

Review of progression planning in further education in Wales

June 2016

2016

People and Work
Pobl a Gwaith



Audience

Further education institutions, local authorities, regional consortia; schools with sixth forms; Estyn.

Overview

A review of how well colleges in Wales are planning and delivering their curriculum to secure progression opportunities for learners at all levels, and to ensure a clear 'line of sight' to career pathways.

Action required

None – for information only.

Further information

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the 13 colleges who supported the study by facilitating visits and the 53 staff and 80 learners who contributed to the interviews. The authors would also like to thank the members of the Welsh Government's project steering group for their advice and feedback throughout the study. Finally, the authors would like to thank Val Williams for her contribution to the fieldwork.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Welsh labour market is changing and increasingly demands much higher skill levels than in the past. Colleges have a key role in ensuring learners have these skills (helping learners realise their employment aspirations) (WG, 2014; Estyn, 2016). In response, the **aim** of this review is:

to undertake a review of how well colleges in Wales are planning and delivering their curriculum to secure progression opportunities for learners at all levels, and to ensure a clear “line of sight” to career pathways¹.

1.2. The **objectives** of the study are to:

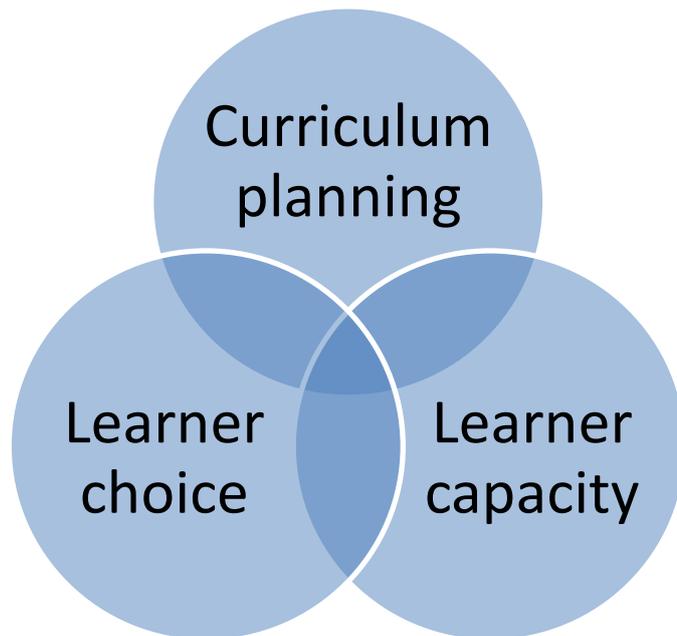
- determine whether the approaches to curriculum planning taken by colleges in Wales lead to learners securing coherent progression routes to Level 3 and above;
- engage with colleges to understand barriers to managing progression effectively;
- assess how funding, planning and quality assurance mechanisms provide positive or negative incentives;
- consider how colleges ensure, through entry requirements and initial assessment, that learners are enrolled on programmes at appropriate levels and supported to achieve qualifications at the highest possible level;
- engage with learners to understand their perspective on the availability and clarity of progression routes, their aspirations in terms of progression, and the extent to which careers advice and guidance is integrated throughout learning programmes;
- evaluate data on learning activities by level, progression rates and learner satisfaction and identify general patterns of progression, issues and gaps;
- consider whether learning from entry level to Level 2 equips learners with sufficient skills and knowledge to progress to higher levels, and whether learners are sufficiently supported to make the transition; and
- identify “best practice” case studies and recommendations for improvement.

This report

¹ As such, the review focused upon the use of labour market intelligence in the curriculum planning process, but did not seek to evaluate the outcomes of this (i.e. whether there was a good match between colleges’ curriculum offer and labour market demands).

1.3. As illustrated by figure 1, this report focuses upon three key factors that influence progression: curriculum planning, learner choice and learner capacity (these are discussed in sections three, four and five of the report). Where all three are aligned, learners progress.

Figure 1: the key determinants of learner progression



1.4. Where appropriate, the report uses Estyn’s convention (Estyn, 2014, p16), outlined below, for reporting the proportion of colleges a particular point refers to.

Phrase	Representation of the phrase
Most	90 percent or more
Many	70 percent or more
Majority	Over 60 percent
Around half	Close to 50 percent
Minority	Below 40 percent
Few	Below 20 percent
Very few	Less than 10 percent

2. Approach and methodology

Introduction

2.1. The study integrated three key elements: a desk-based review of literature and data; interviews with key stakeholders; and a survey of policy and practice in Welsh colleges. This provides important insights, but is not a comprehensive picture of *all* practice across the further education sector in Wales.

Key stakeholder interviews

2.2. Seven interviews with key stakeholders were undertaken. Stakeholders were drawn from the Welsh Government, ColegauCymru and Careers Wales, and interviews focused upon exploring issues at an all-Wales level, such as colleges' use of labour market information to help ensure learners make informed choices about employment opportunities when they choose college courses.

Desk-based literature and data review

2.3. A purposive review of relevant research, evaluations and Estyn inspection reports was undertaken. This included Estyn's annual reports on individual colleges and thematic reviews. The review focused upon identifying evidence of, for example, colleges' use of labour market intelligence and the effectiveness of their curriculum planning and findings.

2.4. Quantitative data on learning provision, outcomes and learner experiences was analysed (and is discussed in section six). The review focused upon understanding patterns of progression, but was limited by the difficulties of tracking individual learners' progress through FEIs. National data was therefore complemented by an analysis of data provided by individual colleges.

Survey of practice in Welsh colleges

2.5. All 13 colleges were visited. Visits included interviews with staff involved in curriculum planning (n=46); focus groups with learners (n=80 learners, in 11 colleges), focusing on one subject area in each college; and the collection of additional data (e.g. on learner progression). The visits focused upon understanding curriculum planning processes, including barriers and enablers, identifying examples of good practice and exploring learners' experiences.

3. Curriculum planning and the curriculum “offer”

Introduction

3.1. Curriculum planning is important in ensuring that learners can progress within and beyond colleges (for example, into HE), towards their intended career. Curriculum planning incorporates planning, delivery and review of a college’s curriculum offer. The quality of planning and delivery of the curriculum is also important, as it impacts upon both learner choices (e.g. whether to continue or disengage - the focus of section four) and learner capacity (e.g. the development of skills and knowledge - the focus of section five).

