

Blw Bo.

Connecting activity, wellbeing and better
mental health among FE learners and staff

Final report
July 2022

This report is available
in Welsh



Ariennir gan
Lywodraeth Cymru
Funded by
Welsh Government

 **Colegau Cymru**
Colleges Wales

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Executive Summary

Wales benefits from a strong national policy focus on health and wellbeing, with accompanying resources assigned to supporting the nation's physical and mental health, including improving mental wellbeing in educational settings. To date, the Welsh Government has invested £2m to support mental health in further education (FE), which will rise to circa £5m in 2023. BlwBo has undertaken three related qualitative research projects with Welsh colleges for ColegauCymru, focusing on Active Wellbeing provision. This Active Wellbeing Research Project has been commissioned by ColegauCymru and funded by the Welsh Government as part of their programme to support mental health and wellbeing initiatives in FE colleges.

Since 2021, the research has engaged with over 300 learners, their tutors and staff members who lead and support active wellbeing provision in further education institutions, as well as some national partner organisations. For this latest study, learners from over 17 different courses have contributed: full time and part time learners, active wellbeing participants and non-active individuals.

The aim of the research was to gain further insight into the connection between activity and wellbeing of FE learners and staff, specifically how active wellbeing can positively impact mental health. It has also explored the use of qualitative approaches to measuring outcomes, the potential for peer-led future research using this model, and identifying opportunities to improve both learner and staff understanding of the connection between activity, wellbeing and better mental health.

It has been well documented that the pandemic has increased the need for mental health support, while at the same time affecting access to the active wellbeing opportunities that can form a key part of a preventative approach. For two years, learners have not had the type of access or experience they might have expected to enjoy in person at college. There is a risk that newer blended learning approaches brought in to manage the pandemic will have a long term negative impact on learner and staff health and wellbeing, and people's capacity to be involved in active wellbeing has become more limited.

Within this context, this research has identified the following findings.

LEARNERS

- Active Wellbeing provision is welcomed by learners and the connection between physical activity, mental health and wellbeing is generally well understood. Those that take part in active wellbeing

opportunities view them very positively, and explain they are providing fun, enjoyment, relief from stress, anxiety and work pressures and an opportunity to socialise.

- Learners are less likely to be aware of the connections between active wellbeing and incidental learning benefits of being active and how it could enrich the college experience and add value to academic outcomes. There is scope to use active wellbeing provision - and the qualitative research process itself - to improve learners' understanding of these links.
- Active wellbeing opportunities can and should be used as a tool to develop skills for future employability, having the scope to develop skills in communication, team building and leadership as well as improving individuals' self-esteem, resilience and confidence. Active wellbeing opportunities that would enhance skills for future employment was given the highest priority by learners when asked what future provision could look like.
- A good proportion of research participants had not experienced the active wellbeing offer due to the pandemic (as of spring 2022) and did not know it was available to them. Awareness of the range of active wellbeing opportunities remains low despite being promoted through multiple channels - messages are not reaching learners who could benefit most.
- Although in part due to pandemic restrictions, even when they were aware of the offer, learners did not have consistent or inclusive access to active wellbeing opportunities. This is not a new finding, but was again a key theme highlighted by research participants, requiring ongoing recognition and actions to address it. The barriers that learners (and staff) face are far-reaching, and include logistical factors such as timetabling, (lack of) facility access and time pressures of external commitments - as well as internal barriers such as motivation, confidence, awareness and ability. The approach needs to be locally driven and person-centred to take account of these factors. Learner participation is greatly affected by their course type, timetabling and programming restrictions.

STAFF AND PARTNERS

- Strategically, active wellbeing has become more important to colleges in recent years and is developing a higher profile, aided by external funding to support it, from Sport Wales since 2014 and boosted with this funding to support mental health from the Welsh Government. Positively, in recent years the workforce for active wellbeing opportunities in further education institutions has been growing its capacity and capabilities - providing additional resources to address this area of need.
- There is work to do to embed and resource active wellbeing in colleges so it becomes sustainable and part of a long term approach – normalising active wellbeing as part of college life, rather than an optional extra available to a limited range of learner groups and staff members. However, there

is minimal capacity in the existing workforce to extend the offer further and reach more learners and staff.

- At a national level, there is scope to raise the profile of ColegauCymru's Active Wellbeing Strategy and review how it can be operationalised. External partners have low levels of awareness and connectivity with active wellbeing for further education learners, and collaborative work to date has been localised and sporadic. There is appetite among some national partners to do more to connect with the FE sector and work collaboratively to address wellbeing in college communities.

As the sector rebuilds from the effects of the pandemic, future active wellbeing offers should provide an opportunity for learners to socialise and meet new people, something that was highlighted as missing in their college experience of 2021. Creating fun, informal and formal opportunities and working towards frictionless experiences for staff and learners to be active remains an important goal. The offer should also encourage community connections. Many of these community opportunities were lost in the last two years, when previously learners could contribute to community based provision and school delivery through volunteering and could gain valuable work experience.

Finally, a 'systems level' approach is needed, as provision can be sporadic and short term at present. To resolve this needs all parts to come together (internally and externally) to work towards seamless active wellbeing provision and participation as a habitual part of college life. Highlighting the wider benefits of participation is an ongoing goal, to realise the potential to improve mental health, wellbeing, and to enrich the overall college experience and post-college outcomes and opportunities.

1. Introduction

Since 2014, ColegauCymru has supported colleges to participate in programmes funded by Sport Wales and the Welsh Government that engage learners in interventions to encourage participation in physical activity, sport and volunteering. This work has involved both delivery and insight, which led to the development of an overarching strategy for the work. ColegauCymru's Active Wellbeing Strategy was launched in 2020 and set out a new strategic direction for the organisation and its member colleges, with the vision: *Active Colleges – Active Lives – Active Wales*. It was developed in the context of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015¹ and the Vision for Sport in Wales².

The strategy “will support college communities to improve emotional, social and physical wellbeing within the sector, promoting both healthier college communities and a workforce fit for future employment.”³ Individual colleges have developed their own specific strategies related to physical activity and wellbeing, they have invested in staff, equipment and facilities to support active wellbeing, along with ambassador and leadership programmes. While there is also specific support for sports learners and the development of sporting opportunities, active wellbeing provision is for everyone - learners, staff and communities - addressing gaps in participation and promoting inclusivity - and places the wellbeing of individuals at the heart of strategic decision making.

In April 2021, ColegauCymru commissioned BlwBo to undertake two independent, related studies⁴, which involved a series of online focus groups with learners and tutors from colleges across Wales. The first looked into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on sport and wellbeing in further education colleges across Wales, focussing on learners in academy and sport programmes. We analysed learners' feedback in relation to the loss of sport on their social, emotional, and physical wellbeing, and the connections between this and their personal development and employability prospects. This research identified a need to re-engage with young people and the future workforce in sport, due to missed opportunities for coaching and volunteering during the pandemic and the structure and routine that a sports course would normally have provided. Learners had lost access to training facilities and competition – in many cases reducing their motivation and fitness levels. The study also looked at the return to sport, finding there were feelings of being overwhelmed and anxious about this, as well as

¹ Welsh Government. (2015). *Well-being of future generations (Wales) Act 2015*. Wales: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

² Sport Wales (2018). *The Vision for Sport in Wales*. Sport Wales. [Online]. Available from: <https://visionforsport.wales/> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

³ ColegauCymru (February 2020). *Active Wellbeing Strategy 2020-25*. ColegauCymru. [Online]. Available from: <http://ow.ly/i9QU50Cgg1t> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

⁴ ColegauCymru. *Pandemic research finds active wellbeing to be hugely valuable across all aspects of college life*. ColegauCymru. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.colleges.wales/en/blog/post/pandemic-research-finds-active-wellbeing-to-be-hugely-valuable-across-all-aspects-of-college-life> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

hope and excitement. Inclusivity was raised as an issue, in particular with female learners facing some negative effects in terms of access to facilities and competition as provision moved back to face to face delivery.

