



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Covid-19 Resilience Plan for the Post-16 Sector

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Stay Learning.



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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Introduction

This plan sets out how the Welsh Government will work with its stakeholders to meet the changing needs of Welsh learners, communities and employers during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. We will build the resilience of the post-16 sector, so that learning providers can adapt; disruption to learning can be effectively managed; and learner and staff wellbeing is supported.

Background

The Covid-19 (coronavirus) outbreak began in China in December 2019 and spread to the UK in January 2020. During spring 2020, the UK and Welsh Governments gradually increased social distancing measures designed to slow the spread of the virus. Welsh schools, colleges, universities and training providers closed for face-to-face learning on Friday 20 March (apart from core provision in schools for vulnerable children and the children of key workers).

In the post-16 sector, providers shifted to remote learning delivery as far as possible, primarily through digital methods; in practice, the arrangements have varied, given the wide range of learner circumstances, access to devices and connectivity, and course types.

ColegauCymru has reported that the FE sector has set its own benchmark for online engagement which reflects the weekly guided contact hours for an average Level 2 or Level 3 main qualification. Colleges have indicated that around 75 per cent of learners are meeting this benchmark; this varies between colleges and is affected by learners' access to devices and connectivity, which in turn reflect economic and geographical differences. Some apprentices have been furloughed by their employers and are unable to continue their "on the job" learning; this varies widely by sector, meaning that for some providers almost all of their apprentices are still working, while for others up to 75% have been furloughed but may be continuing to learn online. Providers are delivering flexible online learning in the majority of cases, and using "keeping in touch" strategies to keep learners engaged¹ In adult learning funded through local authorities, a variety of approaches and platforms are being used, but many learners do not have access to the devices, connectivity and/or skills to be able to learn remotely.

Even before learning providers closed their doors, it became clear that the scale of the Covid-19 outbreak was such that it would require some unprecedented policy decisions. On 16 March the Minister for Education and Estyn made a joint video announcement that inspection and other related activities for schools and providers would be suspended from this date until the current situation passed. This decision was made to help education and training providers to focus fully on the wellbeing of their learners, their staff and their families. On 18 March, the Minister for Education **announced** that the summer 2020 examination series (GCSEs, AS and A levels) would not take place; learners would be awarded grades based on their previously completed work and teacher estimates. Qualifications Wales has been working with other UK regulators and awarding organisations to develop an approach for vocational qualifications, which involves a mix of calculated results where possible, and adapted or delayed assessments.

The economic impact of the crisis is unfolding at an extraordinary pace, with the number of potential redundancies, business closures, and unemployment levels likely to rise to over 10%. This is affecting millions of people who are being furloughed, losing incomes, or losing their jobs entirely.

As in previous recessions, we would expect the people most severely affected will be those who are already most disadvantaged in the labour market. There is good evidence, as set out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies² and the Resolution Foundation³, that adverse effects are likely to be felt particularly by those in low paid jobs; those with lower skills levels; those who have more “fragile” terms of employment; and younger workers. These are also groups who have suffered disproportionately in the aftermath of previous recessions.

²<https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14821>

³<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/risky-business/>

Young and new entrants to the labour market are particularly vulnerable. International evidence suggests that the “class of 1981” experienced long lasting scarring by entry to the labour market during recession and early unemployment, and there was a sustained focus on this group in the last recession. Young people are also more likely to be on zero-hour contracts, and therefore more at risk of lost incomes.

The Welsh Government’s offer across skills and employability is crucial in supporting those most likely to be negatively impacted upon in the future Welsh labour market. Our post-16 provider network will be at the heart of the economic and social recovery. It is well placed to take this role, with a civic mission that includes serving society’s disadvantaged groups as well as meeting the needs of the labour market.

Initial work has focused on giving clarity and reassurance about areas including funding, learner support, and performance requirements, so that providers can make decisions and act on them. This plan sets out medium and longer-term actions to help support our learning providers, learners and staff to prepare for the “new normal”.

Groups most affected by Covid-19

Feedback to date from providers, learners and stakeholders suggests that while Covid-19 (and government responses to it) clearly impacts everyone in society, there are some learners and associated groups for whom the disruption is likely to be particularly significant, and who should therefore be the focus of action in our resilience plan. The table below summarises these groups.