3.2. The Welsh Government’s “longer-term aspiration” is to ensure: “that, by the age of 19, a greater proportion of individuals should have either achieved, or should be in the process of achieving, a learning outcome at Level 3” (WG, 2014, p.3). Curriculum planning therefore generally focuses upon vertical progression; ensuring that there are “pathways” from lower to higher level courses (rather than dead ends or “broken bridges”). Nevertheless, colleges reported that, for some learners, progression to Level 2 but no further, was appropriate. For example, it was reported that:

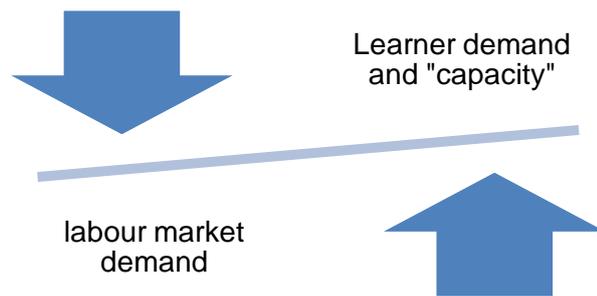
- Some learners, in areas like childcare, may not need to progress beyond Level 2 to realise their career aspirations²;
- horizontal progression at the same level may enable learners in subjects like carpentry to extend their skills (by working at the same level), in an area like furniture making; and
- some learners may reach a “natural” ceiling at Level 2, beyond which they struggle to progress, given their ‘capacity’.

Key elements

3.3. As figure 2 illustrates, curriculum planning involves balancing two key factors; labour market demand, and learner demand and capacity (which we discuss further in sections four and five).

² Those who study child care can find employment in child care at level 2, although they would still need to be supervised.

Figure 2



- 3.4. If too much emphasis is placed upon labour market demands, courses may not be filled and/or learners may struggle to complete them. Conversely, if too much emphasis is placed upon learner demand, learners may struggle to find employment.
- 3.5. The study has shown that curriculum planning is constrained or enabled by factors such as:
- competition from other learning providers which influences the demand for learners for places at a particular college or campus (given the size of colleges, they often have multiple sites covering different populations) and the extent to which labour market demand is already being provided for in a given area by another setting/provider;
 - the capacity of the college to deliver and change the curriculum, which depends upon factors such as their buildings, equipment, workforce size and skills, support from industry, institutional inertia, and the college's willingness to take risks; this means that curriculum change tends to be gradual, not wholesale; and
 - the resources (e.g. funding) available to develop and deliver the curriculum as colleges have a set amount of core funding based upon learner numbers, so, with the exception of franchising learners and drawing upon other funding streams, such as funding from industries, they operate within a set funding envelope.
- 3.6. The study shows how the curriculum offer, which is the result of balancing these different considerations, needs to be clear and coherent; for example, it needs to offer clear progression pathways to employment opportunities. The pathways on paper (typically presented as flow charts) also need to be evaluated in practice by colleges (for example, are learners willingly transferring from one campus to another to continue their progression pathway? Are learners progressing to employment or further study?). Monitoring and evaluation of learner progression can help identify systemic strengths and weaknesses in not only curriculum planning and delivery, but

also in information advice and guidance (IAG), the focus of section four, and assessment and learner support, the focus of section five.

Approaches and effective practice

3.7. Colleges' assessments of employer and learner demands focus upon:

- evaluation of past trends such as post-FE outcomes (e.g. progression rates to employment, training or HE) and learner demand/numbers; and
- forecasting future employer and learner demand (e.g. given demographic changes and changes in post-16 provision, such as a shift to tertiary education).

3.8. Table 1 summarises the most commonly used sources of labour market information (LMI) and identifies other, less commonly used, sources that all colleges should consider using.

Table 1: LMI data sources

Commonly used sources for LMI	Other complementary options which colleges should consider using to improve LMI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welsh Government priorities³ • plans by the Regional Skills Partnerships • range of sources available through the Learning and Skills Observatory⁴ • data through links with local/regional industries (e.g. data collected from industry panels and councils, to more informal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a tool that integrates and manipulates LMI data in an effective way to inform curriculum planning (see College A case study) • colleges collecting their own forecasting data (e.g. through a local employer survey) • colleges collecting their own data for past trends e.g. destination data (by phone) on learners six months after they leave college. Estyn has recommended a national solution⁵. However, this is likely to take time and in the meantime shorter term solutions are needed. • use of other websites sources such as NOMIS⁶, StatsWales⁷, Data Unit Wales⁸ and UKCES⁹

³ For example, the emphasis upon STEM subjects to support future industries. Available at: <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/140530-priorities-for-further-education-sector-2015-2016-en.pdf>

⁴ Synopsis papers of key LMI, available at: <http://www.learningobservatory.com/>

⁵ The Welsh Government should “work with schools, colleges, Careers Wales and local authorities to develop a national system for collecting data on the destinations of 18-year-olds” (Estyn 2015, p.5)

⁶ Available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

⁷ Available at: <https://statswales.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue>

relationships with local industries)

- data on young people who are NEET, from Careers Wales

3.9. Estyn (2015) identify that best practice in the use of LMI data for curriculum planning includes the use of “commercial, on-line research programs to monitor employment trends” and that in “the best cases tutors and college learners use this program to find which localities offer the best job opportunities for them and to identify alternative employment opportunities.” (ibid, p. 19). The College A case study below reports on such an example.

College A: Good practice in the use of LMI data for curriculum planning

The college has a curriculum planning tool that uses a commercial online research program which enables selection of current and predicted employment opportunities in different geographical locations; for example, it can outline current demand in certain sectors (e.g. health and social care) and in specific jobs (e.g. social work) and how demand for that role is likely to change over the next five to ten years. The data can be produced within a range of geographical areas such as local authority or wider regions; and to equivalent areas in England (some colleges have large numbers of learners who find work in England). This information is then integrated centrally with other data collected by the college, such as course completion data, which is used to inform curriculum planning; for example, there is potential for the college to increase the number of learners studying health and social care, as data showed an increase in the number of jobs in the local and wider region within this sector. Consequently the college plans to raise awareness amongst young people and parents regarding job opportunities in this sector, with the aim of supplying more courses in this sector at appropriate levels.