The second study aimed to gain a better understanding of the connection between activity and wellbeing. This involved a sample of 11 focus groups administered remotely via Microsoft teams with learners from a range of different courses. We explored learners' perceptions and understanding of active wellbeing, and how they described concepts of eudemonic and hedonic wellbeing. There were good levels of awareness and understanding of the benefits of being active to physical health and wellbeing. We found there was scope to improve understanding of incidental learning benefits of being active and how it could enrich the college experience and add value to academic outcomes, facilitating opportunities to improve teamwork, leadership, independence, confidence and add to the learning experience.

Some of these findings were not 'new' and had been identified in previous research studies: that being active has a positive impact on learning, along with the increasing need to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Inclusion and tackling inequalities was a recurring theme – a topic that the workforce is familiar with and is continually working to address. The findings again emphasised the importance of recognising the diversity of learners and their needs when developing active wellbeing provision. Importantly, evidence provided by learners reinforced the link between active wellbeing and better mental health and raised the increasing need to support the mental health and wellbeing of both staff and learners as a result of the pandemic.

In September 2021, ColegauCymru commissioned BlwBo to undertake research developing further insight into the connection between activity and wellbeing of FE learners and staff, specifically how active wellbeing can positively impact mental health. This latest active wellbeing research is funded by the Welsh Government as part of their programme to support mental health and wellbeing initiatives in FE colleges. The first phase of this funding saw £2m invested across three strands of the project - institutional, national and collaborative. For 2021-22, this project will form part of the national strand.

This research aims to support ColegauCymru and Welsh Government by:

- Providing new insight into the connection between activity and the wellbeing of FE learners and staff;
- Supporting the development of peer-led research skills linked to active wellbeing projects;

- Identifying new opportunities to improve both learner and staff understanding of the connection between activity, wellbeing and better mental health;
- Further development of group based research as a tool to evaluate the impact of participation in both online and face to face project activity; and
- Making connections with some of the wider elements of existing FE mental health projects funded by the Welsh Government.

2. Rationale and context

Active wellbeing provision in further education settings connects and contributes to wider national policy priorities and the wellbeing objectives set out in the refreshed Programme for Government 2021-26⁵ which incorporates the Co-operation Agreement⁶. In particular, it supports the objective to ‘provide effective, high quality and sustainable health care’, which prioritises:

- investment in mental health,
- service redesign to improve prevention, tackle stigma and promote a no wrong door approach to mental health support.

Active Wellbeing also has a clear role to play in supporting the objectives:

- Celebrate diversity and move to eliminate inequality in all of its forms, and
- Push forward towards a million Welsh speakers, and enable tourism, sports and arts industries to thrive.

These aspects are all considerations for its future design and delivery.

ColegauCymru have made a strong case for everyone to be entitled to receive high quality wellbeing and mental health provision⁷. A key strategic outcome for the Active Wellbeing Strategy is the “*Activity Outcome: Entitlement. Ensuring that everyone in the FE Sector has access to activities which improve their personal well-being*”. There is good evidence to show that through participation in sport and active recreation, volunteering, coaching and leading, young people can develop confidence, enjoyment, wellbeing and skills for future employment⁸. The need for investment in this area is also clear - our recent studies and desk research continue to identify evidence that showed learners are experiencing issues (some of which have been exacerbated by COVID-19) such as:

- Increased pressure on mental health and emotional wellbeing;
- Loss of physical fitness, confidence and motivation to be physically active;

⁵ Welsh Government (7 December 2021) *Welsh Government Programme for Government*. Wales: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://gov.wales/programme-for-government-2021-to-2026-html> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

⁶ Welsh Government (2021) *The Co-operation Agreement*. Wales: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-11/cooperation-agreement-2021.pdf> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

⁷ ColegauCymru (March 2021) *ColegauCymru policy asks for the next Welsh Government, Theme 3: Entitlement to wellbeing for learners and staff*. Wales: ColegauCymru [Online]. Available at: <https://www.colleges.wales/image/publications/briefings/Policy%20Asks%20Senedd%20Elections%202021/Eng/Theme%203%20brief.pdf> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

⁸ UK Active (2020) *British Active Students Survey: Further Education 2019-20*. UK Active. [Online] Available from: <https://www.ukactive.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/BASS-2019-FEReport-2.pdf> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

- Very restricted opportunities to socialise and connect with other learners;
- Practical difficulties in learning and disparities due to digital deprivation; and
- Loss of work experience, paid employment and entry into an employment pathway.

Staff working in colleges highlighted the increase in funding and resource dedicated to active wellbeing. Along with the funding received from Sport Wales, the addition of funding to support mental health from the Welsh Government will help to support further growth of the workforce dedicated to improving opportunities for active wellbeing for learners and staff. The anecdotal feedback indicated that all colleges employ general wellbeing roles and from September 2022, nine out of 11 colleges will have staff supported by mental health funding. More are now known as 'Active Wellbeing Officers' helping to raise recognition among staff and learners. This demonstrates the national and local commitment to wellbeing, although it is worth reflecting on the scale of FEIs, as highlighted in Table 1 below. Active wellbeing provision currently focusses on full time learners and staff, although ColegauCymru recognise that addressing inclusivity also requires longer term consideration of how to support active wellbeing for part time, work-based learners and apprentices.

Table 1: Provider learners enrolled at FEIs by programme (2020-21)⁹

| 2020-21 | Full time | Part time | Work based learning | Total |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|---------------------|---------|
| All FEIs | 48,660 | 45,080 | 18,175 | 111,910 |
| Bridgend College | 2,345 | 2,245 | 1,305 | 5,895 |
| Coleg Sir Gar | 3,150 | 3,080 | 1,020 | 7,250 |
| Coleg Gwent | 7,420 | 4,005 | 440 | 11,870 |
| Grwp Llandrillo Menai | 5,365 | 5,450 | 2,355 | 13,165 |
| Merthyr Tydfil College | 1,810 | 205 | . | 2,020 |
| Pembrokeshire College | 1,955 | 1,435 | 2,055 | 5,440 |
| Gower College Swansea | 4,570 | 3,950 | 2,665 | 11,185 |
| Cardiff and Vale College | 5,365 | 7,330 | 2,185 | 14,880 |
| Coleg Cambria | 6,350 | 5,070 | 3,005 | 14,425 |
| Coleg Y Cymoedd | 4,885 | 2,965 | 1,615 | 9,460 |
| Grwp NPTC | 3,885 | 3,205 | 1,530 | 8,625 |

⁹ Welsh Government (24 February 2022) Stats Wales: Provider learners enrolled at further education institutions by programme 2020-21. Wales: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Time-Series/numberoflearners-by-provider-modeofstudy> (Accessed August 2022).

There is now a wealth of supporting evidence to demonstrate the benefits of physical activity on mental health and wellbeing. The Mental Health Foundation provides evidence of the positive impact that can be gained for mental alertness, energy, mood and self-esteem and how activity can alleviate stress, anxiety and sleep problems. Physical activity can be used as a treatment for depression and anxiety, and importantly, it plays a role in preventing the development of mental health problems and improving the quality of life¹⁰ of those who are experiencing them (our emphasis).

