



March 2022



Engagement work

Further education and adult learning in the community sectors update – autumn 2021

This report summarises the findings from link inspector engagement visits and calls made to all further education colleges, and most adult learning in the community partnerships between September and December 2021. This report is based on the information discussed during face-to-face and online meetings with senior and middle leaders and small groups of learners.

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Summary

There have been some significant changes in enrolment numbers and patterns across the sectors this year. In further education, the earlier release of GCSE grades allowed colleges to begin enrolment earlier than previous years, with the majority conducted online. Colleges reported an increase in learners opting for apprenticeships, especially in engineering and construction. Most colleges experienced a decline in the number of enrolments for full-time and part-time courses in September 2021, especially on vocational programmes such as health and social care, business, and travel, tourism and sport. In adult learning in the community partnerships, nearly all providers reported an increase in enrolments this year compared to 2020, but that numbers were still below pre-pandemic levels.

Returning to learning in the sectors has varied too. Arrangements for starting college from September have followed a hybrid approach with a blend of online and face-to-face induction activities. Colleges arranged staggered start dates to manage the numbers returning to campus and to reduce anxiety for learners returning to college venues. Since the start of September, colleges have moved most of their provision to on-site delivery. In the adult learning sector, there has been considerable variation in the approach partnerships have taken to re-opening centres for face-to-face learning. In a few partnerships, nearly all delivery is online whereas in other partnerships, most learning is taking place face-to-face in centres. Where partnerships use third-party owned venues, such as community centres, they have reported difficulties in returning to face-to-face teaching and learning. A very few partnerships opened learning centres to provide practical elements of classes which could not be delivered online. Both sectors are offering some of their provision online and staff training has shifted towards improving online teaching and learning strategies.

Progress towards adult learning in the community partnerships forming larger, regional collaborations has been inconsistent. A few partnerships have recently formalised new collaborations between local authorities and with college partners.

The effects of the pandemic have accelerated staff recruitment challenges in both sectors. Many colleges have reported concerns with recruiting in the curriculum areas of engineering, construction, IT and accountancy. In the adult learning in the community sector, many partnerships have difficulties in recruiting teaching and administrative staff to respond to the vacancies being created through an ageing workforce.

Detailed findings

Further education link visits: September – December 2021

The information contained in this report is based upon engagement visits to 12 further education colleges between September and December 2021. During each visit, discussions were held with senior and middle leaders and with small groups of learners, using both face-to-face and online meetings. The focus for discussions was the ongoing effects of the pandemic on enrolment trends, curriculum content and delivery and also contingency and strategic plans. This report details the current situation facing providers and will also inform our thematic review on the 16-19 curriculum.



Enrolment

There have been some significant changes in enrolment numbers and patterns across the sector this year. Many of these were anticipated given the continued disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most colleges experienced a decline in the number of enrolments for full-time and part-time courses in September 2021 compared to the previous year. The sharpest decline has been on enrolments for vocational programmes and there has been a notable pattern of school leavers choosing to study A Levels rather than level 3 vocational courses. In those colleges offering A Level provision, the fall in full-time enrolments has been lower and, in a few colleges, lower vocational enrolments have been offset by higher numbers of learners studying A Levels. Colleges also reported a shift in enrolments from lower-level vocational courses to higher level ones and, in the majority of colleges, this has coincided with more learners starting college with GCSE English and mathematics qualifications at C grade or higher. There are fewer learners requiring GCSE re-sit classes in English and mathematics compared to previous years, although a few colleges report similar trends to previous years in the pattern of literacy and numeracy WEST (Wales Essential Skills Toolkit) initial assessment results.

Colleges have reported an increase in the number of learners opting for apprenticeships especially in areas such as engineering and construction. These programmes have become more widely available as these sectors of the economy recover from the pandemic. This could explain the decline in enrolments on engineering courses reported by many colleges. Health and social care, business, travel and tourism and sport enrolments have also been lower than in previous years in many colleges, whilst enrolments in animal care and other land-based courses have increased.