Current learners

- FE A level learners in “Year 13” who need to prepare for progression into HE in autumn term
- Learners progressing from Year 11-13 into further education, apprenticeships and other routes
- Learners who have specific place-based requirements that cannot currently be met (such as work placements, laboratory or studio work, art/performing arts shows, realistic working environments); including those who need to complete vocational learning/assessments before they can progress
- Learners who do not have access to the equipment, connectivity or skills to access online learning
- Learners who become disengaged while not in face-to-face learning
- Learners on employability programmes who are unable to progress into sustained employment
- Those learning through the medium of Welsh who cannot access the range of Welsh medium learning and resources required
- Apprentices who cannot continue their full programme of learning due to workplace closure
- Learners with additional learning needs (including those due to progress into and out of post-16 learning)
- Vulnerable learners in all settings
- More able and talented learners who need continued stretch and challenge, including the Seren cohort
- Learners adjusting to returning to face-to-face learning, including those who have received estimated grades and may need additional support to ‘step up’ to the next level
- HE and FE students in healthcare and allied professions who may volunteer to work in the NHS, and those who will graduate early to bolster the healthcare workforce
- International students in lockdown in Wales

Prospective learners and other individuals

- Learners in FE and adult learning who would have been starting courses during summer term 2020 (mainly adult/part-time)
- Learners needing enhanced support, advice and guidance to switch programme or provider because they have not made the right choice for them
- New apprentices unable to start on programme
- Prospective higher education students who may receive low or unconditional offers which may not be in their best interest
- New higher education students making the transition to higher education in novel circumstances
- Unemployed and economically inactive adults and young people who cannot be referred onto face-to-face employability provision
- Those made redundant/unable to obtain work as a result of Covid-19 employer closures and restrictions, particularly by those in low paid jobs; those with lower skills level; those who have more “fragile” terms of employment; and, younger workers.
- Furloughed employees aiming to reskill or upskill

Learning providers

- Practitioners required to develop and deliver online/remote learning in Welsh and English, and to manage delivery of practical assessments for learners who cannot be awarded calculated results
- Practitioners with constraints around online delivery (such as capability, using online learning platforms, language preferences)
- Staff experiencing their own difficulties around illness, caring responsibilities, mental health
- Sector leaders and staff who need guidance, funding stability, support for decision-making
- Learning providers which are engaging in community and civic responses to Covid-19 through their premises, staff and students
- Sector leaders and staff who need to plan to support 'returning' vocational learners in summer or autumn 2020 as well as new starters
- Sector leaders and staff who need to develop new approaches to engage with learners returning to or progressing into post-16 learning in all mediums

Others

- Parents/carers of learners in the post-16 sector or planning to progress into the post-16 sector
- Employers needing to defer recruitment of apprentices
- Employers needing to upskill their workforce to cope with economic changes (including those who may be impacted by reassigned government funding resulting from Covid-19)

Scope and purpose of the Resilience Plan

This plan includes the higher education, further education, apprenticeships, employability and adult learning sectors. The Welsh Government is working with HEFCW and Universities Wales to develop a statement which reflects the highly autonomous nature of the sector and the way it is funded, and our resilience plan will complement this by incorporating HE policy activities. Sixth forms are not within the direct scope of this plan, as there is a separate continuity of learning plan for schools.

However, delivery of our plan will be co-ordinated with activities in the schools sector; this will help to support learners' transition despite disruptions to their learning and assessment, and help learners to make the choices that are right for them and are able to develop their own informed learning pathway. It is important that there are clear and joined-up messages to learners and parents across all education sectors, particularly in respect of the reopening of settings for face-to-face learning.

The diagram below summarises how the Post-16 Resilience Plan relates to other Covid-19 plans and strategies.



This plan is intended to enable the Welsh Government to:

- Clearly articulate its expectations of how post-16 providers will respond;
- Define the support and information that Welsh Government will provide to the sector;
- Outline the priority groups likely to be most impacted and in need of priority support;
- Structure its work with the post-16 sector throughout 2020 and beyond;
- Work with key stakeholders to promptly and effectively communicate decisions, plans and requirements; and
- Communicate key information to current and prospective learners, parents and carers, and employers as the situation evolves.

Outline of the Post-16 Resilience Plan

Our strategy is organised into three phases:



PHASE 1: RESCUE

This phase is already well underway, and has centred on the shift to online delivery, with associated work to ensure stability of funding for providers and learners. For learners, the most significant impact is the cancellation of A levels and GCSEs and arrangements for awarding vocational qualifications; this has caused considerable uncertainty for learners, and substantial work for staff who are required to work with awarding organisations to estimate grades, alongside their efforts to keep learners engaged and prepare them for transition later in the year.