This is important, as we are seeing widespread reporting and evidence of an increasing need for mental health support, identified in many different research studies including February's publication from the Prince's Trust NatWest Youth Index which revealed that young people's overall happiness and confidence has hit the lowest point in the thirteen-year history of the survey. Almost half (48 %) of 16-25 year olds in the UK said they were experiencing a mental health problem, 46% say the pandemic has made their mental health worse, and 44% agree they are more anxious now. This is reflected by Sported's recently published (March 2022) biennial Community Pulse study¹¹ with feedback from 363 community group representatives across the UK. This reported that mental health is again identified as the most significant challenge young people are facing in communities - 30% of responses from groups designated this the most significant issue, a 3% increase from the last Pulse. The Welsh Government recognises that organisations have provided and will continue to provide additional time and resource to help learners and staff who are suffering from mental health issues, and in March 2022, allocated an additional £2.8m to support the mental health and well-being of further education learners and staff, apprentices and trainees in Wales¹².

Part of this study aims to identify new opportunities to improve understanding of the connection between activity, wellbeing and better mental health. There appears to be a reasonable base level of understanding among the population about how activity can benefit both physical and mental health. Sport Wales recently reported some drivers for participation in activity from their February 2022 ComRes survey: 57% of adults are exercising to manage their physical health (which was the lowest figure witnessed throughout the course of the pandemic, peaking at 71% in October 2022). Those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, with no longstanding physical or mental condition(s), were more likely to say this. 53% of adults are exercising to manage their mental health (again, the lowest figure witnessed throughout the course of the pandemic peaking at 65% in August 2022) and younger

¹⁰ Mental Health Foundation. *How To...Look after your mental health using exercise*. Mental Health Foundation. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-using-exercise> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

¹¹ Sported (March 2022) *Community Pulse*. Sported. [Online]. Available from: <https://sported.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Pulse-March-2022-1.pdf> (Accessed 5 April 2022).

¹² Welsh Government (17 March 2022) *New funding to support mental well-being of apprentices, trainees and further education learners and staff*. Wales: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://gov.wales/new-funding-support-mental-well-being-apprentices-trainees-and-further-education-learners-and-staff> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

adults, those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and those with no longstanding physical or mental condition were more likely to say this.

Active adults are more likely to report being satisfied and happy with their lives¹³. Active wellbeing provision can play a major role in addressing these issues and learners we spoke to during the 2020-21 academic year valued their active wellbeing opportunities and participation, benefiting in a number of different ways in relation to the social, physical and emotional outcomes they experienced. This study will take a further step to exploring the role of active wellbeing in learners' lives, and understanding the progress made towards the strategic outcomes highlighted in the Active Wellbeing Strategy.

¹³ Sport Wales ComRes CLIP event 17th March 2022.

3. Research approach

The original expectation for this project was that the research would be taking place post-COVID-19. However, timings partly corresponded with the emergence of the Omicron variant and continuing restrictions and delivery adaptations to manage risk. By the time of reporting, these restrictions had reduced significantly. Research on active wellbeing has now taken place pre-COVID-19, during the pandemic, and post the pandemic, allowing us to see how key themes have unfolded, and which findings remain current and important priorities to address. Four researchers have been involved in fieldwork, analysis and reporting, which brings in a range of experiences and skills when evaluating the findings and making recommendations.

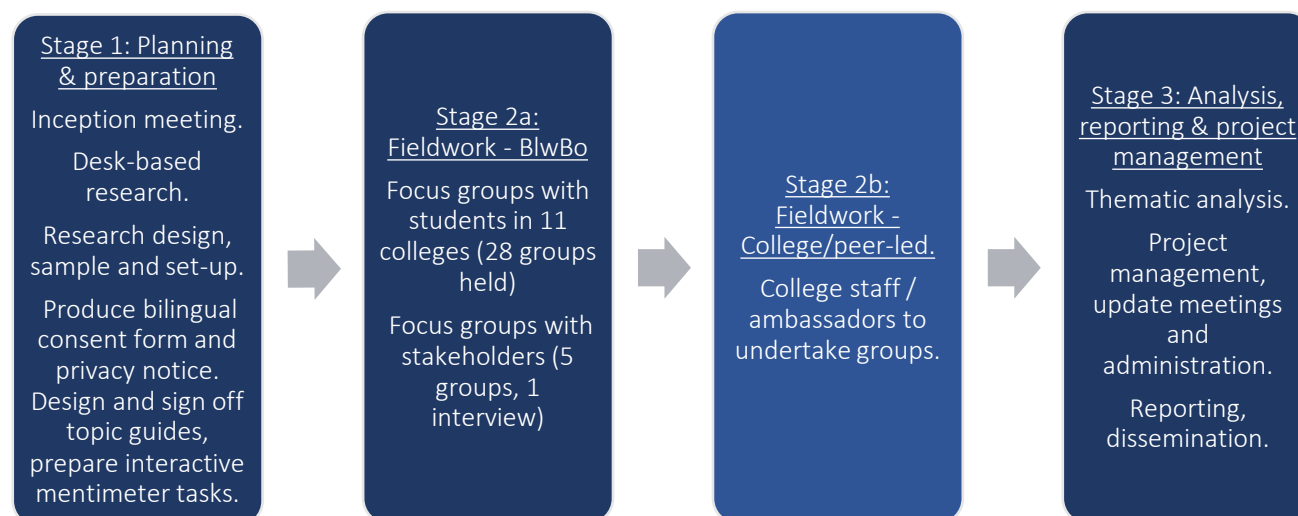
As well as continuing to focus on the experiences of learners, this latest study has greatly benefited from the inclusion of college staff, including tutors, project leads and strategic leads, and a sample of representatives from national partner organisations. Learning from the earlier phases of research found that their involvement in learner focus groups added depth to the process. Holding specific staff and tutor focus groups in this most recent phase has provided a valuable addition to the insight gained from learners about their perceptions of active wellbeing.

The main method for fieldwork involved a further series of online focus groups, using Microsoft Teams, and one face to face visit to a college campus. One of the goals of the research was to test the use of qualitative approaches as a means of monitoring active wellbeing outcomes and gaining new insight. Recruitment and administration of the online focus groups was arranged by a ColegauCymru staff member, and with the permission of participants, sessions were recorded for analysis purposes only so they could be revisited by the research team. Part of this fieldwork has been completed by the BlwBo research team, and part is being undertaken by peer researchers based in their colleges, led by college project leads and ambassadors.

We made use of Mentimeter to support this work. Mentimeter provides a quantitative output that can immediately be discussed. We incorporated the ONS 4 wellbeing measures¹⁴ in many of the groups, which considers life satisfaction, feeling what you do is worthwhile, anxiety and happiness scores. This will allow us to compare results over time for college learners compared with the wider population.

¹⁴ Office for National Statistics (26 September 2018) Measuring National Wellbeing. ONS. [Online] Available from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/surveysusingthe4officefornationalstatisticspersonalwellbeingquestions> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

Figure 1. A summary of the research process



Sample

There is representation from learners from a variety of different course types, providing a good range of different experiences, age ranges, study years, levels of education and modes of learning. In total, 259 learners contributed to this phase of the research undertaken by BlwBo, an average of nine learners per group. In each group there was a tutor and / or an active wellbeing project lead present, who were also able to contribute to the research process and offer contextual information and their own insight.

Courses represented have included:

- Independent Living Skills (ILS) (5 groups)
- Public service (5 groups)
- Health & Social Care (3 groups)
- Business Management/Business studies (2 groups)
- Travel & Hairdressing
- Travel & Tourism
- Leadership & Sports
- ESOL
- Childcare
- IT
- Animal Care

- Agriculture
- A-Level Group (Sport)
- Junior Apprentices
- Performing Arts
- Military Prep
- Fresh Start Group

Analysis

The research team carried out detailed, robust analysis of the evidence. Qualitative data was analysed using a thematic matrix approach - an analysis grid for the classification and interpretation of qualitative data. The key themes and topics were identified through the focus group discussion guides and through an initial review of the group sessions. On completion of the fieldwork completed by BlwBo, the team met to draw out the key findings from this work.