College leaders have analysed their patterns of enrolment and attribute many of the changes to external factors related to the pandemic. The process of Centre Determined Grades for GCSEs made more applicants eligible to apply for A Level programmes which traditionally require higher entry qualifications compared to vocational alternatives. In a few areas, college managers reported that local schools' sixth form numbers were higher as learners opted to stay on at school. A minority of colleges report buoyant local labour markets offering low skilled employment opportunities in areas such as hospitality and retailing which may have also contributed to lower vocational and part-time enrolments than in previous years.

The early release of GCSE grades allowed colleges to begin enrolment sooner than in previous years and for the majority this was conducted mainly online. This allowed colleges to offer guidance on course suitability and provide necessary support for those learners identified as requiring it prior to starting college. In a very few cases, there were problems with digital enrolment systems which caused some problems for learners. These were swiftly identified, and learners were contacted by telephone or email and invited to enrol on college premises. Many colleges continued to accept new learners until October half-term and a few had plans for a January intake.

Throughout the last academic year, colleges conducted most of their open evenings virtually and many reported lower than usual engagement. These evenings have traditionally allowed subject specialist staff and existing learners to meet with

applicants to discuss their provision and to showcase their facilities and resources. In many colleges, there were fewer opportunities than usual to attend secondary school open events and hold on-site taster days for Year 11 pupils. Course information and taster sessions were made available on college websites but engagement with these was variable and in the majority of cases, this was not monitored. In a few colleges, learners were invited on site for an interview to discuss their application.

Transition

Accessing impartial advice and guidance about post-16 provision continues to be a challenge across the sector. Most learners reported that they had received very little information or guidance from their schools, careers advisers or college staff prior to applying to college. Around half had conducted their own research and a few had chosen to study at college based on recommendations from friends and family. A few learners felt that the advice given by their schools focused predominantly on encouraging them to progress to the schools' own sixth forms. Once applications were made, most learners were pleased with the communication they received from colleges throughout the summer period. They reported this made them feel less anxious about starting college. In some cases, learners had the opportunity to speak with subject specialist staff about their choices during this period.

Accessing background information about learners who have applied for college has been inconsistent across the sector with a few colleges reporting difficulties obtaining information from schools, local authorities and external agencies. In a few instances, this has meant learners started college without the support they needed, and colleges have had to arrange retrospective support after speaking with learners directly. Relationships with 11-16 secondary schools were reported to be stronger which facilitated information sharing. Most colleges have used Welsh Government funding under the Renew and Reform Covid-19 Recovery Plan to support learners to transition to college.

For learners on Independent Living Skills programmes and those with additional learning needs (ALN), many colleges reported better information sharing. In a few cases, college staff attended virtual meetings with schools' ALNCoS throughout the year and reported more engagement and higher attendance when compared to the face-to-face meetings held in previous years. In around half of colleges, learners with ALN and those identified as vulnerable attended college prior to September to participate in activities to get them ready for college. Activities included tours of the college, meeting tutors and support staff and learning about where to buy food and how to travel to college.

Induction

Arrangements for starting college in 2021 have generally followed a hybrid approach for nearly all colleges, with a blend of online and face-to-face induction activities. Due to the early release of GCSE grades, these activities occurred throughout July and August. Most learners welcomed the information they received online as it allowed them to access college IT systems and apply for digital loans, arrange their applications for financial support and find out more about college enrichment activities before the start of their courses. Many colleges had a dedicated induction section on their website which has been particularly helpful for those joining late.

Most colleges arranged staggered start dates to manage the footfall on campus and to reduce anxiety for learners arriving at college on their first day. Colleges have been mindful that there are greater numbers of learners starting college with anxiety and have used additional Welsh Government funding to provide additional resources to support wellbeing and mental health. Many colleges have recruited more wellbeing staff and invested in developing dedicated wellbeing areas for learners. During induction, learners were introduced to pastoral staff and most reported that they would know how and where to access this support if they needed to.

