licensed under the Open Government Licence v.3.0

### A level and level 3 equivalent applied general programmes

There is considerable variation in providers' approaches to deciding how many A level or level 3 equivalent applied general subjects should be included in level 3 programmes in sixth forms and colleges. Programmes typically consist of either three or four AS/A level programmes (or equivalents) in Years 12 and 13. There are also similar variations in terms of whether learners are required to study the Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Baccalaureate) as part of their learning programme.

In a minority of providers most learners are expected to study four AS or equivalent qualifications in Year 12. In a few providers most learners are expected to study the Welsh Baccalaureate as well as four AS levels (or equivalents). Learners are often allowed to reduce their programme to focus on three subjects at A level (or equivalent) in Year 13.

Other providers expect most learners to study three AS levels (or equivalents) in both Years 12 and 13. Learners identified as more able and talented are usually allowed to study four AS/A levels with these providers. There is still considerable variation in approaches to inclusion of the Welsh Baccalaureate in these providers. For example, many providers expect learners studying three A levels (or equivalents) to study the Welsh Baccalaureate but allow those undertaking four A levels (or equivalents) to either omit the Welsh Baccalaureate or encourage them to undertake a level 3 Extended Project Qualification as an alternative to the Welsh Baccalaureate.

#### **Learners at a secondary school benefit from taking the Welsh Baccalaureate**

Learners at a secondary school following the Seren pathway can opt to study either four AS subjects or three AS subjects and the Welsh Baccalaureate. One Year 13 learner, who is part of the Seren project, aspires to a career in biomedical science. They, like many learners at the school, chose to take the Welsh Baccalaureate. As part of their individual investigation for the Welsh Baccalaureate, the learner chose to prepare a paper on stem cell research. The research enabled the learner to develop their personal statement to support their university application. The learner has since received, and accepted, a reduced A level offer to study biomedical sciences at their first choice university.

In the best cases, the exact composition of learning programmes is matched carefully to individual learners' needs and abilities. Where provision is less effective, providers often require all learners to follow a standard expected number of main qualifications and only allow learners to deviate from these requirements in exceptional circumstances. In a few cases, it is not made clear enough how providers' curriculum planning and delivery processes seek to match learning programme composition and expectations to individual learner needs and abilities rather than being driven by the need to maximise subject enrolments and associated funding.

#### **Vocational provision**

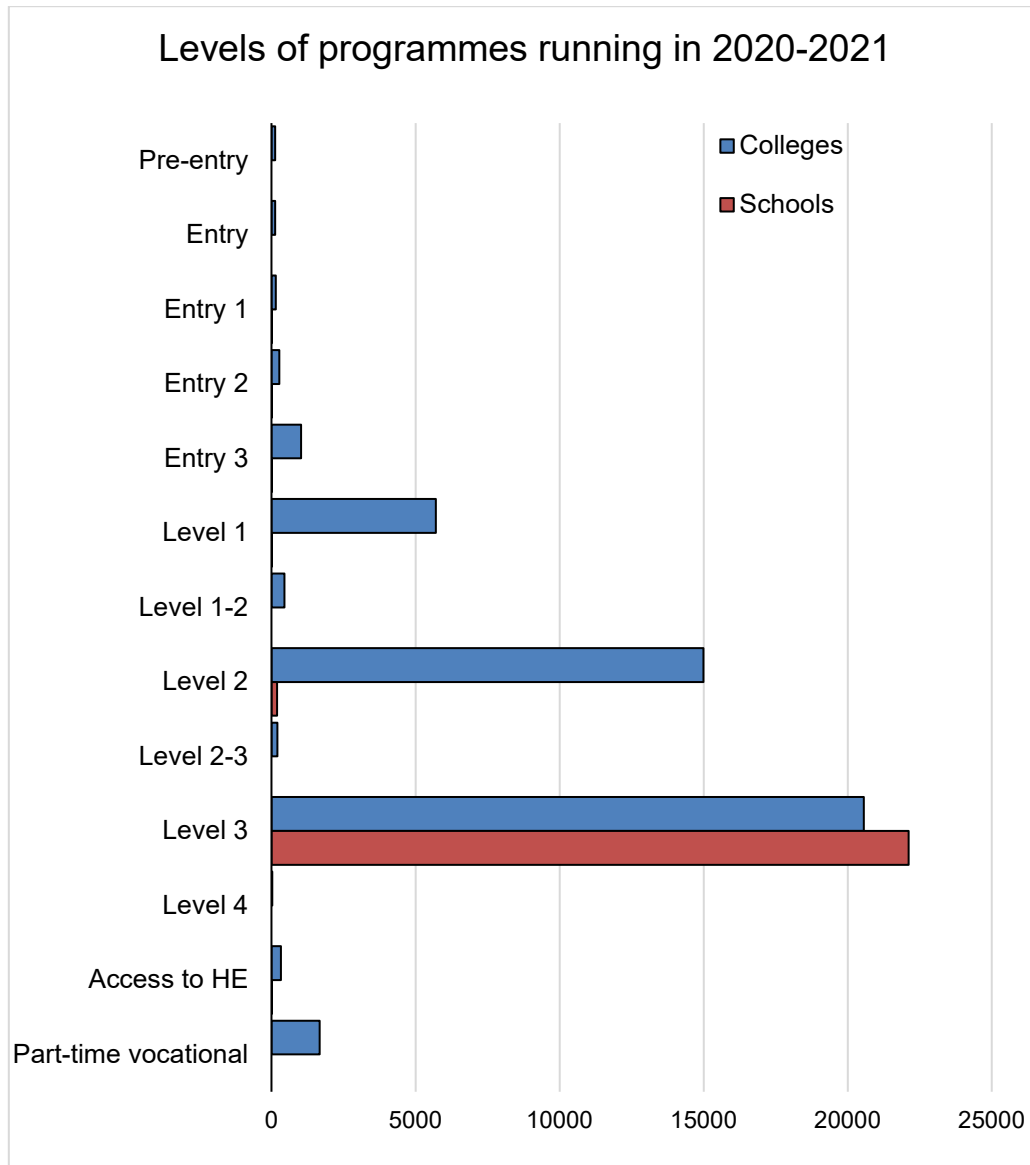
Most post-16 vocational courses are offered by colleges. The popularity of vocational courses by sector subject area (SSA) is captured in the table below. There has been no change in the popularity ranking of these overall SSAs in recent years. There is no published national analysis of trends in the offer and take-up of vocational courses set against the context of the needs of the labour market and wider economy.