3.10. Learner demand forecasts are based primarily upon patterns from previous years (trend forecasting). These have generally proved to be a reliable guide to future trends; for example, subjects such as psychology remain popular whilst demand for sciences has been growing steadily. A few colleges report that they cater for areas where learner demand has been very stable, given the dominance of local industries which have not changed markedly. As a consequence, while the curriculum offer has been tweaked, to reflect changes such as the greater role of Information Technology in agriculture, there has not been wholesale change. Nevertheless, there are unexpected shifts in learner

⁸ Available at: <http://www.dataunitwales.gov.uk/data>

⁹ Employer skill survey. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ukces-employer-skills-survey-2015-uk-report>

demand, given the range of influences upon learners' choice such as the wider media, which has led to spikes in demand following, for example, television shows which have popularised particular careers (discussed in section four).

- 3.11. In the short term, in most cases colleges can address lower or higher than expected demand through marketing, and by exploiting flexibility and “slack” with the curriculum offer. However, large and, especially, unexpected shifts in demand are difficult to respond to swiftly. For example, around half of colleges reported difficulties in responding quickly to large changes in demand especially in subject areas that need specialised facilities and/ or expertise partly due to funding constraints and limited budgets for staff training. Moreover, implementing significant changes in an institution like a large college takes time¹⁰, and one college likened the process to changing the direction of a “super tanker”. Change can be risky and can involve difficult decisions, such as making staff redundant, and therefore demands strong leadership.
- 3.12. All colleges have some flexibility within their curriculum offer, to enable learners to change courses (e.g. if they choose the “wrong” course, change their mind about their career aspirations, or struggle with the demands of a course). In the majority of colleges, this needs to be done early, ideally within the first eight weeks, and no later than January. However, a minority of colleges are developing flexible options that enable learners to change after January. Flexibility is often provided through modular courses, in which modules can be started at different times. However, this is not possible with linear courses which must be completed in sequence (as each section provides the foundation for subsequent sections). In response, as the College B case study below illustrates, colleges have also developed interim courses, focused upon enabling learners to develop their skills (and stay engaged) before changing courses in September. One college is also piloting accelerated learning programmes with a small number of vocational courses in September 2016. This aims to enable learners who can, to make faster progress, and ‘jump’ up two levels in one year (rather than progressing up a level each year). To help accommodate this, the academic year has been extended by four to six weeks.

¹⁰ This is supported by other studies (PPMA, 2010; Starling, 2010; Cunningham and Kempling, 2009).

College B: developing a flexible curriculum

In the college, learners who decided to change courses after their first term often had limited options; for example, many would have to wait for the next academic year (September) to start a new course, and they were therefore at a risk of dropping out. In order to address this, the college established a “skills for further study course” aimed at learners who wanted to change courses late in the academic year (they can join this right up to the Easter period). The course is modular (to enhance flexibility about start dates) and focuses on employability skills (communication, numeracy and ICT) and popular subjects such as sociology and psychology. It aims to help fill skills gaps and aid progression. Careers advice is also provided during this period to help ensure learners make the right choice for the following academic year.

Discussion

- 3.13. Partnership work with employers is vital in ensuring the curriculum offer meets their needs. Estyn (2014b) indicate that partnerships with employers are generally effective, although links between some colleges and employers are much stronger than others. This study found that on the whole colleges had a good understanding of what employers wanted. For example, colleges highlighted new industries that were coming into their area and steps they were taking to capitalise on these developments. Notwithstanding this, feedback by learners from a minority of colleges highlighted that they wanted more practical work experience¹¹ within their course, which is likely to come from further employer engagement.
- 3.14. In addition, learners from a minority of colleges highlighted that in certain subjects there was a lack of apprenticeships opportunities and/or engagement with industry. This could block learners’ chosen progression pathway. The study highlighted that in certain areas, such as construction, the role of independent companies such as Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) Cymru was useful for colleges in helping to provide apprenticeships and engagement; however, such partnerships were rarer in more specialised areas such as marine engineering.

¹¹ This is supported by learners’ comments from the 2015 Learner Voice Wales survey (Welsh Government 2015), summarised in this [briefing paper](#)

- 3.15. The majority of colleges highlighted how the new post-16 planning and funding framework¹² had helped colleges strike the right balance between employer and learner demand, principally through the focus upon LMI (including feedback on college learner numbers on programmes by Sector Skills Councils) and the emphasis upon programmes rather than qualifications.
- 3.16. Mergers between colleges are reported to have disrupted curriculum planning in the short term. However, these mergers, coupled with improved partnerships between colleges and HE, mean that colleges now offer wider choice in terms of courses and higher level progression routes (to Level 3 and higher) (Estyn, 2014)¹³.
- 3.17. However, funding cuts are reported to have had a negative impact upon both the curriculum planning process (e.g. how much resource colleges can invest in it) and also the options open to college (e.g. what progression pathways they can develop/offer).
- 3.18. The curriculum planning process requires robust data, but forecasting future labour market and learner demand, and collecting reliable data on learners' destinations, and the reasons why learners drop out, can be challenging. For example, only a minority of colleges have reasonably reliable destination data for 18-year-olds who find employment or who become NEET (this is collected by college staff directly contacting past learners around six months after they leave the college). In contrast, many colleges rely on the reported intentions of learners before they leave which can be unreliable, consequently Estyn (2015) recommended that a national system be developed for collecting data on the destinations of 18 year olds. In addition, many colleges receive data from UCAS on progression to higher education (for older learners).
- 3.19. The weakness in data and consequent need for judgment means curriculum planning is not an exact science. Nevertheless, generally, the more effective curriculum planning is, the smaller the mismatch between labour and learner market demands and the curriculum offer.
- 3.20. Changes in the labour market mean that while there are still well-established and clear progression pathways for some careers (typically based upon vocational courses), for many other careers there are multiple possible pathways that learners can take. As we

¹² Available at: <http://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/131031-guide-planning-and-funding-framework-en.pdf>

¹³ The "majority of colleges have improved the levels of courses they offer, largely due to college mergers or new tertiary arrangements" (Estyn, 2014b p.120)

discuss in the following section, colleges therefore have a key role in “illuminating” potential pathways to enable learners to realise their aspirations, and progress to employment and/or further study.