We took early action to secure Ministerial approval for the continuity of funding for further education, work-based learning and adult learning. This has given the network a degree of stability and enabled providers to focus on their shift to online delivery. Nonetheless, providers are experiencing a loss of commercial, ESF and international income which is likely to impact on their financial health.

We are considering the impacts of this, including erosion of the infrastructure available to undertake learning delivery when 'business as usual', or some version of it, resumes.

Stability of funding for higher education is also a key priority. The Welsh Government is working with the UK Government, HEFCW and Universities Wales to evaluate and determine an appropriate response. The Minister for Education has provided an indication to HEFCW of the funding it will have available for higher education in the next financial year.

We have announced that performance measures for further education, work-based learning and adult learning outcomes will not be produced for 2019/20, which, alongside the suspension of Estyn inspections, has freed up the sector to concentrate on the safety and wellbeing of its learners and staff. Further consideration is underway to determine the impact on future years' measures.

We have heard many examples of practitioners working with energy and innovation to shift learning online. Providers have access to support from Jisc to help them develop their technical infrastructure and delivery. We are gathering fuller information on what delivery is taking place online, where the gaps are and how learners could be better supported through collaborative working. The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlathol is also gathering and commissioning Welsh medium and bilingual learning resources. We are exploring strategies, including the use of funding, to ensure that digitally excluded learners can continue to access provision.

PHASE 2: REVIEW

At the time of writing, our assumptions are that:

- While some learners may return to face-to-face learning during the summer term 2020, many will not;
- Models of blended learning will need to be continued and enhanced for many, if not all learners;
- The post-16 workforce will continue to face a series of challenges around moving to online delivery and support, estimating grades, and keeping learners engaged, all of which require complex skills and a degree of innovation;
- Some groups of learners will be disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 disruption, and these are likely to include vulnerable individuals, community-based adult learners, the digitally excluded, those with lower skills and those who were already at risk of becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training);
- Many, if not all learners, will need practical and emotional support to reintegrate into learning after prolonged isolation;
- The economy is predicted to shrink by between a quarter and a third over the second quarter of this year. The demand for labour appears to be collapsing, with an unprecedented sustained surge in claims of Universal Credit and new style Job Seekers Allowance claims.
- The effects are not being felt equally across the population and as such some groups are predicted to be even more vulnerable, and more adversely affected than others including the young, those on lower incomes and those with lower skill levels.
- We are likely to see redundancies and/or reduced starts in apprenticeships, although as yet this is difficult to predict or quantify;

- Higher and further education institutions are likely to see a significant fall in international and EU student numbers and the possibility of increased deferment, with a consequential serious financial impact; and
- We are likely to face further cycles of social distancing, requiring providers, the Welsh Government and its partners to build capacity so that we can respond quickly and efficiently.

This means that we need to work together to envisage and plan for a “new normal” which may last for some time, and which may look very different to traditional learning delivery. The physical capacity of learning environments to adhere to social distancing rules is a key factor, and varies widely across providers (and individual sites within providers).

We need to build our own organisational resilience, and that of the post-16 provider network, to meet these challenges. During 2020 some forms of regular delivery will resume, albeit with the potential for further cycles of restriction as outlined above. We will need to work with the sector to support a phased return to face-to-face learning, focusing on priority groups of learners and, above all, on ensuring the safety and wellbeing of our learners and staff.

Some learners may resume face-to-face learning before the end of the summer term 2020, including apprentices, and some FE learners. Some will commence or resume study in the autumn term, including HE students. Others will be progressing to their next level of study, but may need additional support to re-engage with learning and “step up” to the demands of their new programmes. Providers may need to consider additional support for learners from Welsh-medium schools who do not speak Welsh at home in their transition to post-16 learning or higher education. We envisage that a “blended” approach to learning will continue for some time for many, if not all, groups of learners; this may be a very different experience, with practitioners and learners trying new techniques for social interaction, group working, differentiated learning, enrichment and support.

There will be effective and innovative teaching and learning models that we can learn from and build on.

Meanwhile, the provider network (including Working Wales) is likely to face additional demand from individuals who have been made redundant as a result of the economic impact of Covid-19.

The Welsh Government itself will need to ensure that an experienced team is in place to support communications and policy around Covid-19; and will start to plan ahead for longer term impacts on planning, funding, performance measures, work-based learning commissioning, Seren, and projects or activities which have been postponed during the Rescue period. This may involve revised targets, guidance and planning profiles for providers.