A minority of schools have learners studying across 25 courses or fewer in their sixth forms. In too many cases subjects that do not run are simply reoffered in subsequent years without any attempt to amend the mix of available subjects in light of previous lack of demand. Where A level numbers are relatively small, even with shared provision, subjects such as modern foreign languages, music, economics and politics are often not made available to learners. In addition, classes may run with fewer than five learners raising potential issues regarding the quality of learning experiences, cost effectiveness and sustainability of provision.

Most A level learners feel that they were able to choose the subjects they wished to study, although a few learners told us they were unable to access one or more subjects that they were interested in studying, such as economics, politics or law.

For those in full time education in 2020-2021 at either school or college, most programmes are at level 3. Schools offer very few programmes at other levels, whereas colleges offer as just as many programmes at lower levels as they do at level 3. The chart below shows the levels of programmes running in 2020-2021 (source: LLWR database).



The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 guidance is overly focused on level 3 qualifications. In particular, it does not specifically address the provision of lower levels of qualifications, despite over 20,000 programmes running at level 2 or below in 2020-2021, almost all in colleges rather than schools.

In contrast, the programmes directory (Welsh Government, 2021d) provides an inclusive overall framework across the full range of qualifications levels from pre-entry level and Junior Apprenticeships aimed at Years 10 and 11. The programmes directory also requires all full-time programmes to include a Community Learner Industry Focus (CLIF) though access to CLIF was more limited during the pandemic. The programmes directory is valuable in helping providers plan

programmes that cover a wider range of learner attainment levels, including learners with additional learning needs.

Most leaders in schools and colleges feel that the learning area programmes provide a useful and coherent basis for planning the curriculum, both for general education programmes (including A levels) and vocational learning programmes for 16 to 19-year-olds. Prior to the introduction of learning programmes, there was a tendency for too many providers, particularly further education colleges, to maximise funding per learner by adding multiple additional qualifications into learners' programmes, thereby increasing the assessment load for learners and teachers, without a clear identification of the needs and benefits of these qualifications.

Core activities within learning programmes support the development of learners' skills, including literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and may include Skills Challenge Certificate activities (either as a stand-alone or as part of the Welsh Baccalaureate), GCSE resits or Essential Skills Wales qualifications as well as tutorial activities. The content of the core activities is designed to be tailored to the individual needs, skills and abilities of individuals. Many learners feel that their learning programme is helping them to develop useful personal, social and life skills.

#### **Learners at Coleg Cambria have access to many curriculum enrichment opportunities**

Coleg Cambria offers a range of curriculum enrichment opportunities that add value to learners' courses by supporting them to build new friendships, try new activities and develop their self-confidence, social skills and employability skills. Activities range from skills competitions, enterprise activities, sports clubs and academies, societies, the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, well-being events and opportunities to explore their views on issues that are important to them.

Main qualifications within learning programmes are restricted to those listed on the QiW database and must relate to the specific learning area of the programme. Main qualifications are expected to account for between 50 to 70% of the total guided contact hours for the programme.

The CLIF component of learning programmes should be tailored to meet the specific needs of the learner along with local and specific employer needs. The work-related experience (WRE) element is designed to allow time to be allocated to learners to develop and refine their practical skills. This should help learners progress to employment or further learning.



### **Supporting a learner in a secondary school to achieve their ambitions by encouraging extra-curricular activity**

A sixth form learner at a secondary school in south Wales described how they had benefited from support from teachers outside of lessons to develop their skills and confidence to meet their career aspiration to become a sports journalist. The learner has worked with a teacher to set up a school radio station, which has since grown and reached over one hundred broadcasts. This activity has now been extended to other pupils who have broadcast Spanish classes to patients at a local hospital. Broadcasts have continued throughout the lockdown to promote learner wellbeing and support the local community. The learner has now received an offer to study media at university.