Limitations of the research

The original aim had been for BlwBo to complete three groups per college and peer researchers to complete two. Due to some timetabling difficulties with Winter of Wellbeing work and limited capacity at colleges, ColegauCymru and colleges were not able to arrange all the groups intended. BlwBo has undertaken 28 of the planned 33 learner groups. However, these recent groups have built on the 23 completed in 2021, with no duplication in the learners involved, and largely had reached saturation point where limited new evidence was being identified. All colleges have taken part in a minimum of two sessions for this period of the fieldwork. The peer research element is ongoing as of July 2022 with planned activity due to take place in the autumn of 2022.

In responding to the overall study aims, we explored the following topics in our discussions with learners, staff and partners:

- Connectivity between activity and wellbeing;
- The type and location of activities, approaches to delivery;
- Reach and inclusivity;
- The impact of active wellbeing participation;
- Strategy, recognition and value of active wellbeing; and
- Lessons for the future.

Section 4 below discusses these findings.

4. The connection between activity and wellbeing

Level of understanding

We began sessions with an introduction into the topic, giving an overview of previous learner feedback and describing the purpose of ColegauCymru's Active Wellbeing Strategy. During the focus groups, Mentimeter exercises were used to give all learners a chance to provide input, with results then available immediately on screen which prompted further discussion. The first question posed was to ask learners '*what is your understanding of active wellbeing at your college*'? Learners were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers and that all responses were anonymous.



Thirty learners (16% of the respondents who took part in this interactive Mentimeter task) were not able to say what active wellbeing was at their colleges, giving 'don't know'/'not a clue' type answers. However, many were able to describe the provision at their college or what the words meant to them. Tutors prompted and reminded learners of any local branding that was used for active wellbeing provision. There were references to specific sports that learners took part in, along with physical activities like walking and walking the dog. A selection of comments referenced cooking, eating healthily and drinking water. The focus on nutrition tended to come from learners on independent living skills and childcare courses and may have been linked to recent modules and classes taken.

The connection between active wellbeing and its ability to have a positive impact on mental health was a common theme raised in our focus groups. Overall, it seemed that a connection between 'active

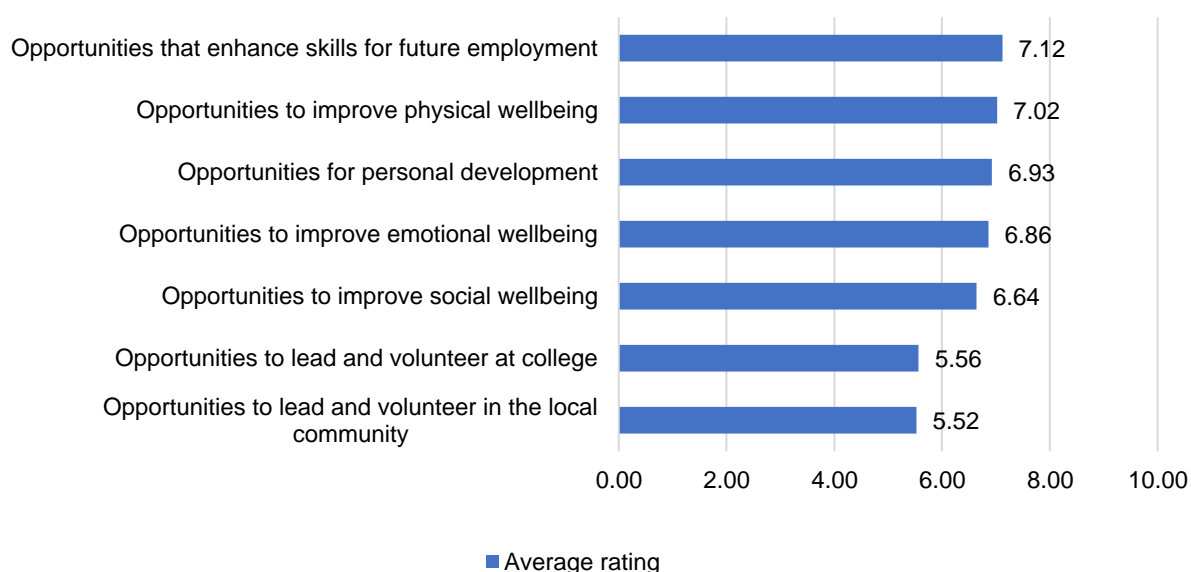
wellbeing' and emotional health was reasonably strong, and a number of learners (39), wrote down responses that referenced 'mental health' and wellbeing. The connection between activity and mental health and wellbeing is generally well understood and perhaps has become higher profile during the pandemic. These benefits might be something to build on and highlight in promoting active wellbeing opportunities to learners and the workforce.

The type and location of active wellbeing opportunities

Active wellbeing provision varies greatly from college to college, and across different campuses, naturally shaped by the level of staff resources and facilities that are available in each location. The positioning and location of any active wellbeing staff is also a factor— whether these are specific post holders or an extension of the remit of learner support services, enrichment opportunities, or sports department responsibilities.

Learners and college staff described a wide-ranging selection of activities that had been on offer as part of active wellbeing provision. This went well beyond more traditional sports offers and included yoga, healthy lifestyle talks, individual classes like Zumba, HIT and boxercise, cooking, mindfulness, short energiser sessions, and adventurous activities such as climbing. Although there is a varied and widespread offer, active wellbeing delivery has continued to be affected over the last year as a result of the pandemic. Tutors explained that pre-COVID, more opportunities had been available than there were now. In particular, there have been restrictions in place on the use of sports facilities, and access to community offers. Many learners have not had the type of access or experience they might have expected to enjoy in person at college sites. We asked learners what kind of provision they would like to see organised. Chart 1 shows the results.

Chart 1: What are the active wellbeing areas that colleges should prioritise in future? A score of 10 is the highest priority