3.21. There is also evidence of increasing polarisation in labour markets, with increasing numbers of jobs requiring higher level skills, alongside increasing numbers of semi-skilled jobs (Owens, 2015; Felstead et al., 2002). This suggests that while some learners need to plan to progress to HE (and curriculum pathways within FE need to enable this), others may not need to progress beyond Level 2. This has important implications for both curriculum planning and information, advice and guidance (the focus of the next section).

4. Learner choice

- 4.1. The choices learners make, both about their career aspirations (what they want to do) and the pathway to their aspiration (how they want to get there) have a large impact upon their progression, so the choices learners make about each before entering college and during their time at college are important.
- 4.2. Colleges have a key role in providing information, advice and guidance (IAG) (the focus of this section) and table 2 below summarises how effective IAG should help ensure that learners can make informed choices. Learner Voice Wales data for 2015 indicates around 70 percent of learners are satisfied with the information and advice they had (WG, 2015, p.20).

Table 2: The role of IAG in informing learners’ choices

‘Inputs’	Process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Career aspirations (what learners want to do) - Curriculum planning (e.g. developing progression pathways) - Assessment of a learner’s capacity and potential - LMI (e.g. employment opportunities and prospects) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Challenge (discussing alternatives and other options, given LMI, a learners aspirations and capacity) and - Individual planning (how the learner can realise their aspirations, including choosing progression pathways)

Approaches and effective practice

- 4.3. IAG should be on-going, linked to regular reviews and in line with the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) (WG, 2013), targeted when learners are at risk of disengaging or have disengaged. As figure 3 illustrates, there are three critical periods where IAG is particularly important.

Figure 3



4.4. Table 3 summarises the most commonly used approaches to IAG at key points and identifies less commonly used, but complementary approaches. The study shows that tutors have a key role, but should not be the only regular source of IAG.

Table 3: IAG when choosing courses, when considering changes, or considering disengaging

Stage : periods when...	Common methods used	Other complementary methods which colleges should consider using to strengthen IAG
learners are choosing (e.g. a course, whether to progress to the next level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • college open days, taster courses, school visits and interviews • briefing schools, Careers Wales advisors and the local authority on 14-19 learning pathways¹⁴ • marketing (e.g. websites, leaflets) • on-going advice from tutors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maximise contact with learners at this point (see College C case study), including face-to-face advice for mature learners in particular • target schools that the college has a “poorer” relationship with in terms of sharing IAG • provide more courses for pupils aged 14-16 in college, including junior apprenticeships (Year 10)¹⁵ • extended taster courses¹⁶ • provide an indication of the likely salary associated with different career choices.
learners can change or need to sustain progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • on-going advice from tutors • Careers Wales (mainly for those at risk of disengagement) and internal advisors (including learning coaches) • using learner feedback to inform IAG (e.g. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implement core standards for early identification (as part of the YEPF)¹⁷ • dedicated staff with expertise in LMI advising other staff and learners. • progression weeks (when the focus is upon engaging learners in

¹⁴E.g. <https://www.npted.org/section/1419/Pages/default.aspx>

¹⁵E.g. a college targeted pupils who are struggling in the school environment and who have an interest in an apprenticeship. They would attend college instead of school and continue their GCSE in English and Maths and do a part-time apprenticeship. At the end of the two years they would then be guaranteed a full apprenticeship.

¹⁶ E.g. a college has a pre-GCSE course for undecided learners. This includes an Edexcel-level hairdressing and construction taster that is considerably longer than the usual (i.e. 16 weeks), which also helps with developing basic skills.

¹⁷ As the YEPF highlights: “focus as a core on attendance, behaviour and attainment indicators”; “produce, as an outcome, a clear prioritised assessment of risk” , to “be used by all partners involved in providing support” ; and “be aligned with other services” (WG, 2013, p.18).

from learner reps. and internal surveys)

- industry talks / presentations for learners within related subject areas
- work experience
- “Swap don’t drop” initiatives (to encourage learners to change courses rather than drop out.)

thinking about their progression).

- learning programmes planned so that learners come away with some form of a qualification if they leave after the first year
- talks from industries where there is a high demand, at points when learners can easily change courses.
- raising awareness among learners (e.g. through tutors and posters) that changing course is acceptable even if you are not at risk of dropping out.

Discussion

- 4.5. Economic changes, such as deindustrialisation and the rise of the “knowledge economy” (discussed in section three) have created new opportunities, but also stripped away many traditional vocational routes and mean that learners are required to make many more choices. Qualitative data collected by this review indicates that learners had high aspirations and were keen to progress, but that their understanding of progression pathways was often variable (and colleges are well placed to improve their understanding and should be doing more to address this). Learners’ understanding (as might be expected) was generally stronger in more vocational subjects, like plumbing, with clear progression pathways to a small number of careers. In contrast, learners in areas like media and creative arts, with many and varied potential employment options, were often less clear. Some learners were also more focused upon progression to HE, and consequently were being encouraged to do ‘facilitating subjects’¹⁸ to gain access to a Russell Group Universities¹⁹ as an enabler to future employment.
- 4.6. Some interviewees argued that increasing choice meant that effective IAG was more important than ever. There were therefore concerns that cut backs in services like Careers Wales had negatively impacted upon young people’s access to IAG. It was also observed that without access to professionals who could advise them, learners might struggle to make full use of the increasing amount and accessibility of LMI, when making choices.
- 4.7. Effective IAG can both influence learners’ aspirations and inform their choices about how to realise them. However, unless a learner has clear aspirations in relation to employment and/or further study, it is difficult to advise learners on progression pathways, as the intended destination is not known. Moreover, some learners only develop clear career aspirations while at college. Without clear aspirations, learners are also likely to be less motivated and to be at higher risk of disengagement if they encounter challenges or barriers (e.g. linked to travel or the cost of FE). Working with learners to help them develop clear and realistic aspirations is therefore important for colleges and learners. This should provide a solid foundation that supports progression, but should not preclude a learner changing their aspirations.

¹⁸ Available at: <http://russellgroup.ac.uk/for-students/school-and-college-in-the-uk/subject-choices-at-school-and-college/>

¹⁹ The Russell Group is made up of 24 U.K based universities with a reputation for high standards in research and teaching. They are often perceived as the most prestigious U.K. universities.