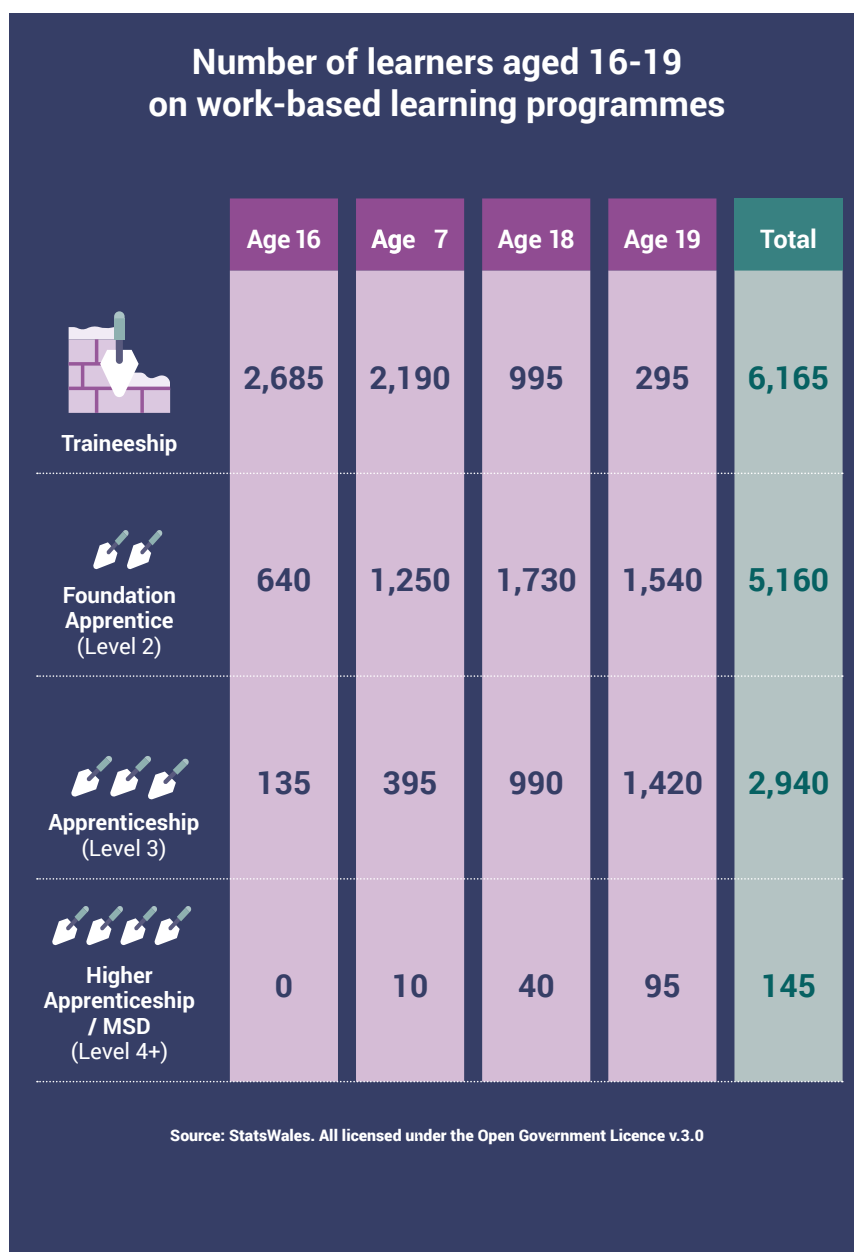
In a minority of areas, oversight of the local post-16 curriculum has suffered as a result of the loss of key posts relating to previous 14-19 network planning and co-ordination. The lack of national compliance monitoring arrangements in relation to the Learning and Skills (Wales) 2009 Measure is mirrored by a lack of local monitoring arrangements in the majority of local areas. Whilst in many areas much of the collaboration between schools has been sustained at local level, collaboration between schools, further education colleges and work-based learning providers has reduced across the majority of local areas. Where collaboration has reduced, this has restricted options for learners.

The majority of local authorities engage effectively with leaders of local colleges. In a few cases, local authorities also engage effectively with colleges in neighbouring areas as part of recently established strategic groups. They meet regularly to share their plans and work together to shape local provision. A few further education colleges also have a significant role in local partnership networks alongside local schools. These include Bridgend College, which works with Pencoed Comprehensive School operating as Penybont Sixth Form College, and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, which is a member of local authority-led partnerships across Anglesey, Gwynedd and Conwy.

### **Work-based learning**

Most further education colleges also provide work-based learning programmes (apprenticeships and other employability programmes), either as a lead contractor or as a partner organisation with another work-based learning provider that is a lead contract holder. A minority of independent work-based learning providers also operate as lead contract holders for apprenticeships and the new Jobs Growth Wales Plus programme, while many others work as delivery partners with other lead contract holders.

The chart below shows the distribution of learners across the main programmes in 2020-2021. In addition, a very few learners aged 16-19 access shared or higher level apprenticeships.



### **NPTC Group of Colleges engages with local Health Boards to promote and deliver apprenticeship programmes**

NPTC Group of Colleges is an active partner with both Swansea Bay University Health Board (SBUHB) and Powys Training Health Board (PTHB). An Apprenticeship Academy has been established within the health board in order to successfully deliver an apprenticeship programme to respond to identified skills shortages and gaps and provide a talent pipeline for current and future clinical and non-clinical vacancies. The Academy promotes the benefits of apprenticeship opportunities, both internally and externally, co-ordinates the recruitment and monitoring of apprentices, and provides an integral link between the health board and the college to co-ordinate off-the-job training. The Academy has so far taken on over 500 apprentices in clinical and non-clinical roles, many of which have been school leavers.

## Vocational qualification programmes

The landscape of vocational qualifications is particularly complex. Parents and learners say they are less aware of vocational qualifications than they are of A levels. Vocational programme choices include those leading to general vocational qualifications, such as BTEC level 3 subsidiary diplomas or equivalent qualifications, which are broadly equivalent to one GCE A level. Most schools and colleges offer learners the opportunity to undertake a hybrid programme that combines AS/A levels and general vocational subject choices.

All colleges and a few schools offer learners the option of study a full general vocational level 3 learning programme that is based around a level 3 BTEC extended diploma (or equivalent similar qualification) in a specific occupational area. Examples include art and design, business, engineering, land-based subjects, travel and tourism, public services and sport. These level 3 extended diplomas are broadly equivalent to three A levels. Similar general vocational qualifications are available below level 3.

Most school sixth forms provide at least one level 3 vocational course, including subjects such as health and social care, sport, public services, applied science or applied business. A very few learners in school sixth forms undertake a wholly vocational learning programme.

Providers' approaches to inclusion of the Welsh Baccalaureate on full level 3 vocational programmes also vary, both between and within providers depending on individual learning programmes. The Welsh Baccalaureate is included in around a quarter of full vocational programmes.

