

Further education

Providers

There are 12 colleges providing further education courses in Wales. Many have multiple sites across a wide geographical area, spanning several local authority areas.

A majority operate under a group structure, maintaining separate college identities for individual sites or regional site clusters. A few colleges operate as wholly owned subsidiaries of higher education institutions.

Many colleges also provide work-based learning and adult learning in the community programmes. Some also deliver Welsh for adults programmes and/or provision in the justice sector. This provision is inspected under the relevant inspection arrangements for each of these sectors. Please see the relevant sector reports for further details of these other areas of provision.

Colleges also provide higher education courses, which are quality assured by the Quality Assurance Agency, QAA.

Learners at further education institutions (FEIs) in 2022-2023

105,785

45,275

60,510

All FE learners at FEIs (99,930 in 2021-2022) +5.9% change

Full-time FE learners (45,250 in 2021-2022) +0.1% change

Part-time FE learners (54,680 in 2021-2022) +10.7% change

Learners at FEIs with Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic Backgrounds: 10% (9.4%)

Learners at FEIs identified as having a 'disability and/or learning difficulty': 13% (12.3%)

Follow-up:

There are currently no further education colleges in follow-up.

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 1

The inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai in April 2024 was

Case studies

No. of case studies: 0

Colleges with case studies: 0

Engagement visits

No. of visits: 12

Link inspector engagement visits were made to all colleges

undertaken as a pilot inspection for the new Inspecting for the future (2024-2030) inspection arrangements. Names of colleges with case studies: Not applicable between January and June 2024. Five colleges were also visited as part of the [Junior Apprenticeship thematic review](#).

The remaining colleges will be inspected under these new arrangements in the new cycle of inspections from September 2024 onwards.

Summary

Where teaching and learning is effective, learners make good progress and display strong subject or vocational skills. Care, support, guidance and well-being is supported well through welcoming and inclusive environments. Leaders ensure that improvements and professional learning respond well to national, regional and local skills needs.

Learning, teaching and learning experiences

During our link engagement visits to further education (FE) colleges, we focused on their range of provision and outcomes for learners on different programmes. Most colleges deliver a mix of academic and vocational provision, with most learners studying vocational programmes. The numbers and proportion of learners studying AS and A level programmes have risen in recent years, reflecting the higher GCSE grade profiles achieved in school during the pandemic period, when these were affected by teacher assessed or teacher determined grades. Most colleges told us that this uptick in recruitment tended to be at least partly offset by lower retention rates as a greater proportion of learners than usual struggled to adapt to the demands of AS/A level programmes.

Recruitment patterns onto vocational programmes varied substantially between occupational areas and between colleges. Teachers and learners in practical subjects often benefited from professional and realistic learning environments that helped learners develop relevant skills that prepare them for employment. College leaders and staff were notably more positive about the made for Wales qualifications in health and social care and childcare and construction and building services engineering than on previous visits, with colleges welcoming recent adjustments to some qualifications in these sectors.

Across the sector, the proportion of learners achieving higher grades in graded provision, both on vocational and A level programmes, was too low. Colleges recognised the need to improve successful completion rates on underperforming programmes. In addition, the development of Welsh language skills was limited and very few learners carried out written work in Welsh.

During the core inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, we found that many learners displayed strong subject or vocational skills. In addition, learners identified with additional learning needs, including learners on independent living skills (ILS) programmes, made at least sound progress in their learning. In a few ILS sessions, some paper-based activities, such as cutting and sticking, did not meaningfully reinforce learning.

The inspection report of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai includes two 'Spotlights on' teaching and learning experiences at the college, including bilingual delivery and hybrid teaching. The 'Spotlight on bilingual delivery' highlights how in these sessions the language of learning switches seamlessly between English and Welsh. The 'Spotlight on hybrid teaching' outlines how teachers plan and deliver these sessions skilfully to make sure that all learners contribute and share their ideas through collaborative activities.

During our thematic review visits to the five colleges currently delivering junior apprenticeship programmes, we found that junior apprenticeship programmes had a positive impact on engagement, attendance and progression of 14 to 16-year-old learners.

Care, support and guidance, well-being and attitudes to learning

During our link visits to FE colleges, we focused on their work in relation to addressing poverty and disadvantage and implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET) and ALN code (2021).

Colleges offered a wide range of support to those learners affected by poverty, ALN or other identified barriers to progress. They made effective use of financial contingency funds made available to colleges by the Welsh Government to help learners who might be facing financial hardship or difficulties. Learners are also able to benefit from an Education Maintenance Allowance or a Welsh Government Learning Grant. The availability of free or subsidised transport arrangements was cited as a key issue in most colleges, and concerns were expressed about the potential impact on participation in those areas where local authorities are intending to change their policy towards free travel or where bus routes or timetables are likely to be rationalised.

Colleges worked hard to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for learners. In response to ALNET Act requirements, colleges were enhancing their provision for learners with additional learning needs, continuing to train and develop their staff and strengthening partnerships with schools, local authorities and health boards. As a result of this work, transition arrangements have improved for many learners moving from school to college. All colleges have established a local universal and additional learning provision offer and many used this well to clarify the extent and limits of their offer to local authorities, schools and parents/carers.