4.8. A few colleges reported actively informing existing learners who were already studying in subject areas with limited employment prospects about other subject areas with better or broader employment opportunities (potentially influencing or changing learners' aspirations). However, this tactic proved largely ineffective. This may be because, as illustrated in table 4, the main factor that influences learners' choice is their interest or enjoyment in the subject area²⁰. Informing learners' initial choices (before entry to college) is therefore important and could be complemented by a greater focus upon taster and/or work experience in subject areas where LMI demand is high (to help build interest and enjoyment in new subjects). Flexibility in the curriculum offer is also important to enable learners to act upon IAG (as discussed in para 3.11 and College B case study).

College C: informing pupils about career opportunities prior to entry

The college uses every opportunity to make sure that (school age) pupils and learners are informed about career opportunities within the subject areas the college offers; these include:

- a bespoke newsletter to schools that includes past pupils/learners (from school and the college) reporting on their career experience.
- the college's curriculum offer and related higher education and career opportunities are explained to pupils at a range of activities e.g. pupils visit the college in Year 10; in Year 11 parents and pupils attend an open evening; and the college attends a range of events at local schools, such as Year 9 option evenings.
- future progression and destination routes are an explicit part of the college offer; for example, learning portfolios (i.e. combined areas of study, such as social and cultural) describe the types of careers to which certain routes may provide access.
- the college refers pupils who are interested in subject areas and related careers paths which it does not offer, to other colleges or school sixth forms.
- interviews with applicants include learning coaches, who provide guidance concerning their subject choices and its suitability for their career aims.

4.9. Even when learners have clear aspirations, effective IAG cannot guarantee progression to employment or further study; for example:

²⁰ This is also supported by a study based in England (Simm et al., 2007).

- LMI may be uncertain (see section three) and although career progression is a key motivator for people to continue in education²¹ and IAG focused upon employment and salary prospects is therefore likely to be important, this is not the only factor that drives choices. For example, interest in a subject may be more important than employment prospects (and in this study learners highlighted an interest or enjoyment in the subject area or similar subject area as the main factor in choosing their course (see table 3).²² As a consequence, learner choices are not always economically “rational”;
- it can be difficult to assess a learner’s capacity or potential before they start a course so ensuring that initial assessments are robust and IAG in the first eight weeks is effective is crucial; and there needs to be flexibility; and
- learners are exposed to multiple sources of IAG, including that offered by parents (a key influence), peers, schools and Careers Wales, which may contradict the IAG offered by colleges.

4.10. A majority of colleges felt that there was a lack of impartial and/or fully informed advice provided in schools (because, for example, schools with sixth forms may have a vested interest in “holding onto” learners and school staff may have limited experience of colleges or apprenticeships). Only colleges in a few local authorities reported they had access to the majority of schools. In addition, many learners interviewed for this study did not rate the careers advice they had in school. This reflects wider weaknesses that have led Estyn to conclude that “overall, advice and guidance for learners throughout their education do not provide enough opportunities for learners to develop a good understanding of the labour market and employment opportunities.” (Estyn, 2016, p. 91).

4.11. The range of influences learners are exposed to can constrain their choices, and research highlights how young people’s choices can be “bounded”, limiting the options they consider. For example, young people’s sense of what is possible and ‘natural’ for someone ‘like them’ will tend to limit the range of choices they consider (Dolton et al., 1999; Evans and Furlong, 1997). Consequently, changing learners’ choices can take some time. Moreover, while IAG can aim to ensure that learners make more informed choices, the choice ultimately rests with the learner, not the college. Learners may also make different choices (e.g. as their aspirations change). Colleges therefore need to

²¹ Available at:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140108090250/http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/evidence-report-3-employee-demand-for-skills.pdf>

²² This is also supported by a study based in England (Simm et al., 2007).

work hard to ensure that learners' choices are as informed as possible and that, where appropriate, they actively seek to shape those choices (e.g. by exciting and enthusing learners' interest in particular subject areas).

4.12. Table 4 below summarises the key reasons why learners chose their course, and assesses colleges' scope to directly influence this choice. As illustrated, there are areas where some colleges are likely to have had more influence than others.

Table 4: the reasons for learner choice, and assessment of college influence over choice

Reasons for learner choice (listed in order of prevalence)	Colleges' scope to directly influence choice
interest in/enjoyment of similar subject area before joining the college	 - medium - e.g. taster course and doing college courses while at school can expose learners to new subjects
influence of parents and family	 - medium - e.g. open evenings and marketing can engage parents and family, but parents are influenced by many other sources
having enough subject choices coupled with proximity of location	 - high - this is the focus of curriculum planning, although is constrained by factors such as funding and college capacity
media	 - limited - colleges' influence over media coverage is likely to be small, compared to other sources
employment opportunities	 - high - curriculum planning should be informed by LMI, so colleges can use this to structure progression pathway to employment and to inform learner choices, through, for example, school visits, interviews and on-going advice

5. Learner capacity and potential

5.1. Learners' capacity to follow their chosen pathway has a large impact upon their progression; for example, those who struggle with the demands of their course, struggle to progress. However, capacity is not fixed and colleges have a key role in identifying and assessing learners' capacity, potential and needs, and identifying what support learners need to progress and realise their aspirations. Learner Voice Wales data for 2015 indicates that around 70 percent of learners are satisfied with the learning support they receive (WG, 2015, p.23).

5.2. An understanding of learners' capacity, their aspirations (the focus of section four), and the college's curriculum offer (the focus of section three), was also described as vital in ensuring that learners are enrolled on programmes at appropriate levels.

Key elements

5.3. The three key elements the study identified around learner capacity are:

- identification and then assessment of a learner's strengths and needs;
- admission to the most appropriate programme of study (matching learners' aspirations, strengths and needs with appropriate progression pathways); and
- developing individual learning plans (to maximise learners' strengths and address needs, so they can follow their chosen progression pathway and change the pathway if appropriate).

5.4. Each of these elements should be part of an ongoing process, rather than a single event.

Approaches and effective practice

5.5. Table 5 summarises the most commonly used approaches in colleges to identify and assess learners' capacity, to match learners to appropriate progression pathways, and for the development of individual learning plans. It also identifies less commonly used, but complementary, approaches to each, which all colleges should consider.