Many other learning programmes are based mainly around technical vocational qualifications. These cover a wide range of occupational routes, such as beauty, hairdressing, childcare, construction trades, and health and social care. These qualifications are available at various levels and they form the basis of a wide range of practical learning programmes relating to specific job roles or occupational sectors. The range of qualifications also caters for older learners who may wish to retrain or study part-time.

Leaders in schools, colleges and work-based learning providers were generally positive about the development of Wales specific qualifications. They welcomed the recent development of specific general education qualifications for Wales, including AS and A levels. These have enabled learners in Wales to continue to benefit from the availability of AS and A level qualifications that meet the needs and interests of learners in Wales while allowing Wales to develop its own policy for these development, implementation and oversight of these qualifications.

Leaders are also generally positive about Qualifications Wales' recent and planned developments in relation to vocational qualifications that are specifically 'made for Wales'. They have also expressed particular concern about the potential impact of current policy developments in England that would involve the removal of funding from many vocational qualifications as part of planned qualification reforms.

Providers in Wales are especially worried about the likely implication of these reforms on the availability of vocational qualifications in Wales. Most vocational qualifications are currently delivered and regulated in conjunction with England and Northern Ireland agencies. The planned removal of funding in England from BTEC diploma programmes and equivalent qualifications and replacement with a smaller suite of England specific T levels is a major concern for providers in Wales. It is not clear whether awarding bodies will continue to make the current range of qualifications available or whether these qualifications will become more expensive without funding from England.

Leaders in schools, colleges and work-based learning providers are generally positive about the development of new Wales specific vocational qualifications resulting from the first series of sector reviews undertaken by Qualifications Wales. Many did express some frustration with early issues regarding the design and implementation of some of the new qualifications in health and social care, childcare and construction and building services. Qualifications Wales is currently working with providers and other key stakeholders to review and update these arrangements where necessary. Providers and Qualifications Wales recognise that there are lessons to be learnt from these initial reviews and reform of vocational qualifications in these sectors. These are being considered as part of ongoing review discussions about the recently introduced qualifications with a view to making revisions where appropriate.

### Collaborative provision

Communication, co-operation and collaboration are generally stronger between groups of schools with sixth forms than between schools with sixth forms, further education colleges and work-based learning providers. This often results in the offer of joint provision that is open to learners from different schools and colleges. These arrangements range from formal collaboration and consortium approaches through to informal arrangements based on links between individual providers.

#### **Two schools work in collaboration to establish Barry Sixth Form**

Barry Sixth Form is a collaborative sixth form, run jointly across Pencoedtre and Whitmore High Schools, with its own distinct uniform. Timetables are aligned between the two schools, allowing courses to run more effectively and efficiently. Through working in collaboration and combining learners from two schools, the sixth form is able to offer a wider range of A level and level 3 vocational qualifications than was previously the case in either school, with 36 courses on offer including new courses such as A levels in economics and geology.

The majority of schools with sixth forms report that they share provision with other providers. A few schools work with private companies, public sector organisations or specialist third sector organisations to deliver provision, such as childcare and sports programmes. Arrangements for evaluating and improving the quality of shared provision are too variable.

Arrangements for the delivery of shared provision typically involve timetabling shared provision on a common day or on two half days each week. Learners choosing shared subject options then usually travel to other sites as required to access shared provision. Alternatively, shared provision is delivered online, for example as part of the e-sgol blended learning initiative. During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic when widespread restrictions were in place, most providers switched their shared provision to online delivery. Most have now returned to face-to-face delivery, although a few providers have maintained or extended online delivery arrangements for shared provision since the lifting of restrictions.

In a few cases all learners across a local area are given a copy of a shared prospectus that details shared provision options available to them. Where shared provision is restricted to a small number of providers within an area, learners in these providers usually receive details of shared provision as part of the provider's own options information materials.

Leaders state that collaborative shared provision helps them increase the number of subject options available to learners, sharing specialist staff in shortage subjects as well as improving viability of provision. This approach is particularly useful in helping providers run A level subjects such as modern foreign languages, music, further mathematics, politics and economics. It can also be useful across a range of vocational subject options.

#### **Learners and schools benefit from partnership working**

Within the County Borough of Caerphilly there are several local secondary schools with small sixth forms. Schools work together in two local consortia, supported by the local authority, which funds transport for learners. Each school retains its own governing body while being committed to improving outcomes and broadening provision for learners, staff and the local community through close co-operation and mutual support. Schools met regularly to agree provision, track pupil progress between centres, standardise assessment and ensure that there are rigorous quality control measures in place. The partnership allows learners to access a wider range of subject options and also benefits the schools by allowing them to pool resources, share good practice and operate more efficiently.

Leaders in a minority of providers report that there is a lack of transparency and trust in cross-sector relations arising from competitive pressures and behaviours. These pressures are most evident in relationships between colleges with substantial A level provision and schools with small or medium sized sixth forms. In a few cases these tensions are also evident between schools, especially where schools with larger sixth forms recruit from other schools with sixth forms. Links with work-based learning providers are generally underdeveloped, except where major local public and private sector employers have initiated links as part of their apprenticeship recruitment strategies.

Competing priorities, senior leadership changes and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted on collaborative activities. Leaders feel that the combined effect of such pressures has contributed to some partnership initiatives and shared provision activities ending over the past couple of years.

Ongoing barriers to collaborative provision commonly cited by leaders include the complexity of timetabling common sessions for shared provision and logistical or financial issues relating to transporting learners to shared provision sessions. A few leaders also report that concerns over the quality of some shared options is also a barrier to sustaining collaborative arrangements.

College leaders report that relationships with schools that do not have a separate sixth form are generally strong. Collaboration between these schools usually includes extensive and useful joint planning of progression and transition activities. This helps learners make informed choices from a wide range of academic subjects and vocational courses and then transition smoothly to the next stage of their learning. Former pupils of these schools are also often invited to participate in visits to their previous school to share their experiences with current pupils who are considering their progression options.