These arrangements were most effective when college staff were invited to attend transition panels and reviews and when key information on learners was shared with colleges in an accurate and timely manner. Where information was not shared or was delayed, this hindered transition arrangements and made it more difficult for appropriate support arrangements to be identified and put into place. Although the overall impact of the changes was positive, college leaders and staff expressed concern over the high administrative workload associated with the new ALN arrangements, especially where there are substantial differences in required documentation across several local authorities. Colleges have also begun to implement reasonable adjustments into college systems and procedures, but it is too early to evaluate the overall effectiveness of such changes. Our recently published youth engagement and progression lead worker thematic review highlighted the need to strengthen collaboration between lead workers and FE colleges to support young people either not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET.

Many colleges recognised the need to improve the overall effectiveness and impact of tutorial programmes and several colleges were piloting the use of specialist roles, such as pastoral coaches,

to help achieve greater consistency in delivery and impact. Positive behaviour management approaches were becoming more prevalent in colleges with clear focus on restorative approaches rather than relying on previous student disciplinary policies and policies.

College leaders and staff highlighted the widespread mental health challenges facing many learners, including exam anxiety. They also identified exam access arrangements as especially challenging, both logistically and in terms of resourcing, including the need for many additional rooms and extra invigilators, particularly for GCSE resit examinations.

Colleges have established strong well-being teams over recent years. However, leaders expressed concern over potential sustainability of the current staffing arrangements in light of changes to funding, including scaling back or ending of some specific project funded initiatives.

During the core inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, we found that most learners enjoyed coming to college and felt safe and secure. Most learners were happy, well-motivated and proud of their progress. Well-established learner voice arrangements, including learner surveys and learner representative mechanisms, provided useful opportunities for learners to express their views and opinions on their learning experiences. Leaders had established a strong safeguarding culture with good working relationships between teaching, well-being and safeguarding teams and outside agencies. However, we identified a need for greater consistency and effectiveness within and across colleges in ensuring attendance and punctuality of learners across campuses. There was also a need to improve the consistency of advice and guidance for learners nearing completion of their programme on their next steps.

The inspection report of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai includes two 'Spotlights on' well-being, care, support and guidance at the college. One highlights the value of the specialist roles of a college nurse and mental health practitioner. The other outlines how the college has significantly strengthened its relationship with its partner local authorities and schools to support the successful transition of learners into college.

During our thematic review visits to the five colleges currently delivering junior apprenticeship programmes, we found that learners on these programmes particularly valued the support provided to them by learning coaches as well as dedicated teaching staff. However, there was a need to ensure that responsibilities for safeguarding arrangements are always clear and that individual risk assessments are undertaken for all school pupils attending partnership provision in college, including junior apprentices.

Leadership

During our link engagement visits to FE colleges, we focused on college strategy, self-evaluation and improvement planning. We found that strategic priorities were identified clearly and used appropriately to inform strategic and operational planning. Governing boards provided appropriate challenge and support to senior leaders, including helping to shape and determine the strategic direction of the college and oversight of performance.

College leaders reported that they participated actively in regional skills partnerships and this helped to ensure overall responsiveness to national, regional and local skills needs. In many cases, college developments aligned well with national, regional and local priorities. Learner recruitment patterns varied across the sector as did the performance of individual colleges against learner number delivery

targets as set in their FE funding allocation agreements. Many colleges identified particular challenges in recruiting learners in the health and social care and hospitality and catering sectors.

Collaborative 14-16 provision arrangements were especially variable and several college leaders expressed concern over the potential impact of introduction of VCSEs on this area of their work. Overall, collaborative working between colleges, schools and local authorities is still too underdeveloped and, with insufficient national direction or local action, does not maximise opportunities to enhance local 16-19 provision or partnership provision for 14 to 16-year-old pupils, including junior apprenticeships. Any criticism in this area cannot be targeted at FE providers alone.

In most colleges, as part of self-evaluation activities, there has been a gradual return to the use of internal and external benchmarking in response to national developments in the publication of consistent measures data relating to learner outcomes and the return to usual assessment arrangements following the pandemic. College leaders identified that the lack of FE college sector specific comparator data as a subset within consistent performance measures for post-16 learning limited the scope for effective benchmarking.

Problems with the accuracy and reliability of college approaches to inputting and evaluating value added data was also limiting the ability of colleges to evaluate robustly the distance travelled by individual learners.

Most college staff benefited from a wide range of professional development activities, with designated time for this within college calendars. College leaders identified staff recruitment difficulties and sickness absence as a source of concern, for example in lower paid roles such as learning support assistants and invigilators. It continued to be challenging for colleges to recruit Welsh-speaking staff.

The inspection report of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai includes three 'Spotlights on' leadership and improving. These focus on staff and learner consultation, specialised professional development and the college's contribution to sustainable farming and local food production developments.

This year, there was an unusually high turnover in the number of senior postholders, including four of the twelve chief executive officer roles in the sector retiring. A tightening of the overall financial position across the sector was also cited by many colleges as a key factor influencing recent voluntary severance exercises within further education.

During the core inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, we found that senior and middle leaders used information well as part of self-evaluation and monitoring arrangements. However, evaluation of teaching, assessment and standard of learners' work was not considered well enough to inform improvement planning and support sharing of good practice.

Overview of recommendations

Recommendations from the inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai included strengthening the impact of teaching on the quality of learning, improving high grade attainment and addressing punctuality and attendance issues consistently.

Recommendations from thematic review of the junior apprenticeship programme included making sure that safeguarding arrangements for individual junior apprenticeship learners are clear and robust, and providing regular updates of any timetabling arrangements affecting individual learners.

The report also made a series of recommendations for schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government.

We also made a recommendation in our Youth Engagement and Progression Lead Worker Review report, focused on improving the transition support into post-16 destinations for young people at risk of being not in education, employment or training.