Learner feedback about induction was mixed. Nearly all expressed a preference to attend college yet their first day experiences were variable. In many instances, induction was a functional process mainly involving information giving and learners were less positive about these experiences. In a few colleges, where induction was conducted in a more course-specific way, feedback was more positive. Learners welcomed the opportunity to meet their peers and make friends on their courses, meet key support staff, and engage in activities relevant to their programme areas.

For learners on Independent Living Skills programmes, induction arrangements were more bespoke to support their needs. In many cases, these learners were prioritised for face-to-face attendance. Induction has involved multi-agencies and in some cases parents have visited college with learners to help them settle in.

Curriculum content

Following the disruption to external assessments and curriculum content last academic year, colleges welcomed the early announcement and release of information relating to subject adaptations for A Levels. Adaptations to vocational learning programmes are less certain and colleges report that they are delivering full specifications with some minor amendments affecting practical elements on some courses. For example, in hair and beauty learners can demonstrate on their peers rather than on external clients. College leaders expressed concerns about the lack of clear guidance from awarding organisations and the disparities between adaptations to academic and vocational programmes.

Provision for the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification (WBQ) is mixed across the sector. Most A Level learners study it with the exception of those following four A Levels. For vocational programmes, take up of the WBQ is less consistent and varies across curriculum areas in most colleges. Learner feedback is more positive where the WBQ is integrated into the main qualification. There have been some concessions to the community challenge assessments this year due to COVID-19 restrictions preventing learners getting into voluntary settings and colleges welcomed the early announcement regarding these changes.

Colleges are making use of additional Welsh Government funding to provide more curriculum hours. For most, this is being used to develop skills in literacy and numeracy. Almost all colleges reported that there are significant numbers of learners struggling with the demands of their programmes. However, in a few colleges, there have been challenges in staffing these additional curriculum hours.

Many learners acknowledge tutorials as being a strong feature of their college experiences and speak favourably of the support they receive from their personal tutors. They describe their personal tutors as approachable and caring. Colleges

have invested significantly in wellbeing and mental health including developing content for tutorial programmes, dedicated wellbeing staff and physical spaces. There is limited awareness of the issues raised through the 'Everyone's Invited' platform, although many colleges have included sexual harassment and bullying in their tutorial programmes. One college is planning staff training on these issues.

Enrichment activities are slowly returning to the curriculum. A minority of colleges have undertaken local visits and entered skills competitions and a majority have invited guest speakers to address learners remotely.

Curriculum delivery

Since the start of the academic year, colleges have moved most of their provision to on-site delivery. This was the clear preference for most learners and staff. The ongoing uncertainty with the pandemic and changes to local and national guidelines have influenced delivery methods and colleges have adapted quickly to full or partly remote learning activities when required to do so. Colleges have retained elements of blended delivery to accommodate staff and learners required to self-isolate and in a few colleges to reduce the mixing of learners outside their main qualification groups. For example, a few colleges have face-to-face delivery for A Level subjects yet the WBQ and tutorials are delivered remotely. A few colleges have cited examples where a blended approach has been beneficial to learners. For example, one college reported more engagement from learners in GCSE English classes that are held remotely. Nearly all colleges have a clear rationale for the hybrid approach, although in a few instances this is not communicated clearly enough to the learners.

Colleges have made decisions to prioritise on-site attendance for certain groups. In most colleges, vulnerable learners, those on Independent Living Skills programmes and those on level 1 and level 2 courses attend for nearly all of their learning. Practical sessions on vocational courses were front loaded from September when there were fewer pandemic restrictions. Priority was given to courses where practical assessments were essential for learners to achieve qualifications for their licence to practise. When sessions are delivered online, many colleges provide a facility for vulnerable learners to attend college to access the sessions from college premises where there are staff available to support them.

The balance between on-site and remote delivery varies across the sector and colleges are responding flexibly and adjusting timetables in light of local cases of COVID-19 and the needs of the learners. Managers understand the preference from most learners is to return to full face-to-face learning but they have been mindful of the need to retain some remote delivery in anticipation of future lockdowns.