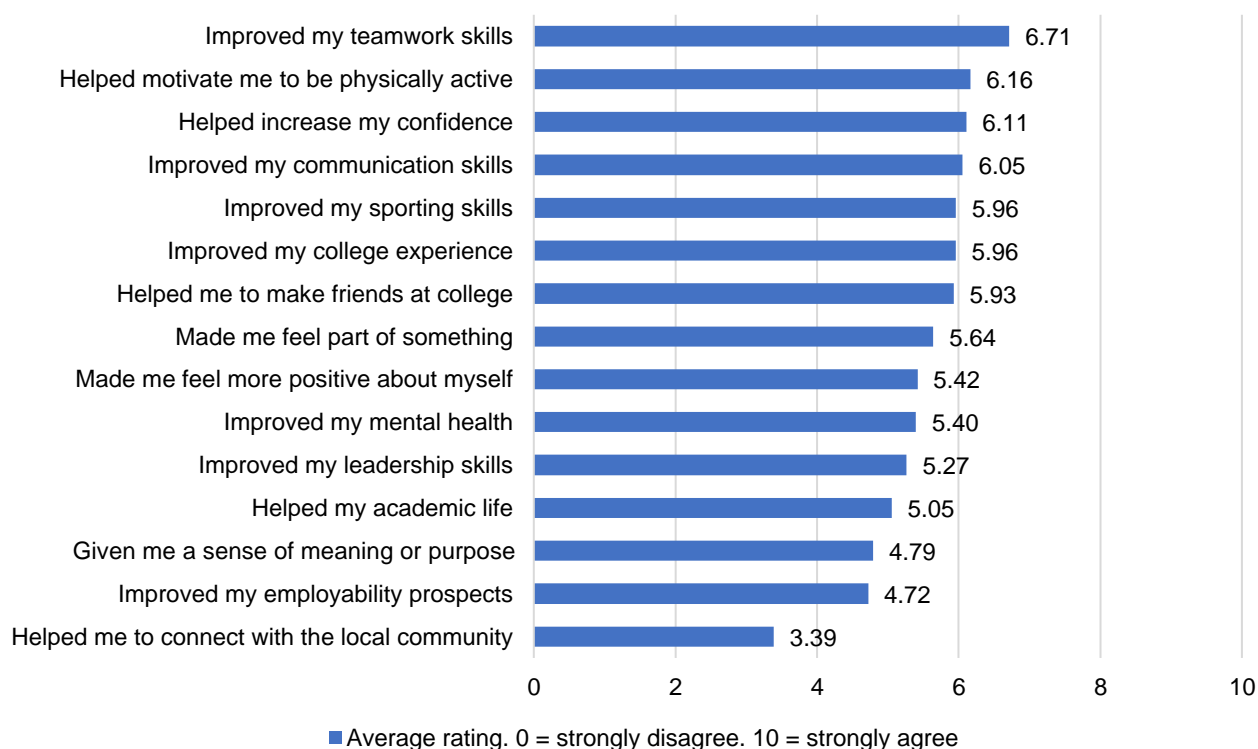
Opportunities to enhance skills for future employment was given a high rating, along with improving physical wellbeing. Opportunities to lead and volunteer were lower, perhaps influenced by the lack of exposure to this during the past two years – volunteering and leadership opportunities have largely been on hold. Project leads spoke about the impact of COVID and the effects they are seeing on learners and new cohorts coming through the system – resilience levels and communication skills are very poor, there is a lot of pressure on learners and they are feeling overwhelmed. So when designing offers now they are stripping it back to basics and making it very easy to engage. For example, not organising “a ten-week block of sessions to improve your life - it might be a lunchtime walk opportunity instead”.

Walking and outdoor activity have the benefit of not being facility dependent with capacity restrictions during the pandemic. “Structured, but informal” provision was considered to be working best at the point in time. Learners spoke about the importance of having access to social and team activities (and not just the traditional team sports offer). These were key to supporting their wellbeing and allowing them to get to know other people. These were the types of provisions that could support their mental health, and this feedback is borne out by Sport Wales’s latest ComRes survey findings which showed that the proportion of adults saying that they ‘find exercising on their own enjoyable’ was lower than witnessed in any previous round of the survey.

The impact of participation in active wellbeing

Learners were asked “*How do you feel about college active wellbeing activities?*” and given a series of statements to score, where 0 = strongly disagree & 10 = strongly agree. Chart 2 shows the findings.

Chart 2: The effects of taking part in college active wellbeing activities – learners’ outcomes



Participating in the opportunities was described as helping with feelings of stress, anxiety, and anger. Learners spoke about it re-sparking energy levels, being fun, enjoyable and an opportunity to socialise. *"It's just a bit of fun." "It's a break." "It's not serious." "You feel fit and healthy after. You feel better."* Activities provide an opportunity *"to get away from it all"* and there were frequent comments about it being an *"escape from everyday life"*, perhaps demonstrating the increasing pressures learners are feeling at this time. The students again made the link between physical wellbeing and emotional wellbeing and mental health and how this could support them academically.

I think the stuff that keeps you fit - keeps you healthy and keeps your mind healthy - is always going to be a good thing to do. It's never really a bad thing. If we had more of that in college, I think it would help It would give an hour's time to focus on yourself and not college.

It really helps with my confidence. I feel so much better if I've done activity - less stressed, I feel like I can tackle the day - gives me a better mindset and feel so much happier and motivated. It makes me better at assignments.

How do these results compare with previous studies?

Similar questions were asked in the 2020-21 Active Wellbeing study and we are able to directly compare the responses to some of the potential areas of impact, as shown in Chart 3 below. This shows a very similar pattern of findings (albeit with responses from a smaller sample in the first study) with 'teamwork skills', 'motivation to be physically active' and 'helping increase confidence' all ranking highly. One discrepancy is how provision had 'given me a sense of meaning or purpose' and this may be a sign of the timing of the 2020/21 fieldwork, where there were far more restrictions on mixing with others due to the pandemic, and limited opportunities for activities to do in any leisure time.

Chart 3: A comparison of perceived impact from 2020-21 and 2021-22 fieldwork stages



For some learners, although they might be aware of the general benefits, the discussions suggest that students took part because the college organised the sessions for them, without thinking about why they were doing the sessions. It wasn't necessarily about wellbeing in their minds. There is perhaps something to think about in the design of sessions that proactively incorporates explanation of the benefits as well as offering the physical opportunity. Using active wellbeing sessions and making the connection with future employment is a further opportunity, as developing employability skills was highest priority for learners in any future design of active wellbeing, compared with the effect that current provision is having.

Staff wellbeing provision

ColegauCymru's Active Wellbeing Strategy is for everyone, and tutors and staff members who took part in the study have described their own stresses and how they can benefit from active wellbeing. The effects of the pandemic on education continue in 2022 and staff have to juggle new and changing blended learning approaches, high levels of staff absence and illness as well as helping learners 'catch up' time lost. Staff spoke about how it was important to be considered when designing and encouraging the implementation of active wellbeing offers so that it didn't have the opposite effect and add to pressures and expectations on top of the existing workload.

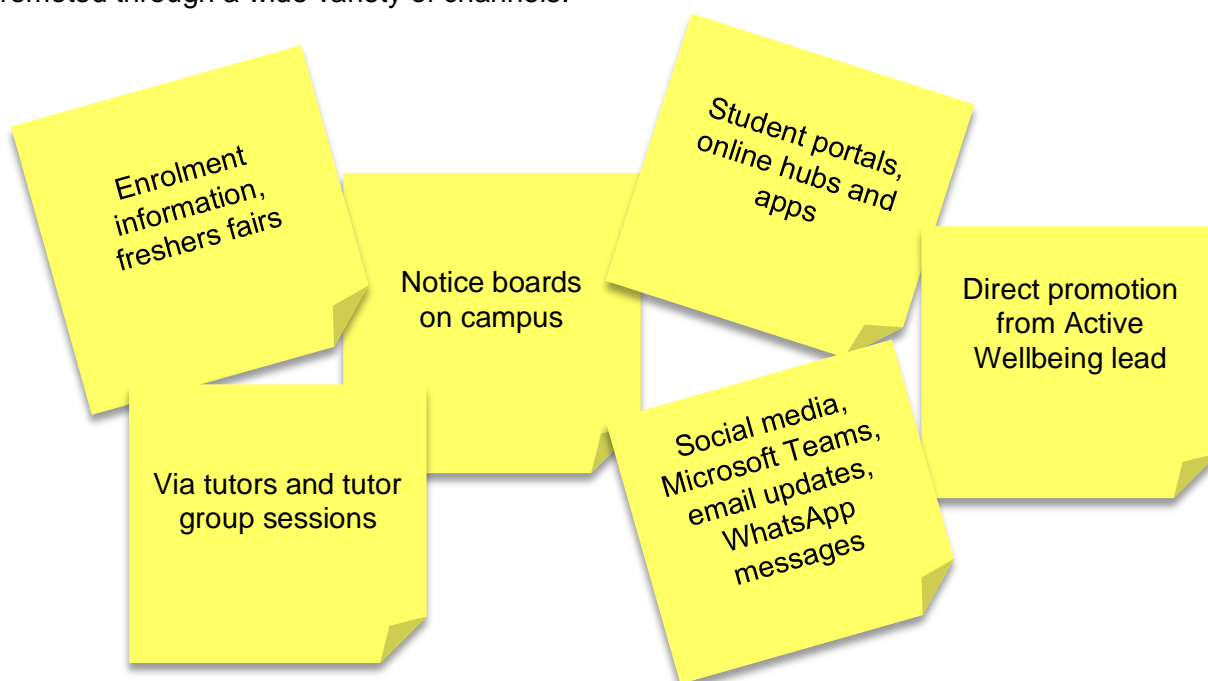
While there is staff provision as well as learner provision, some of the discussions suggested that there might be too much presumption about what staff want when it comes to offering them support, rather than asking them. As with the importance of learner voice, *"discussion as well as participation is important."* Something to consider is whether staff are being given the same focus as learners in terms of delivering the AWB strategy and achieving the strategic outcomes. It could be argued that the wellbeing of staff is the first priority as their ability to support learners and encourage participation is a key enabling factor in achieving learner wellbeing. As one member suggested, learners are in college for relatively short periods of time, whereas many staff are there long term and have seen initiatives come and go, so continuity of support and resourcing for this area of work is important for it to have a stable impact on the workforce. Staff members may have to experience wellbeing benefits from being active and taking part in opportunities that are new to them in order to appreciate them and share the potential benefits with learners – if they understand and enjoy the offer, they become advocates.