Table 5: approaches to identifying and assessing learners' strengths and needs; match learners to appropriate progression pathways and individual planning and support

Key element	Commonly used approaches	Other complementary options which colleges should consider to strengthen work to assess and support learners and match them to provision
<p>identification, assessment and admission to the most appropriate programme of study</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • basic skills screening and initial assessment (e.g. WEST) • school visits (especially for those aged 14-16) • initial interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transfer of information about learners from schools e.g. through individual plans and exchange of intelligence about learners judged at risk of disengagement . In line with the YEPF (WG, 2013) a minority of colleges work with the local authority to track learners who are at risk of becoming disengaged. Their progress is monitored closely (attendance, exclusions, attainment) and they are provided with extra support before they reach a critical point.) • HE provision in a FE college : A minority of colleges found that there were a proportion of learners who had the ability to study at HE level but were reluctant to go to University due to reasons such as travelling issues.
<p>individual planning and support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development and use of individual learning plans: a range of paper based and electronic plans are used to define learners' journeys and to engage and motivate learners (see e.g. Burns et al., 2013). • holistic learner support services covering basic skills, social and emotional* and practical* needs (e.g. travel and childcare) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial software packages that help learners manage their learning (such as SOLA, which encourages independent learning skills) • MAT interventions focused upon sporting or artistic potential (for example, helping those who have artistic or sporting ability, rather than just academic talent, to progress) • partnership work with other agencies to provide social,

- Interventions focused upon academic potential: many colleges have more able and talented (MAT) programmes and as the SEREN network²³ embeds further these are likely to expand. These programmes are largely academic-based e.g. helping learners to progress to Russell Group Universities.
- transition planning and support (e.g. progression to HE, where for example, learning coaches help with UCAS applications or to apprenticeships)
- Partnership arrangements between FE, WBL and/or HE to ease transition arrangements
- emotional and practical support (by for example working in partnership with local authorities and voluntary sector groups to cater for demand).
- focused strategies to help groups of learners at risk (see case study D)
- HE tasters
- 'Progression agreements'²⁴ between school sixth forms, colleges, WBL or employers and universities to improve transition arrangement**
- Bridging modules in literacy or numeracy provided during the summer^{25**}.

*Although these are commonly provided, there are issues around meeting demand. Partnership with other agencies is one way of potentially increasing capacity.

**These are examples taken from other studies based in England (McKee, 2011; NFER, 2014).

²³ "Seren is a network of regional hubs designed to support Wales' brightest sixth formers achieve their academic potential and gain access to leading universities" Welsh Government

²⁴ "A Progression Agreement is a signed document between a feeder institution FE, 6th form college, WBL provider or employer) and receiving institution (college or university delivering HE programmes). The agreement sets out a framework of collaborative activities to enhance progression, and the criteria that students need to achieve in order to progress to higher education".(McKee, 2011, p.3).

²⁵ E.g. "Develop a summer maths bridging module to cover specific areas of mathematics that students need to have a confident understanding of if they were to be successful at HNC level." (NFER, 2014, p.13).

Discussion

5.6. In order to assess learner needs, a majority of colleges have, to varying degrees, started using the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST)²⁶ for initial screening and diagnostics. Although a minority of colleges praised the comprehensiveness of data it produced (compared with other screening tools²⁷), many had concerns regarding the length of time (up to 90 minutes) it took a learner to complete the test and the level of support provided to colleges using WEST. Moreover, there had been difficulties getting some learners to take diagnostic tests seriously, which potentially skewed results. Although the demands of WEST may be greater than some other screening and diagnostic tools, initial assessment is not a new requirement for colleges.

5.7. Many colleges, and learners in around half of the colleges, highlighted that learners came to college because they were attracted to the vocational and practical aspects of learning. The greater policy emphasis upon learners improving their literacy and numeracy skills with courses becoming more academic²⁸ was therefore seen as a potential barrier. It was seen as a particular problem because many colleges reported that around half of full-time learners had poor basic skills²⁹ and colleges reported that it was challenging to raise their skills levels swiftly enough given the time available, in terms of both the intensity and duration of the intervention (typically 2-3 hours a week). Equally, poor literacy and numeracy skills are significant barriers to learners' progression, and raising learners' skills is a vital part of college strategies to improve learners' progression.

5.8. Many learners interviewed for this study reported that their courses "pushed" their abilities or were at the right level. However, learners in a minority of colleges felt that they were not being challenged enough academically.

5.9. Learners in around half the colleges highlighted that the quality of teaching and personal support could vary considerably. The quality of teaching and support impacts upon both learner capacity and learner choices about whether to progress or not. Learners identified tutors as a key source of support, which helped to provide consistency, but meant that

²⁶ Further details available:

https://www.walesessentialskills.com/sites/default/files/WEST%20Offline%20Assessment%20Tool%20guide_v1.0.pdf

²⁷ Further details available: <http://www.bksb.co.uk/products/diagnostic-assessment/>

²⁸ For example, the Welsh Government is aiming for the Welsh Baccalaureate to be universally adopted. For learners who are doing a Level 3 course this will include an advanced level baccalaureate where a 'C' GCSE grade would be needed in English/Welsh and Maths. In addition, a majority of colleges highlighted how courses were becoming more academically rigorous, especially at level two.

²⁹ E.g. one college reported 55% of their learners at level entry three or less in numeracy and 51% in literacy. Exact figures varied from college to college

much support was dependent upon the skills and interest of one person (who might be absent or difficult to talk to). This suggests colleges should make it easier for learners to change tutor, improve training for tutors on supporting learners, and provide more timely support from other sources (see College D case study).

5.10. Around half the colleges reported seeing increases in the social and emotional needs of learners, including mental health problems (depression and self-harming). Colleges said that this increased demand, in conjunction with cuts in funding for support services, had limited colleges' capacity to support social and emotional needs effectively. As the case study of College D illustrates, a minority of colleges reported developing targeted interventions to support social and emotional well-being for learners. Developing interventions to address social and emotional needs is likely to be an important part of college strategies to improve learners' progression.