Assessment

Colleges responded well to the challenges presented by the cancellation of last summer's external examinations drawing upon their expertise and experiences of higher education and vocational processes for standardisation and moderation. Almost all reported rigorous and transparent systems that were implemented for the A Level Centre Determined Grade process and vocational qualification Teacher Assessed Grades. Around half collaborated with other colleges to ensure consistency across the sector. As a result of this, grade appeals by learners were managed well and only a very small proportion were changed by awarding

organisations. Some elements of these processes have been retained as good practice. While colleges collaborated with other colleges for moderation processes, there were few opportunities to do the same with secondary schools in their local areas. Colleges expressed frustration about the lack of information from some awarding organisations and the timeliness of information received last year which they felt put undue pressure on staff and learners.

Around half of colleges reported a backlog of practical assessments from last year and, in a very few cases from 2019, for child-care and health and social care courses. In a few areas, local authorities are still not allowing placements in nurseries and learners are still not permitted into clinical settings such as care homes and hospitals. As a result, some learners have not been able to complete their course and achieve a licence to practise. Colleges are working hard to find placements and have prioritised previous cohorts. This is, however, having an impact on current learners in a minority of colleges.

Colleges are planning their assessments and curriculum in anticipation of the return of external examinations while maintaining contingencies in anticipation of further disruption. Many are increasing the frequency of formal internal assessments and ensuring learner progress is monitored. Many learners report feeling anxious about the uncertainty over the way they might be assessed but appreciate the support put in place by their teachers to develop their examination skills. A few learners expressed concern because they were uncertain as to which internal assessments would be included for final grading if Centre Determined Grades were used as the main assessment. A very few learners expressed concern that if external examinations were cancelled again, they would feel less prepared for higher education.

Strategic plans

Senior leaders have clear strategies for improvement with a focus on meeting the needs of learners, their local economy and wider stakeholders. There is recognition of the need to continuously improve teaching and learning in most colleges. Almost all colleges have given greater prominence to staff wellbeing and environmental issues. Many have made significant investments in accommodation, physical resources and staffing using funding from Welsh Government, reserves and commercial loans to develop accommodation and facilities. Labour market intelligence and relationships with partners are used to develop provision. Examples of developments include programmes in engineering for the aerospace and agricultural sectors, and courses for nursing cadets in collaboration with a local health board.

Contingency plans

Colleges anticipate that hybrid delivery and elements of working from home will continue for some time and have developed risk assessments and contingency plans that are flexible to allow for the changing course of the pandemic and official advice and guidelines. Where possible, they have listened to learners' preference for on-site delivery yet have remained cautious and are aware of the risks of allowing greater footfall on college premises. At the time of the engagement visits, many colleges had relaxed some rules on moving around the premises and social distancing but had

kept mask wearing as mandatory in communal areas. They have condensed timetables and retained elements of online delivery to reduce mixing of learner groups. Most colleges had plentiful supplies of hand sanitiser and masks, but in a minority of colleges, learners not wearing masks were not challenged by staff. By the time of later visits, official guidelines had changed and mask wearing became compulsory again in classrooms. Colleges responded swiftly to this advice, contacting learners via text messages and emails and engaging more staff to patrol communal areas and main entry points. In a very few colleges, ventilation was poor and few classrooms had open windows. Almost all learners report feeling safe at college.

Colleges reported ongoing challenges presented by the prevalence of learners and staff with mental health concerns. Almost all colleges have invested heavily in wellbeing measures such as appointing extra support staff and providing additional training since the start of the pandemic using funding from the Welsh Government Renew and Reform Covid-19 Recovery Plan. A few college leaders expressed concerns for the sustainability of their initiatives to support staff and learners after the funding ceases. In a few colleges, leaders reported difficulties recruiting pastoral and academic support staff particularly where many posts are advertised as fixed-term contracts.