It was suggested in one of the staff focus groups that active wellbeing opportunities could be offered to all staff as part of their CPD which takes place at the end of the summer. Another group mentioned building it into Guided Learning Days (GLD) that take place 5-7 times a year for staff development.

As part of a more continual offer, there are sometimes opportunities for staff and learners to take part in active wellbeing provision together, and this was viewed positively. *“Productivity increases when you do something completely different.”* This kind of approach helped staff and learners to build relationships and trust.

Reach and inclusivity

As with our last reports, there were still low levels of awareness of the extent of the offer, despite there being a varied and widespread means of promotion. Learners on different types of courses had differing levels of access and awareness and sometimes, the focus group sessions undertaken as part of this research provided an opportunity to raise the profile of the offer and for staff members to share what was available. Tutors and sometimes learners were able to explain that activities are promoted through a wide variety of channels:



Despite these efforts, a proportion of learners in the focus groups were unaware of what they could access and when, and the offer was not always reaching those who could benefit most. One student said: *“I don't know where to go to get this information, or who to ask. I come to college to study, and because I also work, I don't have time to hunt for this information. Why isn't there an easy website that tells you all you need to know?”* The tutor conceded that a lot of the information being circulated isn't reaching the intended audiences, *“I try to tell everyone about the notice boards, and there is more and more stuff on there, but the message isn't getting through”*. The timing of certain activities was also a barrier for some, as they have other commitments (work, childcare, etc.), so flexible provision

is key. Another tutor and project lead commented *"we need to find more distinctive and dedicated methods of getting this information across, as it is getting lost at the moment"*.

There appears to have been a focus on promoting the activities at freshers' fairs and during the induction phase, and a sense that it might get lost at a time when mass information is given out. It is unclear whether the promotion of active wellbeing provision happens regularly throughout each term and project staff have limited capacity to directly reach large cohorts of learners and need to prioritise their efforts. Learners suggest one of the best ways of finding out about the offer is via their tutor groups, which provides a standardised means of reaching people regardless of course type and college location. This raises the question of whether there are mechanisms in place for the tutors themselves to find out about what is available, for whom, and when, so they can share those messages properly and consistently.

Visibility of the activities was important and plays a part in 'normalising' active wellbeing in college life – for both learners and staff. *"I sit in the atrium so I see them (the activities) there"* said one learner. Visibility is clearly key for unstructured opportunities for participation such as table tennis provision, as well as activities that are led by others. The process of delivering the focus groups has itself helped raised the profile of certain opportunities, with staff describing the offer and learners mentioning things they were aware of - or not: *"It's too hard to find this information out"*, *"I never knew there was even a netball team"*. In another session, learners thought that promotion would work much better if they were introduced to the activities as a group rather than having a go as individuals. Having taster sessions would also help. However, it is also important to note that some participants will feel more comfortable participating in sessions that are not overlooked by others. The availability of these kinds of spaces and sessions could help to bring in new participants, as well as catering for those who are already happy to be active in open, public spaces.

Reaching different course types

For some groups and course types, active wellbeing provision plays a particularly important role and our previous research has highlighted the benefits – and barriers – for ESOL and ILS learners. We heard similar messages again in this round of focus groups. For ILS learners, it was a big part of their structure and routine. The groups we heard from had good levels of access to active wellbeing opportunities through their college, which they might not have elsewhere. One ILS group were clear that if they didn't do 'activity' they felt sad, insecure, bored, depressed, upset, frustrated: *"there is nothing to look forward to if we don't have activity"*.

Groups of ESOL learners have spoken about how they enjoy opportunities to meet other people, share information and practice their language skills, which can be facilitated through active wellbeing. The group spend a lot of time together, so they value being able to expand their network and experience new things. In one specific example, an ESOL group felt they were sometimes segregated from the rest of the college and would like greater opportunities to meet others from different backgrounds. A tutor agreed with this, noting that a film night was recently arranged, where ESOL and students with a learning disability were grouped together. Whilst this was good, it illustrated the tendency to segregate groups that are 'different' from the wider college community.

Developing more effective links with communities was another important point raised. This would allow students to feel part of the communities they live in, meet new people, help others, and feel more connected and integrated. *"We need to develop stronger links with grassroots community groups. We need these connections to share with students, who can then mix with others and interact with people in their area".*

As with earlier studies, we heard about some specific inclusion barriers for female learners and there were a few comments in relation to female learners having less access to the facilities and specific sports and competition – either in reality or perception. The number of female learners who enrolled on sports courses in the last couple of years had fallen, meaning there was not always a sufficient number to form a team or to have an appropriate level of competition. Numbers may be recovering for the next academic year. As has been identified on previous occasions, confidence levels among females can also be lower when it comes to participating in sports and physical activity, and one group pointed out that girls-only access to the gym would be a good thing.

Active wellbeing through the medium of Welsh was not a theme raised widely in this phase of the research but we heard from some female Welsh Speakers (their first language) that the ability to do things in their language of choice was an important factor influencing their participation in sport, especially when the language used reflects the wider society and community. In another college, a tutor mentioned how they introduced Welsh language opportunities through active wellbeing, including the Urdd's #FelMerch initiative, funded by Sport Wales¹⁵. The use of Welsh in active wellbeing is especially important when this reflects the wider society/community. Active wellbeing opportunities can provide a different context for people to learn and practice and embed the use of Welsh, supporting one of the aims in the Programme for Government to 'push forward towards a million Welsh speakers, and enable tourism, sports and arts industries to thrive'.

¹⁵ Urdd (2022). #FelMerch. Urdd. [Online] Available from: <https://www.urdd.cymru/en/sports/felmerch/beth-yw-felmerch/> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

As well as barriers that affect learners with protected characteristics, we again identified many factors preventing participation in active wellbeing offers. These were a mixture of internal, personal barriers combined with logistical barriers, largely outside of learners' control.

Logistical barriers

Timetable and programming: This was a widespread issue and one of the key themes raised in this research. We heard about the challenges from learners and their tutors on a range of different courses. The structure of their college day – or week - did not leave them with enough time to take part in any extracurricular opportunities. As a result of moving to online, remote and now blended learning approaches because of the pandemic, there is now a situation where some learners are experiencing intense desk-based/online lessons - some learners were online in lessons for seven hours a day. There needs to be a serious consideration for the post-COVID world to avoid the risk of going backwards and having an adverse effect on wellbeing.