### Supporting high attaining learners

The access and opportunities on offer through the Seren provision for high-attaining learners are generally well established in schools and colleges. It provides learners with enrichment opportunities that may support their studies and future prospects. Opportunities include links with specialist areas such as medicine and veterinary science, visits to higher education institutions including Cambridge University and Oxford University, and advice on university applications and interviews. However, while there are case studies of individual successes stories from learners involved in Seren, drawing conclusions on the overall impact Seren has nationally on future destinations is difficult as higher education destinations for those involved in Seren are not evaluated systematically. It is more likely that participants on the Seren Programme will be drawn from programmes focused on A levels than level 3 vocational qualifications (Welsh Government, 2018).

#### **Alun School learners enjoy Seren programme success**

At Alun School in Mold, interested learners participate in a seven week 'Seren medics' online programme hosted by Wrexham Maelor Hospital. Successful completion of the programme leads to a guaranteed structured work experience placement this summer. Those that attended the placement in recent years have enjoyed a 100% success rate in gaining offers from medical schools across the UK.

The Inspiring Skills Excellence in Wales project also provides support for learners in colleges and on apprenticeships to develop high level vocational skills through competing in World Skills competitions.



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## **Access to coaching for learning, personal support, and careers information and guidance to support learner choice and transition**

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Learners in schools without their own sixth form generally receive substantially more information, advice and guidance about the variety of education and training routes available to them in their local area. This usually includes access to useful impartial information, advice and guidance activities in relation to local college provision as well as about other local schools with a sixth form. Although most of these activities take place during Year 11, a minority of schools provide useful opportunities to access appropriate information and activities in Year 10, and in a few cases in Year 9 or below.

Learners in the majority of schools with their own sixth form receive detailed information about courses available in the sixth form, including any subject options that are available as part of local partnership arrangements. However, relatively little, if any, information on other options at all levels or apprenticeship opportunities available through alternative local providers is provided routinely to learners in the majority of these schools. This often results in learners being reliant on any information provided through careers adviser or through word of mouth from friends and family who have experience of other providers, or having to search provider websites independently to find information on alternative study and career routes. A minority of learners feel that insufficient attention is paid to alternative learning pathways other than staying on in the sixth form, especially if learners are expected to achieve well in their GCSEs. Learners feel that they should have the opportunity to meet with representatives from other providers in order to allow them to fully evaluate all available options, regardless of whether the school has its own sixth form.

Where schools with their own sixth forms do allow representatives into the school to meet with groups of learners studying in Year 11 this is sometimes restricted to meeting specific groups of learners who are unlikely to progress into their own school sixth form.

In our recent thematic survey (Estyn, 2022), we found that Careers Wales provides valuable information and advice in most schools about a wide range of available education and training pathways. It helps to provide useful events and activities, including careers fairs and progression events as well undertaking face-to-face sessions with vulnerable learners and providing support by telephone, email or via online chat facilities, although the availability and quality of these activities vary around Wales.

### **Annual curriculum updates at NPTC Group of Colleges for Careers Wales advisers**

Curriculum leads at NPTC Group of Colleges meet annually with Careers Wales advisers to showcase the curriculum offer across the colleges in the group. This event involves presentations from each curriculum area, providing updated information on the courses offered, entry requirements, progression opportunities and typical career routes. All curriculum areas are included including work-based learning routes. The events have been held remotely for the past two years during the COVID-19 pandemic. This has helped Careers Wales advisers remain up to date with key information about NPTC Group of Colleges and the education and training programmes available, which supports their work with learners at key stage 4 in schools.

Our recent report 'Impartial careers advice and guidance to young people aged 14 to 16 years provided by Careers Wales' report (Estyn, 2022) found that 'where young people begin their guidance session [with a Careers Wales adviser] with unrealistic plans and ideas, this usually stems from lack of support from their school or setting. Following guidance, these young people make very good progress towards understanding the post-16 routes available to them.'

Few schools provide enough information and advice on work-based learning opportunities, including apprenticeships, regardless of whether the school has its own sixth form provision. Only around a quarter of learners feel that they understand the range of apprenticeship pathways quite well or very well. Many parents' understanding of work-based learning pathways is very limited, with around 70% of respondents telling us they understand apprenticeship options very little or not well.

All schools and colleges continue to provide careers advice and information for post-16 learners, often through tutorial sessions. Careers Wales' work with this age group is more targeted. The Welsh Government has identified the need to provide more consistent advice and support for post-16 learners and has introduced the Young Person's Guarantee. The Young Person's Guarantee provides under 25s in Wales with the offer of support to gain a place in education or training, find a job or become self-employed. It is too early to evaluate the impact of this new initiative.

### **Entry requirements on programmes**

Most providers set a minimum entry requirement for post-16 programmes. Many also stipulate additional grade requirements for A level study in specific subjects, especially for maths and science subjects. For example, schools and colleges often stipulate that a minimum of a grade B at GCSE is required in such subjects for admission to these subjects at A level. A few providers do not stipulate a minimum entry requirement for admission into the sixth form.

Entry requirements vary significantly between providers. For example, many providers require a minimum of five A\*-C grades at GCSE for entry onto an A level programme. A few providers stipulate as many as eight A\*-C grades for entry onto such programmes.

Most providers also stipulate minimum entry requirements for enrolment onto equivalent level 3 vocational programmes, such as BTEC Extended Diplomas. Minimum entry requirements for such programmes are often set at a lower level than for A level programmes. Without clear explanation of any rationale for these differences, there is a risk that this may help perpetuate misconceptions that vocational qualifications are either less demanding, less valuable than A levels or less likely to be accepted by higher education institutions.