Staffing and professional development

The effects of the pandemic have accelerated the recruitment challenges many colleges were already facing. In around half of colleges, leaders have reported more requests from staff for early retirement and agile working and many have an ageing workforce. Recruitment has been most difficult for academic staff in curriculum areas such as engineering, construction, IT and accountancy. This is worse in colleges located in the west and south-west of the country. A few colleges also reported challenges recruiting staff to support and administration roles. One college is currently advertising 90 vacancies. Almost all expressed difficulties recruiting Welsh-speaking staff. They attribute the challenges to the financial incentives to work in the private sector especially for construction, IT and engineering where remuneration is often much higher than for staff in colleges. Additionally, many of the roles are advertised as fixed-term contracts, due to use of the Renew and Reform grant funding, which has resulted in lower response rates. In a few colleges, existing staff are working over-time to cover classes. One college is upskilling existing support staff and technicians by funding higher education and PGCE courses whilst another has contacted past learners who have recently graduated to entice them into teaching by offering them placement hours and funding towards a teaching qualification.

Senior leaders have a clear focus to support staff to develop capacity. Almost all have aspiring leaders and managers programmes which they develop largely in house, and, in a few colleges, participants can achieve accredited leadership and management qualifications. These have proved popular and are often over-subscribed. A minority of colleges have different progression pathways available such as industry-related or professional research experiences, for example through funding work placements to upskill teachers in health education and allowing time for staff to undertake research enquiries in their chosen sectors.

Staff training has shifted away from focusing on developing digital tools, necessary at the start of the pandemic, towards supporting staff in terms of their own mental health and wellbeing and strategies to improve teaching and learning. Many colleges have noted more collaboration between staff facilitated by familiarisation with digital platforms where they can share information and resources. For example, in colleges where there are multiple campuses, staff have shared teaching resources and moderated learners' work online. In a few colleges, modern building designs and new facilities have enhanced opportunities for staff to collaborate. A few colleges report strengthening ties with neighbouring colleges through professional learning networks. One college has been developing provision for the Green Economy in collaboration with a leading energy provider whilst others have worked together alongside a local university and their regional health board to develop new courses for entry to nursing.

Adult learning in the community partnerships link visits and online calls: October – December 2021

These engagement visits were carried out through a mix of online and face-to-face activities. In total, eleven partnerships and Adult Learning Wales were visited during October and early December 2021. The Omicron variant only appeared in Wales towards the end of this period and increased restrictions were not yet in place.

Adult learning in the community is delivered by 13 partnerships across Wales and Addysg Oedolion Cymru / Adult Learning Wales.

Membership of the partnerships differs from area to area, but most include provision offered by the local authority, further education college, Adult Learning Wales and local voluntary organisations.

Over recent years, the sector has focused its funded provision on courses for adults to improve their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Partnerships also provide a small number of leisure and recreational programmes for personal interest, wellbeing, and inclusion, such as yoga classes, needlecraft or local history. In many cases, partnerships support voluntary groups or clubs to run their own leisure and wellbeing provision, by providing venues or advertising classes.



Enrolment and centre re-opening

Nearly all providers report an increase in enrolments compared to last academic year (2020-2021). However, most providers report fewer enrolments for this stage of the autumn term than their typical patterns pre-pandemic.

There is considerable variation across the sector in respect of reopening centres for face-to-face learning. This varies from partnerships where nearly all centres are open and operating with COVID-19 safety mitigations to, in a very few cases, only one centre open for face-to-face delivery.

In general, partnerships have found it more straightforward to return to face-to-face learning in venues which are under their control, such as council-owned learning centres or college premises. This is because they are able to carry out risk assessments and put in place COVID-19 safety mitigations. Partnerships report more difficulty in reopening face-to-face provision where they use third-party owned venues such as community centres. A very few partnerships have opened only a very limited number of learning centres in order to deliver practical components of classes which cannot be delivered online, for example, first aid training where there is a practical element to the assessment.

All partnerships are offering some of their provision online. The proportion of online delivery varies between partnerships, from about one-quarter of provision delivered online to, in a very few cases, nearly all provision being delivered online. Many partnerships also use blended delivery approaches, where learners attend both face-to-face and online classes. Where blended learning approaches are being used, most providers report using face-to-face sessions to get learning programmes and courses 'started on the right foot', to introduce learners to each other and their tutors, and to ensure that learners have the necessary skills and suitable IT equipment to engage in their online learning sessions.