"We don't have time. The course runs from 9 to 4 - and we only get 30mins for lunch. No time, no energy". One tutor asked if the students would consider doing something at home, and one student responded by saying, *"If we're finishing at 3.30 or 4 pm, I'm so tired by then and it's dark so I can't go for a walk. If we get a 25 minute break, I'm going to get my lunch in that time, or get ready, and not go for a walk."*

In some courses, learners are now only in college for two days a week and are unlikely to travel back on other days to do active wellbeing provision if it doesn't fit with that timetable. These timetabling difficulties were described by learners studying childcare, business studies, A-Levels and travel and tourism amongst others. *"We would all do wellbeing activities if we were able to build them into our learning day"* (Childcare group). *"Because they are A-Level students, their timetables are very busy and extremely rigid. We have to get special permission for them to attend sport provision on a Wednesday afternoon, so it is not ideal"* (A-level Tutor). On some campuses, there is very little activity at all – no critical mass of learners, and no specific facilities available.

One college lead spoke of approaching heads of department to look at a tutorial approach to deliver active wellbeing, but only having a positive response from one head. Going directly to tutors worked better and operational changes from offering 'optional and inconsistent' Wednesday provision to embedding it in two hour tutorials is now working really well. *"It's easy to find a reason not to go if you are a learner pushed for time."* The tutorial approach had resulted in unexpected positives and 'unplanned successes' with a host of new participants accessing provision: *"The best engagement has been from girls, hairdressers, ESOL and a construction group"* with social and cultural benefits

from lots of different ethnic groups attending together. *“Once people start to see things on social media, it creates a buzz and it is currently ‘selling itself, people (staff and learners) want to get involved”.*

Public services students were among those who would like to see more lunchtime provision, to allow them to participate whilst in college. *“At the moment we have long lunches, and we just sit around doing nothing, which is boring.”* The tutor pointed out that pre-COVID, there would be 'Lunchtime Electives', where tutors would put on activities for students. However, staffing pressures and COVID brought this to a close. We heard about ‘crammed’ timetables and enrichment blocks being temporarily dropped and Wednesday afternoon slots previously dedicated to activity now be used for GCSE resits. It was clear that further efforts were needed to embed active wellbeing into the curriculum rather than it being something that was sporadic in terms of access. College staff spoke about building part of the active wellbeing offer into the tutorial programme so that all students have a consistent means of accessing it. *“We need a concerted effort to put these activities on the timetable and make them visible.”*

There wasn't clarity in the overall feedback on when sessions should be held and learners on the same course and tutor group were not always in agreement about what worked best, highlighting the importance of learner voice and ongoing consultation in the best way to offer active wellbeing.

Balancing time pressures: A lack of time outside of college was prevalent among the vast majority of learners, due to the need to work and earn money in any spare time, and/or for childcare and family and caring commitments. Lack of time was mentioned more frequently as a reason for non-participation, rather than indifference to active wellbeing and just wanting to do other things. It is worth noting that designing inclusive offers for those with caring responsibilities might be particularly important, with carers generally having higher rates of poor mental and physical health than the average young person¹⁶ and more likely to drop out of college. Certain groups of vocational learners will also be finding time to volunteer as part of their studies, although there is evidence to suggest that volunteering itself can improve wellbeing for the individual volunteer as well as those who are being supported by volunteers, and volunteering could be part of an active wellbeing offer. Benefits highlighted in the Welsh Government's Volunteering Policy *Supporting Communities Changing Lives*¹⁷ include:

¹⁶ Carers Trust (2015) *Supporting students with caring responsibilities: A resource for colleges and services to help young adult carers succeed in further education*. Carers Trust. [Online]. Available from: <https://learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Supporting-Students-with-Caring-Responsibilities.pdf> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

¹⁷ Welsh Government (August 2015) *Volunteering Policy*. Wales: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-01/volunteering-policy-supporting-communities-changing-lives.pdf> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

- Building of social networks and relationships, creating a sense of belonging;
- Enjoyment of purposeful activity, including 'serious leisure' activities such as sports coaching;
- Experience and skills gained – e.g. for employment or career advancement, or simply the challenge of something new;
- Improving health and wellbeing; and
- Personal development, including building confidence and self-esteem.

Access: Access to sports halls and gyms obviously varies greatly from college to college and across campuses – either because of location, travel and cost barriers or due to the lack of space/time when programming the use of the facilities, or from lack of awareness among non-sports students not realising they are available to them as well. In several groups, learners suggested an improvement to the active wellbeing offer would be to have open access sessions at the gym, or to have the gym available after college. The cost of using the gym was a barrier. Some learners were not aware they were eligible for a discount. *"Access to the Sports Hall has always been an issue"* described one tutor. This supports the need to consider embedding active wellbeing into classroom and curricular settings and as part of different subject areas.

Access to changing areas is a further barrier and a lack of ancillary facilities for changing or equipment storage will affect the type of offer that can be delivered according to the setting, as highlighted by a conversation in one group! *"I wouldn't want to do a full-on workout, be sweating all day and then carry on with work. I'd stink."* The students agreed that they would definitely use the showers if they were available to them.

As well as actual lack of access, perceived lack of access links to confidence levels (below) and certain facilities feel inaccessible to many and staff as well as learners spoke about off-putting terminology such as 'academy' and unfamiliar facilities like the dome being barriers. It is not clear that certain facilities like sports halls and gyms are available to non-sports course learners.

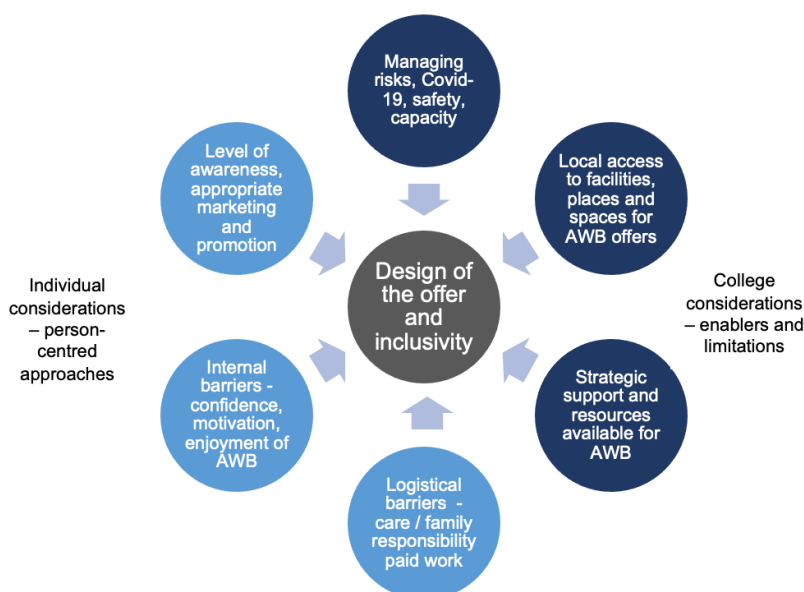
Internal barriers

Confidence levels are a common theme that can prevent participation, but also one of the most cited positive outcomes of active wellbeing participation if the offer is right. Some learners may be very aware of opportunities but don't feel confident or comfortable going into these new environments because they 'feel intimidated'. Learners feel that they need some support to be introduced to different activities. *"It needs to go beyond an email or a message saying, 'You need to go on Wednesday at this time.' It's quite daunting."* A tutor added, *"When students start college, with new tutors and*

classmates, it's difficult to throw other things into the mix. If we're taking them down there as students and get them to meet the Wellbeing Officer, it might help make it all more accessible." Similar misgivings were raised about informal opportunities that are intended to be available to anyone: *"I guess that if you're shy, you might not want to go to the ping pong tables because there's quite a few people around them and you just don't feel confident."* *"You might just feel like that you can't do certain things and that you'll be judged. You probably won't be but it's in your mind that you might be."*

Conversely, it is important to note there have been positive impacts from changes to delivery approaches as a result of the pandemic. For those learners facing regular time barriers and difficulties accessing extracurricular active wellbeing provision, remote and online offers may have eased pressures and opened up the opportunity - although wellbeing activities in face to face settings may still be difficult to access. In discussions over whether all learners had the same opportunities to take part at college, one tutor pointed out that you have to also appreciate that some learners will always prefer remote/online provision, and it provides an opportunity for some who might never access it otherwise.