For foundation apprenticeships at level 2, learners do not need any specific qualifications and just have to show that they will be able to complete the programme. For standard apprenticeships at level 3, some employers expect learners to have a few GCSEs or equivalent as a minimum and some employers may require learners to have had previous experience in the industry.

Many providers exercise some degree of flexibility when considering entry grade profiles of individual learners, especially where learners have experienced extenuating circumstances such as serious illness or family bereavement. In a very few cases learners are admitted onto demanding level 3 programmes despite having a relatively weak profile of prior attainment at level 2 and no extenuating circumstances. This often leads to learners withdrawing from these courses or going on to fail final assessments.

In many areas there is choice between schools with sixth forms and further education colleges. Learners are able to choose from school, college or work-based learning provision available within their immediate and neighbouring local areas. Learners living close to the border with England often also consider continuing their studies at a sixth form college, further education college or school sixth form based in England. The intensity of competition varies substantially between, and within, local areas.

These competitive pressures are cited by many leaders, both in schools with sixth forms and in colleges, as having a significant impact on the range and extent of information, advice and guidance activities that is made available to learners. Financial concerns about budgets and local issues relating to surplus school places and provider performance against learner number targets often add to these pressures.

Leaders in schools with their own sixth form often perceive colleges as being overly aggressive in their marketing and promotional activities. Similarly, college leaders often perceive many schools with their own sixth forms to be overly focused on retaining as many learners as possible into their sixth forms including, in the worst cases, by restricting access to information and advice from external providers.

In a minority of cases, leaders in competing neighbouring providers tell us they work well together and alongside each other in the best interests of learners. They recognise that a mix of competition and collaboration can be mutually beneficial to their respective institutions and their learners. In a few cases, leaders report unnecessary duplication, and wasteful competition issues are a cause for concern, such as when a decision is made to duplicate specialist vocational provision within a local area without consultation or discussion about alternative approaches.

A few local authorities operate common application systems for learners applying for post-16 courses. This means that learners can apply for courses in more than one provider without the need to complete and submit multiple application forms. However, these systems do not always treat schools, colleges and work-based learning providers equally as they sometimes only allow direct applications to schools while signposting learners to other providers' own application systems.

Arrangements for entry onto shared courses vary between providers. In a few cases, additional applications or submission of additional information is required by partner providers.

The lack of a clear expectation and entitlement to specific types of information, advice and progression guidance across the available range of provision means that there is substantial variation in the information and activities provided to learners approaching the key transition point into post-16 education and training. This makes it far easier for some learners to access the impartial information and advice required to make fully informed choices about their future learning pathway than it does for others who find such information and advice much more difficult to access or make their choices based on limited information or biased advice.

Many learners appreciate the opportunity to choose from a range of providers as well as across a wide range of course and subject options. Most learners in schools without their own sixth form appreciate and enjoy the opportunity to meet representatives of a range of providers at events such as parents' evenings and progression events held at their school. The majority also take the opportunity to visit one or more providers at open events or for taster programmes organised in conjunction with their current school. Although nearly all of these activities were held online during the course of the pandemic, most providers have now resumed on-site and face-to-face events and activities.

#### **Learners at Coleg y Cymoedd emphasise the value of face-to-face open events**

Learners now studying at Coleg y Cymoedd said that they conducted their own research about their post-16 choices by contacting the college and attending one of their open events. Learners particularly valued the opportunity to visit the college in person to see facilities and observe learners participating in activities, as well as being able to meet with staff face-to-face. They also enjoyed speaking with 'Learner Ambassadors' during these events to ask questions about specific courses, as well as finding out about student life at the college. Many learners found this so beneficial that they later signed up to become ambassadors themselves to help future learners find out more about studying at the college.

There are also wide variations in entry requirements for courses in higher education depending on the institution and the course level and popularity. Colleges and schools report variations in the value placed by higher education institutions on different vocational qualifications and qualification combinations, which means that some learners do not gain access to courses they want to follow. The complexity of vocational qualifications and the variety of ways in which they are combined with

other courses do not support a strong understanding of the value of these qualifications.

### Transition arrangements

Schools and colleges are expected to work together to facilitate the smooth transition of learners from one provider to another. Welsh Government guidance on 'Effective post-16 transitions and data sharing' (Welsh Government, 2019) states that providers should work together to provide information, advice and guidance to learners on educational pathways and career aims. It also suggests that they should share information about individual learners, including their achievements, well-being, behaviour, attendance and qualification outcomes when they transition from one provider to another.

Transition arrangements are generally more comprehensive and effective for learners progressing from schools that do not have their own sixth forms. Links between additional learning needs co-ordinators across local school and colleges also help with information sharing and transition planning in relation to those learners with identified additional learning needs. Overall, the majority of providers do not routinely share information to support learners' transition when they progress to another school or college.

Providers in a few local areas are working collaboratively to extend arrangements for the sharing of information on individual learners in response to recent Welsh Government guidance on 'Effective post-16 transitions and data sharing' (Welsh Government, 2019). Providers in a minority of local areas have agreed information and data sharing protocols. However, the range and extent of information covered by these agreements are often too limited.

Information sharing arrangements to support the transition of learners with ALN between schools and other providers are strong. Suitable support and guidance ensure that ALN learners have a beneficial understanding of the options and pathways 14-19. The ALNCo, pastoral staff and specialist careers advisers work well together to help learners to transition smoothly. Where this is a strong feature, regular dialogue and planning for transition take place within the school or between the school and other providers. This may include visits, detailed transfer of information (on the ALN along with well-being and academic information) and continued support for learners. This appears to be a strong feature in line with the Welsh Government's requirements set out in the 'Effective post-16 transitions and data sharing' guidance (Welsh Government, 2019).