PHASE 3: RENEW

We will review our medium- and longer-term approaches to commissioning, planning, funding and quality assuring post-16 provision for the 2020/21 academic year, working with the sector, Estyn and other partners.

As well as supporting the sector to deliver during this period, including coping with new and changing learner demands, the Welsh Government will need to work with stakeholders to start evaluating the impacts of Covid-19, and plan to meet the changing needs of the economy. Apprenticeships have a vital role in supporting the recovery of the economy and we will working across sectors to understand how the programme can support growth.

While the unprecedented challenges of Covid-19 have required rapid responses and some difficult decisions, we anticipate some positive outcomes too, including:

- quicker and more transparent decision-making by Welsh Government, including direct responses to provider queries and requests;
- frequent and clear communications with the sector and with stakeholders such as Qualifications Wales and NUS Wales;
- reduced bureaucracy;
- institutions' rapid responses to community needs, including providing their premises for field hospitals, producing personal protective equipment and volunteering by staff and learners;
- opportunities to strengthen communication with learners and support them to become more resilient and independent; and
- increased online learning delivery and support, accelerating the sector's response to our [Digital 2030](#) vision, and providing opportunities to extend blended learning models in future.

As the “new normal” emerges, we need to ensure that progress in these areas is not lost. We will work with the sector, Estyn and other partners to help evaluate the positive changes that have taken place and to plan to make them sustainable.

At the same time, we will be facing a significant economic downturn, with the latest forecasts suggesting a reduction in GDP of up to 35%. The post-16 sector will be at the centre of strategies to support, reskill and upskill individuals who are facing unemployment or underemployment as a result of Covid-19 repercussions. While apprenticeship numbers may drop, this will require a shift in priority sectors as well as a ramping up of employability programmes, and a focus on stimulating hiring and demand for labour. During this phase, we will need to re-focus our “business as usual” programmes and projects, including the Tertiary Education and Research Bill and the Commission which may be subject to a revised timetable as a result of Covid-19. In addition, transitional policy development on areas such as 16-19 curriculum, learner engagement, learner protections, civic mission and greater coordination across the sector will continue and be informed by the experiences of Covid-19 to prepare for the future.

Our ways of working

Post-16 providers have mobilised quickly to respond to the challenges of Covid-19, with leaders and practitioners working innovatively and at pace to ensure that they support their learners' progress and wellbeing. We are expecting that **all providers will**:

- Make the safety and wellbeing of their learners and staff the first consideration in all decisions;
- Give additional support to vulnerable learners including those experiencing mental health issues; looked after children/care leavers; estranged students; those at risk of disengaging; those with additional learning needs; and those with caring responsibilities, including regular 'keeping in touch' strategies, safeguarding referrals and, where possible, access to online counselling and other services;
- Support learners, wherever practicable, to continue their learning and progress to their next stage of learning and/or employment, including through working with professional bodies and awarding organisations to help ensure learners meet relevant standards for their chosen profession or industry;
- Use the resources and support available to them to provide engaging, innovative models of online/remote delivery, and should share good practice to maximise opportunities for learners;
- Ensure that learning and assessment opportunities, resources and support for learners are available bilingually;
- Communicate and work collaboratively to ensure consistency of approaches and opportunities across Wales where possible;
- Evaluate the impact of changes to delivery in all mediums, and keep evidence and data, wherever practicable, to help them do so;

- Be clear and transparent in communicating with their learners, staff and communities about changes and the reasons behind them;
- Be proactive in developing solutions to the learning challenges alongside the wider health, economic and social challenges resulting from the impacts of Covid-19 on the Welsh economy and society; and
- Involve learners wherever possible in decision-making, the identification of solutions and actions and in their implementation.

In its turn, **the Welsh Government will:**

- Work closely with our partners including Estyn, Qualifications Wales, Jisc, Careers Wales, HEFCW, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, sector representative bodies, teaching unions, providers and learners to ensure a comprehensive approach to tackling shared challenges;
- Ensure that decisions are made quickly where possible in making changes to policy, funding and requirements on providers, based on evidence and a balanced understanding of implications;
- Give providers as much flexibility as possible to support their own decisions and actions;
- Respond quickly, helpfully and accurately to queries and requests, and incorporate key themes arising from queries into FAQs and other communication channels;
- Establish a communications plan to ensure that key messages are conveyed to learners, parents/carers, providers, employers, community partners and stakeholders;
- Redeploy staff resources to areas of need, deferring activities where this can help reduce the burden on providers and dedicating resource to support the sector's response to Covid-19;
- Support professional learning and pedagogy around online and blended learning delivery in Welsh and English;

- Develop and share underpinning labour market information and intelligence to inform planning and provision to meet the emerging needs of learners and the economy, including bilingual skill requirements;
- Work strategically across teams and departments to ensure a joined-up approach across education sectors and with Business Wales; and
- Engage regularly with the sector, its representative bodies, learner representatives and other stakeholders to share information and seek feedback, via the PCET Change Board and other networks.