College D: strategy for tackling poverty and disadvantage

The college aims to improve the life chances of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds through:

- Producing a strategy specifically targeting learners in poverty or who are from other disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. such as young offenders, looked after children)
- collaboration with a range of partners (including schools, inclusion services, Looked After Children Co-ordinators, youth offending teams and youth engagement services) to share information and support, that has also improved the data that used to monitor and target support for learners in need;
- providing the learners with life skills in areas that they have typically struggled with (and hence caused anxiety) such as financial awareness, healthy eating and employability skills; and
- ensuring mechanisms for support (student welfare officers, tutors, youth workers) are able to provide support where and when needed.

5.11. The study found that there can be tensions between service-centred delivery (i.e. the need to hit targets) and learner-centred delivery (what is right for the learner); for example, a minority of colleges highlighted that because Estyn judged them upon completion rates of courses, colleges were incentivised to place a "borderline" learner on a lower level course to increase their likelihood of completing the course.

6. Progression data

Introduction

6.1. In order to explore learners' progression rates, the study focused upon:

- evidence of changes in the volume of learning activity at each level (based upon Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) data); and
- data from individual colleges on learner progression.

6.2. The conclusions that can be drawn from changes in the volume of learning activity are limited, because it does not allow for in and out flows of learners (e.g. learners leaving college after completing Level 1 and new learners entering college to start courses at Level 2).

6.3. Within the timescale for this study, it was not possible to carry out systematic analysis of LLWR data on learner progression. The conclusions that can be drawn from data provided by individual colleges are limited due to differences in the way the data was collected and presented by the five colleges who responded to the data request. Data collection was reported to be difficult due to a range of reasons including: colleges' capacity and time, mergers (which often made it difficult to track learners' progress over time) and the distribution of data (e.g. across departments or campuses and in the type of entry level courses recorded - in previous years some were accredited others were not). The data provided by colleges has been anonymised.

Findings

6.4. LLWR data on the volume of learning activity (illustrated in Table 7 in the appendix) over the last five years (2010/11 to 2014/15), highlights an overall increase in the proportion of learning activities at Level 3 (an increase of seven percentage points)³⁰, while the proportion of learning activities at levels four and five has remained the same.

6.5. Data from individual colleges (summarised in Table 6 below) shows that over the last five years, there has been an increase in the proportion of learners progressing from Level 1 to Level 2 (and above) and from Level 2 to Level 3 (and above). The data also

³⁰ The changes in the proportion of learning activity at level three have not been uniform; e.g. there has been a 36% increase in learning activities in sports, games and recreation at level three and a decrease of 8% in learning activities in humanities at level three.

indicates that around 40 to 50 percent of learners progress from Level 1 to Level 2 (or above) and around 30 to 50 percent of learners progress from Level 2 to Level 3 (or above), each year. The range in the progression rates is likely to reflect differences in the learners' capacity (which is likely to be the most important factor), learner choices and curriculum planning and delivery and differences in how the data is recorded and presented.

Table 6: progression data (anonymised) collected from five colleges

Coll. Summary of the data (trends)	
i.	Over the last five years (2010/11 to 2014/15) there has been: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fluctuation in the proportion of learners progressing from Level 1 to 2 (or higher), resulting in an increase in the proportion of learners progressing from 38 percent to 49 percent over the period (although given the year to year fluctuations, it is difficult to interpret what will happen next); - a steady increase in the proportion of learners progressing from Level 2 to 3 (or higher), from 28 percent to 32 percent; and - a large increase in the proportion of learners progressing from Level 3 to 4 (or higher), from 16 percent to 36 percent.
ii.	Over the last five years (2010/11 to 2014/15) there has been a steady increase in the proportion of learners progressing from Level 2 to Level 3: increasing from 48 percent to 53 percent of learners.
iii	Over the last five years (2010/11 to 2014/15) there has been: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a steady increase in the proportion of learners progressing from Level 1 to 2 (or higher) or progression at the same level to a different course, in four of the five years, followed by a drop in the fifth year, so the rate increased from 77 percent to 78 percent overall (having peaked at 84 percent in 2013/14-2014/15); and - a steady increase in the proportion of learners progressing from Level 2 to 3 (or higher) or progressing at the same level to a different course, from 50 percent to 68 percent.
iv.	Over the last year and half (from 2014/15 to 2015/16) 50 percent of learners progressed from Level 1 to Level 2, and 33 percent of learners progressed from Level 2 to Level 3.
v.	In 2013/14 50 percent of learners progressed from Level 2 to 3.

7. Conclusions

How well are colleges planning and delivering their curriculum to secure progression opportunities for learners at all levels?

7.1. Learner progression is well understood by colleges and is generally good. It depends upon curriculum planning, learner choice and capacity.

7.2. Progression planning can never be perfect. It relies upon imperfect information (e.g. on future learner and labour market demands), requires the balancing of a number of different factors and can be affected by factors beyond a college's control. Nevertheless, there is scope to improve how colleges plan and deliver their curriculum by focusing upon the curriculum, learner choice and learner capacity, and this review focuses upon identifying examples of how this can be done.

7.3. In relation to progression, learner choice is probably the weakest element. As Estyn identify, while progression planning and learner support are generally good: "many learners do not appreciate the importance of considering employment opportunities when they choose their college course" (Estyn, 2016, p. 91). This represents a systems-wide failure (including weaknesses in IAG provided by schools and Careers Wales³¹). This is a challenging failure to fix, given the range of factors that influence learners' aspirations, learners' knowledge of how to realise their aspirations and ultimately, learners' choices in relation to progression.

7.4. Colleges can improve learner choices by focusing upon IAG, curriculum planning and, to a lesser degree, learner capacity. IAG before and during a learner's time at college is vital in ensuring that learners can make more informed choices. Curriculum planning is important here, as by establishing clear progression routes (so whatever course a learner chooses, there is a clear set of pathways to employment or further study), and ensuring there is flexibility (enabling learners to change pathways), colleges can mitigate the impact of poorly informed choices. Learner capacity is important as it should ensure that learners have the skills needed to not only progress to the next level, but, if necessary, change to a new pathway.

³¹ Although evaluations of Careers Wales' work with young people are positive, cut backs have reduced the extent to which Careers Wales can work with young people and employers.

How satisfied are learners with progression routes and information advice and guidance?

7.5. Learner Voice Wales data indicates that most learners are satisfied with college, with 80 percent of learners rating their overall experience as 'very good' or 'good'. Satisfaction with information, advice, guidance and support, is lower than this, but still relatively high, with around 75% of learners rating it as 'very good' or good' (WG, 2015, p.20).