**Smooth transition arrangements for learners progressing from schools to Pembrokeshire College**

Pembrokeshire College has strong relationships with schools in their local area that do not have a sixth form to support the smooth transition of learners from school to college. Transition arrangements include bespoke support for learners with ALN and other learners who may need extra support such as LGBTQ+ learners, more able and talented learners, young carers and Welsh speakers. The college works closely alongside partners including parents and carers, Careers Wales advisers, school staff and the local authority's social services, inclusion and education teams as part of these arrangements. Transition arrangements are supported by established information sharing. Particularly vulnerable learners benefit from personal development activities with the college, vocational taster sessions and familiarisation visits to the college linked to their interests. This enabled learners to reduce anxiety, improve confidence and make informed decisions based around these experiences when choosing a post-16 pathway.



## Leadership, planning and funding for the 16-19 curriculum

Overall, the national, regional and local structures to support improvements in the curriculum for 16 to 19-year-olds in Wales are not working well enough. There is no clear national vision or strategy for education and training for 16 to 19-year-olds in Wales. Schools, colleges and work-based learning providers in the post-16 sector, along with local authorities, are influenced by different departments in the Welsh Government, have different funding delivery arrangements and are not subject to the same statutory duties or guidance. The planned creation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research is based on a recognition of these issues and the need to address them.

In spite of the lack coherent direction from the Welsh Government for learners aged 16-19, providers and local authorities in a few local areas work well strategically to overcome some of the barriers and provide a broad and relevant curriculum offer that meets the needs of learners at all levels.

The new Curriculum for Wales is being rolled out from September 2022 with around half of secondary schools introducing it voluntarily in Year 7. The remaining secondary schools will introduce it to Years 7 and 8 at the same time from September 2023.

Decisions around how a school develops their curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 in the coming years is likely to have implications for learners' post-16 choices. Equally, post-16 providers will need to consider the implications for the local curriculum offer as the first learners to experience Curriculum for Wales throughout key stages 3 and 4 leave compulsory education in the summer of 2027.

A minority of school and college leaders and teachers interviewed as part of this thematic review expressed concern that uncertainty about the future structure of the curriculum and assessment frameworks resulting from the phased introduction of Curriculum for Wales raises important questions that need to be addressed in relation to future development of frameworks for the post-16 curriculum and qualifications. For example, the subjects that learners study at GCSE often have an important bearing on their subsequent subject and course choices, especially when selecting A level options. These include subjects such as modern foreign languages, humanities and sciences.

Changes in the pre-16 qualification framework are likely to impact on subject options and choices for 16 to 19-year-old learners. Currently, the post-16 curriculum and qualifications framework has not been reviewed or updated to reflect any potential impact of Curriculum for Wales developments on learners' experience, skills and qualifications acquired up to the age of 16.

Collaboration across the post-16 sector is hindered by disparities in the funding mechanisms between school sixth forms and colleges, as noted in a policy briefing from Colegau Cymru (2020). They claim that the current curriculum privileges academic progression pathways over higher level vocational opportunities.

A minority of school leaders told us that funding issues remain a key concern, especially regarding how individual local authorities allocate sixth form funding to schools. There is also widespread uncertainty about the potential impact of the imminent establishment of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, especially in relation to the sustainability of smaller sixth forms.

In the majority of local areas, the removal of specific grant funding from the Welsh Government for 14-19 networks in 2017 has been accompanied by the dissolution of the local 14-19 network. Joint strategic planning has declined in these areas, leading to less collaboration, a more limited local curriculum offer and a lack of monitoring of whether or not the offer meets the requirements of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009. In a minority of areas, local 14-19 networks have been replaced by new strategic groups that continue to focus usefully on joint planning and review of the local curriculum offer.

### **The Flintshire Post-16 Network**

The Flintshire Post-16 Network consists of headteachers from six local schools with sixth forms and a representative from Coleg Cambria. The network provides strategic direction and local support and monitoring for post-16 provision in Flintshire. For example, the group ensure that, through the regional school improvement service, there is support for developing and sharing good practice in teaching and learning across post-16 providers. The group analyses progression, recruitment and retention of learners between key stage 4 and key stage 5 to support strategic planning.

### **Strategic plans to strengthen post-16 collaboration between schools and other partners in Powys**

Powys County Council is aiming to improve the learner entitlement and experience for post-16 learners across the county as part of its Strategy for Transforming Education in Powys 2020-2030. This strategy aims to ensure that all post-16 learners in Powys have equal access to high-quality provision in both Welsh and English, including those with additional learning needs. Post-16 provision will remain at all current Powys post-16 centres as part of the proposals. Under the new model, all post-16 learners will have a 'home base' but will be able to access courses locally and across the county via face-to-face teaching and through the online delivery of lessons.

There is a tension between what learners are choosing to do at age 16 and what local employers have identified they need more learners to do in order to meet their future recruitment needs. Employers, through the regional skills partnerships, identify priority sectors for recruitment and aim to influence post-16 providers to offer courses with enough capacity to provide pathways to employment in these sectors. For example, this is the conclusion of the South West Wales Regional Learning and Skills Partnership in its plan for 2019-2022: 'those sectors that are attractive to learners are considered over-subscribed' and 'there needs to be a re-balancing of the further education and work based learning offer to ensure that priority sectors have

an ample, varied and suitable provision offer' (South West Wales Regional Learning and Skills Partnership, 2019, p6). Although the regional skills partnerships communicated priorities for apprenticeships and vocational programmes to the Welsh Government, there are no nationally published reports analysing how this impacts on provision across Wales.

Regional skills partnerships potentially have an important role to play in forming partnerships between employers and education and training providers to help ensure that provision to develop skills is meeting Wales' future skills needs. However, the regional skills partnerships vary significantly in terms of size and maturity. In the best examples, it is clear how the priorities identified by a regional skills partnership have started to impact on provision at a local level in a college, for example by reducing or increasing the target numbers for specific sector areas.