Key delivery areas

We have identified six key delivery areas, as outlined below. We are taking a broad approach which looks at the stability of the provider network and evaluation of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the post-16 sector, as well as actions focused on learning delivery and support. The plan is intended to reflect the diversity of learners, programmes and qualifications in the post-16 sector, as well as the different relationships between Welsh Government and learning providers.

1. Learner progression and transition

We will:

- work with Qualifications Wales to ensure that learners can complete their qualifications and progress to the next stage of learning and/or employment, ensuring availability of Welsh-medium assessments;
- work with the post-16 sector to ensure a safe, managed return to face-to-face learning;
- work with the Education Directorate, Regional Consortia, Careers Wales, Seren hubs, local authorities, providers, and the HE sector to make learning content available to prepare learners for transition;
- support continuing access to bilingual resources and learner support throughout the summer period to create new ways of engagement, and maximise the ability of learners to progress with confidence to their next stage of learning;
- consider how learners can support each other and the progress of their own learning in the face of disruption to their learning programmes; and
- support learners, their parents and carers to maintain engagement in learning.

2. Distance learning

We will:

- review capacity and skills in the post-16 sector to deliver bilingual online learning and support;
- review the risks and opportunities of extensive and prolonged online learning delivery, including online safety, cybersecurity and network capacity;
- ensure that digitally excluded learners have the equipment, connectivity and resources they need to continue their learning;
- support practitioners to develop their skills and confidence in online, blended and remote learning and assessment in all mediums;
- work with the sector to improve the availability and quality of bilingual learning resources, particularly in vocational, Seren and adult learning;
- explore opportunities to extend the availability and take-up of online, bilingual learning to support individuals who need to upskill or reskill; and
- provide support and advice to the sector via Jisc, on technical infrastructure and digital practice.

3. Learner wellbeing and engagement

We will:

- secure continuity of support funding for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- support the mental health and wellbeing of learners and staff;
- work with the provider network to analyse the impact of Covid-19 on learner retention and drop-out;
- put arrangements in place to monitor and support apprentices made redundant or furloughed as a result of Covid-19; and
- consider how to support learners at greater risk of disengaging from learning, including planning routes for them to re-engage.

4. Support for employment and economic recovery

We will:

- work with Working Wales (Careers Wales) to ensure unemployed young people and adults continue to receive independent advice and guidance regarding learning, skills and employability support;
- signpost and promote online learning for furloughed employees and the unemployed;
- review arrangements for the introduction of revised adult and youth employability programmes;
- work with the Regional Skills Partnerships and Regional Employment Response Groups to assess how changing skills and economic priorities can be addressed, including through employability, vocational and part-time adult learning;
- ensure that the planning and funding of post-16 learning reflects evolving needs, including flexible responses to redundancy and unemployment; and
- respond to NEET and youth unemployment levels and work with Careers Wales to support young people to re-engage, and enable and maintain labour market attachment.

5. Building stability and resilience

We will:

- secure continuity of funding for providers as far as possible;
- establish clear requirements around any arrangements for furloughing provider staff;
- analyse impact on learner recruitment;
- monitor impact on providers' financial health;
- work with the sector to define and delivery the “new normal” pattern of learning delivery, based on scientific advice;

- review the support for staff in the development and delivery of alternative approaches to learning, teaching and assessment in all mediums;
- review and revise arrangements for apprenticeship and employability programme commissioning; and
- assess and strengthen the network's capacity to respond to future cycles of social distancing.

6. Evaluation and future-proofing

We will:

- identify "lessons learnt" from our response to Covid-19;
- identify and share good practice, including innovative approaches to learning delivery, learner support and professional learning;
- establish revised arrangements for planning, funding and performance measures;
- evaluate the impact of Covid-19 on learners and on the sector as a whole;
- identify learning that can be effectively applied to future business continuity challenges; and
- find opportunities to retain the positive outcomes, such as reduced bureaucracy, rapid decision-making, increased online learning, and improved communications.