7.6. Qualitative data collected by this review indicates that learners had high aspirations and were keen to progress, but that their understanding of progression pathways was often variable. Their understanding (as might be expected) was generally stronger in more vocational subjects with fewer and clearer progression pathways (such as the construction industry) and is likely to have made IAG simpler to deliver to these learners.

Are learners progressing to Level 3 and above?

7.7. The limitations of the data mean it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions. The available data suggests increasing proportions of learners are progressing to higher levels. It is likely that some groups of learners are more likely to progress than others; for example, progression rates amongst learners from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are generally lower (Smith et al, 2015). Improving data on learner progression (including post-college destinations) is important.

7.8. Colleges identified unmet social and emotional needs, the gaps between Level 1 and 2 and Levels 2 and 3, and the increasing academic content of some courses, as key barriers to progression. The level and academic demands of courses are beyond colleges' control and colleges need to address these barriers through action focused upon learner capacity (e.g. basic skills interventions and developing their own mental health support services). Improving partnership work with other specialist services may also be important here.

Recommendations

7.9. Estyn has found that progression planning is generally good with no systemic weaknesses (Estyn, 2014b; 2015; 2016) and differences in practice in colleges are primarily around additional or extended activity. The activities a minority of colleges do to enhance curriculum planning, learner choice and capacity are not fundamentally different to what most colleges do, but some colleges do more of these activities, and on the face of it, some do it better (however, rigorously and independently evaluating the effectiveness of different activities was beyond the study's scope). As a consequence, each recommendation is likely to be more relevant to some colleges than others.

Strengthening curriculum planning

Recommendation 1: Colleges improve the use of LMI in curriculum planning by drawing upon a wider range of sources (see table 1 for details).

Recommendation 2: Welsh Government improve data on learner destinations at 18, by (as Estyn recommends) working with schools, colleges, Careers Wales and local authorities to develop a national system for collecting data on the destinations of 18-year-olds.

Recommendation 3: Colleges improve data on learner destinations at 18+, by contacting past learners six months after completion of their course (rather than, for example, relying on data on learners' stated intentions).

Recommendation 4: Colleges centralise data collection on progression across colleges/departments, systematically monitoring and evaluating progression rates (e.g. to identify systemic weakness in curriculum planning or delivery and to explore differences for different groups of learners, such as those with learning difficulties or disabilities or from ethnic minority groups), setting targets for improving progression rates and benchmarking progression rates.

Recommendation 5: Colleges make full use of data on learner progression rates and destinations in the curriculum planning process.

Recommendation 6: Colleges increase flexibility through for example, the development of modular courses (where possible), interim courses and accelerated learning programmes.

Recommendation 7: Colleges ensure that there are clear progression routes, so whatever programme a learner chooses, there are a clear set of pathways to employment or further study.

Recommendation 8: Welsh Government to work with colleges and employers to explore co-investment opportunities³² with employers.

Ensuing learners make more informed choices

Recommendation 9: Colleges ensure IAG integrates challenge and planning (see Table 3 for details), and is informed by learners' aspirations, LMI, the college's curriculum offer and an assessment of a learners' capacity or potential.

Recommendation 10: Colleges focus IAG on critical periods in a learners' journey (e.g. when choosing courses, when they can still easily change course or are "wobbling").

Recommendation 11: Colleges use college engagement activities (e.g. open days and media outlets) to better inform parents of the subject choices and subsequent progression routes available to their child or children.

Enhancing learners' capacity and potential

Recommendation 12: Colleges strengthen assessments of learners' needs (see table 5 for further details).

Recommendation 13: Colleges strengthen individual planning and support (see table 5 for details).

Recommendation 14: Colleges strengthen support for learners' social and emotional needs, including improving partnership work with specialist services.

Recommendation 15: Welsh Government to improve the quality and availability of support available to colleges using the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST).

³² As championed by the Welsh Government (2008).

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Appendix

Table 7: showing the percentage change in learning activities credited at Entry Level, Level 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 within FEIs between 2010/11 to 2014/15 (provisional data).

Subjects	Entry	L1	L2	L3	L4/5
All subjects	0.7	-7.4	-5.1	7.1	0.0
Agriculture, Horticulture & Animal Care	-8.3	4.9	-1.7	9.9	
Arts and Crafts	1.2	-14.5	-9.6	5.8	
Built Environment	-2.1	-6.7	-3.6	8.6	-0.1
Business/Management/Office Studies	-4.4	4.0	-8.7	1.7	-1.8
Care/Personal Development	-0.1	-6.9	-12.0	11.8	
Cultural Studies/Languages/Literature	7.1	-2.3	-8.2	-1.6	
Education/Training/Teaching	-1.1	-19.1	-9.8	25.7	1.3
Engineering	-1.3	-0.1	-0.5	0.4	0.0
Environment	4.9	-12.9	13.7	-9.8	
Health Care/Medicine/Health & Safety	-0.2	-3.9	-7.8	6.6	-0.2
Hotel and Catering	-1.0	-4.0	0.7	1.4	-0.1
Humanities	1.7	-9.8	-6.5	-7.8	
Information Technology & Information	4.1	-13.8	3.3	8.7	
Manufacturing		-6.6	13.8	4.4	
Media/Communications/Publishing	0.5	-5.6	-3.4	7.3	-0.1
Performing Arts	4.1	-7.4	-12.1	10.3	
Sales, Marketing & Retailing	-4.7	-1.3	1.3	-0.2	-0.1
Sciences & Mathematics	0.1	-3.9	0.8	2.8	
Services to Industry/Commerce		1.0	-6.3	1.1	
Social Sciences	0.4	-0.5	-5.7	10.2	
Sports, Games & Recreation	-5.1	-20.2	-11.7	36.1	0.7
Transport		-1.4	-1.9	1.6	
<i>Not Specified</i>	-44.7	3.1	10.0	3.8	3.8
<i>Not Known</i>	14.1	-26.1	-2.1	3.8	

Source: LLWR³³

³³Based upon data on learning activities at FE institutions by subject and credit level:
<https://stats.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Lifelong-Learning-Wales-Record/learningactivities-by-subject-creditlevel>