It would be useful to explore whether or not there are particular trends with specific groups of learners that indicate that their needs are not being met as well as other learners' needs in any aspect of post-16 education. Published data about destinations, course choices and outcomes for post-16 learners does not currently support a detailed analysis for learners with protected characteristics or additional learning needs or for other vulnerable learners or those who learn through the medium of Welsh. It is not possible to report in detail on whether or not there are specific equality issues that need to be addressed, such as whether or not some groups of learners are less likely to access certain courses or types of provision such as apprenticeships. Being able to analyse richer data would help providers to tailor their curriculum offer and support better for learners, and support local, regional and national strategic planning.

The data about post-16 learners that is currently available is not used well enough at provider, local, regional or national level to evaluate provision or policy and plan for improvements.

It is also not clear how the Welsh Government currently sets priorities for some of the post-16 sectors. Prior to 2018, the Minister wrote to further education colleges and local authorities regarding their sixth form provision each year with priorities, for example in relation to promoting equality and equity. Overall, there is little evident planning happening at a national level to drive post-16 curriculum design at a local level.

## Methods and evidence base

Inspectors conducted online meetings with a range of secondary schools, further education colleges, work-based learning training providers and local authorities in eight local authority areas across Wales.

Inspectors held discussions with:

- young people
- leaders and staff

Inspectors scrutinised relevant documentation in these providers and local authorities, such as:

- prospectuses
- pre-entry post-16 course information
- course timetables
- information sharing protocols
- partnership agreements

Inspectors also spoke to leaders of national bodies that support post-16 education and training in Wales.

Inspectors considered a wide range of relevant national data, such as:

- destinations of learners at age 16 and beyond
- information about learning programmes running
- information about qualifications gained

Inspectors scrutinised a range of national documents and reports relating to 16-19 education and training.

A questionnaire for learners was distributed among the providers contacted. A total of 3,446 responses were collected.

### Providers and local authorities contacted

ACT Training  
 Bishop Gore School, Swansea  
 Caerphilly County Borough Council  
 Caereinion High School, Powys  
 Cardiff and Vale College  
 Castell Alun High School, Flintshire  
 City and County of Swansea  
 Coleg Cambria  
 Coleg y Cymoedd  
 Cowbridge Comprehensive School, Vale of Glamorgan  
 Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn - Isle of Anglesey County Council

Flintshire County Council  
Gower College Swansea  
Grwp Llandrillo Menai  
Gwynedd Council  
Haverfordwest High VC School, Pembrokeshire  
Heolddu Comprehensive School, Caerphilly  
Itec Training Solutions  
Llantwit Major School, Vale of Glamorgan  
Mold Alun School, Flintshire  
Newtown High School, Powys  
NPTC Group of Colleges  
Olchfa School, Swansea  
Pembrokeshire County Council  
Pembrokeshire College  
Powys County Council  
St Martin's School, Caerphilly  
Vale of Glamorgan Council  
Welshpool High School, Powys  
Ysgol David Hughes, Ynys Môn  
Ysgol Dyffryn Nantlle, Gwynedd  
Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhymni, Caerphilly  
Ysgol Gyfun Ddwyieithog Y Preseli, Pembrokeshire  
Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bryn Tawe, Swansea  
Ysgol Maes Garmon, Flintshire  
Ysgol Syr Hugh Owen, Gwynedd  
Ysgol Uwchradd Caergybi, Ynys Môn

## Glossary

<b>A level</b>	General Certificate of Education Advanced Level qualification (level 3)
<b>ALN</b>	Additional learning needs
<b>ALNCo</b>	Additional learning needs co-ordinator
<b>AS level</b>	General Certificate of Education Advanced Subsidiary Level qualification (level 3)
<b>BTEC</b>	A BTEC is a work-related qualification that combines practical learning with theory content.
<b>College</b>	One of the 12 further education institutions in Wales predominantly providing education to 16 to 19-year-old learners
<b>Consolidated provision</b>	Secondary schools do not have their own individual sixth forms. Learners from these schools progress to a nearby college or school sixth form.
<b>Consortia</b>	Regional school improvement consortia working to lead, orchestrate and co-ordinate improvements in the performance of schools and education of young people
<b>GCSE</b>	General Certificate of Secondary Education qualification (level 2)
<b>NEET</b>	Not in Education, Employment or Training
<b>OFQUAL</b>	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) regulates qualifications, examinations and assessments in England.
<b>Post-16</b>	For the purposes of this report, post-16 refers to the phase of education involving learners between 16 and 19 years of age. It encompasses school sixth form and college learners, but excludes those in higher education such as at university.
<b>Shared apprenticeship</b>	The shared apprenticeship scheme allows apprentices to complete a full apprenticeship programme by working with a number of different employers rather than a single employer.
<b>Shared provision</b>	Courses where providers combine teaching groups from different sixth forms or colleges



<b>Sixth form</b>	The phase involving school Years 12 and 13 where learners between 16 and 19 years of age typically study level 3 qualifications such as A levels or equivalent vocational qualifications.
<b>UCAS</b>	The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is a UK-based organisation whose main role is to operate the application process for British universities.
<b>Value-added</b>	Measures used to gauge the degree of progress learners make from their starting points, based on prior attainment. They quantify grade attainment for level 3 qualifications, such as A levels, by taking into account learners' prior attainment at level 2 (predominantly GCSE).
<b>Welsh Baccalaureate</b>	The Welsh Baccalaureate comprises multiple elements and is achieved on the successful completion of the Skills Challenge Certificate and the required level of attainment in supporting qualifications. It can be achieved at three levels: Foundation (level 1), National (level 2) and Advanced (level 3).

### Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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