Training teachers in online pedagogy and developing the infrastructure for online learning remains a priority for nearly all partnerships' professional learning programmes. Partnerships report benefitting from the support provided by their own staff, who received specialist digital pedagogy training during the pandemic, now acting as mentors for their peers.

We spoke to learners during our face-to-face and online engagement visits. Nearly all learners who had returned to classroom-based learning were pleased to be back in a classroom learning environment and valued the social interaction with fellow learners and their tutors. Providers report that they have invested considerable effort into ensuring that learners feel safe on their return to centres, and to explain the COVID-19 safety procedures and mitigations they have put in place. These include one-way systems, hand sanitiser and facemask stations, increased ventilation, social distancing in classroom and communal areas, reduced density of learners in classrooms and learning centres, wearing of masks in classroom or communal areas, physical barriers such as clear plastic screens in reception areas and designated teaching stations in classrooms.

Provision and delivery

Nearly all partnerships are reviewing or beginning to review their provision offer in light of the pandemic and due to the changes in Welsh Government funding. In some

cases, partnerships are planning to expand the quantity of courses they offer in response to increased funding. Conversely, some partnerships are considering how they can reduce costs or, if necessary, reduce the quantity of provision in response to reduced funding.

The demand for different types of courses is variable across Wales, reflecting the different needs of the partnership's areas. For example, a few partnerships report strong demand from learners for IT courses, whereas others report that demand for IT, particularly lower-level courses, is much reduced. Many partnerships report increases in demand for health and wellbeing classes, and for classes in British Sign Language.

Across Wales, there is considerable variation between partnerships in the breadth of their provision offer. All partnerships offer the 'core' provision of adult essential skills (developing literacy, numeracy and IT skills) and skills for employability (such as CV writing). Provision for health and wellbeing classes such as yoga, or art or creative writing is variable, depending on the partnership.

During the pandemic, very little provision for family learning took place. Family learning often takes place in schools and provides opportunities for parents to improve their own literacy, numeracy and IT skills hand in hand with their children. During periods of school closure and continued restrictions on non-essential adults entering schools, it was not possible to sustain this provision. During the autumn term of 2021, around half the partnerships offering family learning began to re-establish this provision, initially in a few schools. A few partnerships do not offer family learning provision.

Many partnerships facilitate a range of cost-recovery courses, which are not funded directly by Welsh Government. These courses provide a wider choice of activities for their communities, such as gardening, British Sign Language, modern foreign languages, furniture restoration, photography or pottery. Many of these courses continued during the autumn term.

The pattern of delivery for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) is also variable across partnerships. In the majority of partnerships, ESOL is delivered by the college partner, usually at one of its campuses. The funding for this provision is generally through the college's part-time budget. In a few cases, the college and local authority partners do not collaborate effectively to market and publicise ESOL provision as part of their partnership's adult learning in the community offer.

In a few partnerships, the local authority delivers the ESOL provision. In a very few partnerships, there is very little ESOL provision offered across the partnership's community area.

Re-configuration and partnerships

Over recent years, Welsh Government policy has been to encourage partnerships to form larger, regional collaborations. Overall, progress towards this goal has been inconsistent. A few partnerships have recently formalised new collaborations between local authorities and with college partners.

In a few areas, progress towards formal regional collaborations has been slow. However, partnerships have collaborated informally during the pandemic to bid for

and share additional Welsh Government funds, for example, for professional learning in digital teaching skills and mental health training.

In a few partnerships, the roles and responsibilities between providers in the partnership are clear and working relationships are strong. Providers plan progression routes for learners effectively and map their provision across the area of the partnership to reduce duplication.

However, in a few partnerships, relationships between providers are not clearly formalised and rely too strongly on personal professional contacts between key staff.

Many partnerships report concerns with recruiting both teaching and administrative staff to respond to the vacancies being created through an ageing workforce. Partnerships report that the often part-time nature of the work and increased competition from private adult learning providers are potential reasons for the challenges in recruitment.