What we know works is when learners are involved in the choices that they make and the offers that are provided. Active wellbeing needs to be demand-led. Different cohorts of learners have different perceptions of what wellbeing is, and what works for them in their context. When designing an inclusive active wellbeing offer, it should be informed by understanding the barriers and considerations shown below in the local context.



5. The value and recognition of active wellbeing

A strategic approach to active wellbeing?

The importance of mental health provision and additional resourcing and national policy focus seems likely to have boosted the profile of active wellbeing and the relevance of ColegauCymru's Active Wellbeing Strategy. *"Wellbeing must continue to be a priority"* was the message from Estyn's Chief inspector in December of 2021¹⁸, with Estyn's engagement discussions with college leaders in 2020-21 focussing on the wellbeing of learners and staff. However, the annual report¹⁹ does not make explicit links to the potential role of 'active wellbeing' in this overall support, so there is an opportunity to raise its profile in the ways wellbeing and college experiences can be measured and improved.

Partners contributing to the research described there being far more of a focus on mental health than previously, and 'off the back of the mental health funding' one group mentioned there is overlap between the active wellbeing offer, the student services function and college health and wellbeing strategies. In a different focus group, the connection with volunteering and the ambassador programme was mentioned as being very beneficial to mental health, with *"sport and physical activity provision lending itself to those opportunities which is why things like the young ambassador's programme work so well."*

In our staff and partner focus groups, we explored the extent to which stakeholders feel that active wellbeing is valued and whether there is a strategic approach to this area of work in individual colleges and nationally. There was a general feeling from college staff that there had been a positive change over the last four or five years, with active wellbeing developing a higher profile in colleges. This was evidenced by the progress that has been made to make it inclusive *"since the time when there was more of a focus on sports learners. Now it is a whole student approach"*. One project lead commented that active wellbeing is a strategic priority for their college. Through our desk research, we have seen that several colleges have at least active wellbeing or its equivalent local brand flagged on their websites with contact information for the officer(s), resources, support and the activities and facilities that are on offer are promoted. Some colleges have developed publicly accessible health and wellbeing strategies that include active wellbeing provision. Some college websites highlight the wellbeing links that can be supported via sports academies, enrichment activities, student active

¹⁸ Estyn (1 December 2021) *Wellbeing must continue to be a priority says Chief Inspector as she recognises the resilience of educators*. Estyn. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/news/wellbeing-must-continue-be-priority-says-chief-inspector-she-recognises-resilience-educators> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

¹⁹ Estyn (2021) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales*. Estyn. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/www.estyn.gov.wales/files/2021-11/Estyn%20Annual%20Report%202020-2021.pdf> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

wellbeing ambassador programmes and other learner support services – these are all things that a current or prospective student might be looking for when choosing a programme of study and deciding to enrol. The visibility of active wellbeing policies and the ability to search for them was not consistent however, although this might be more prominent on closed student and staff hubs and portals. This supports the need for a systems-level approach as well as a whole-student approach with interconnected and interdependent areas – ‘wellbeing’ can feel quite isolated at present.

Beyond college partners, the external partners we spoke to couldn't see themselves in the Active Wellbeing Strategy as it stands. They could see the connections in terms of a shared national priority to address health and wellbeing and underrepresented groups, but there was not a clear suggestion on how this might be operationalised. External partners thought that general awareness of ColegauCymru's strategy was quite low, especially among staff 'on the ground' and they were aware the level of awareness had not been helped by the need to respond to the pandemic. However, there was "*absolutely*" an opportunity for better connections to be made with ColegauCymru and colleges on the core theme of wellbeing. Work to date had been "*quite ad hoc and reactive*". There was obvious synergy with a national focus among partners on inclusion, addressing participation gaps and targeting areas of deprivation.

The timing of the launch of the Active Wellbeing Strategy coincided with the beginning of the pandemic. As highlighted by a recommendation in our earlier studies, there is now an opportunity to re-promote the strategy and review the best mechanisms for actioning it. External partners felt it could be more direct in tone, as they found it difficult to identify their role in it, feeling the language is currently more visionary than explicit. Work to date had been "*quite ad hoc and reactive*" and although there have been some local projects, strategically, there is not a direct or consistent relationship between NGBs and organisations such as Disability Sport Wales (DSW) and StreetGames, who are part of Sport Wales's national partner group. External partners thought that general awareness of ColegauCymru's strategy was quite low, especially among staff 'on the ground' and they were aware the level of awareness had not been helped by the need to respond to the pandemic.

Partners stated "*absolutely*" that there was an opportunity for better connections to be made with ColegauCymru and colleges on the core theme of wellbeing. There was obvious synergy with a shared national focus among partners to improve the health and wellbeing of the nation, to address inclusion, and improve the opportunities for underrepresented groups, but there was not a clear suggestion on how this might be operationalised. We suggest ColegauCymru could undertake a stakeholder review to identify the roles and responsibilities of partners and how national organisations are going to be engaged – and whether this engagement is led by ColegauCymru as a national approach, or whether it is college-led depending on local circumstances, capacity and need. There

are different kinds of connections that can be made with those organisations that deliver and facilitate active wellbeing/sports activity, compared with those who don't directly deliver, but who coordinate, upskill and support a wider network of staff and community organisations.

Opportunities for collaboration and partnership working

Partners commented that the gap in partnership working to date was not specific to ColegauCymru, highlighting that there could be more sharing and partnership working generally, and acting on the ways of working highlighted through the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act²⁰. Some of the reasons why there has been little connection to date have been due to reacting to the pandemic, and current workloads and recruitment pressures.

Partners suggested some possible opportunities to jointly address active wellbeing and meet shared organisational goals. For example, the Football Association of Wales Trust (FAWT) recognised that while there are organisational links with FEIs via academies and sports courses, there is not much connection in terms of recreational offers, and they recognise this as a gap. They suggested that facility development is one mechanism where NGBs can collaborate with further education, and another is through coach education.

For StreetGames, while there is no direct relationship with colleges, the organisation has worked with ColegauCymru before but not in the active wellbeing 'space'. Although StreetGames does not deliver activities, it supports a network to do so. One of the ways it could connect in future is through its training offer and support for practitioners, which could include college staff. Applicable training modules are offered in mental health and wellbeing such as 'Five ways to wellbeing' and 'Mental Health conversations'. This might be where it could support the workforce and leaders.

DSW is also not a delivery organisation, but wellbeing and mental health are very high on the agenda of their core team and they have a network of officers at local authority level who do have good links to colleges in some regions and have provided education and support/training for students such as DIT. For them, the connection was more about inclusion. At a national and performance level, DSW felt there was less of a link to FE and the Active Wellbeing Strategy.

From a college perspective, during the last couple of years, the opportunities to benefit from community connections has been on hold. College representatives spoke of the need to be innovative in how wellbeing provision is offered and how they were making links with external partners. One

²⁰ Welsh Government. (2015). *Well-being of future generations (Wales) Act 2015*. Wales: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

example was Ospreys in the community: who offered a 10-week traineeship using rugby as a vehicle and taster for employability skills. Offers that incorporated environmental sustainability as a hook were also having traction, with evidence to show the benefits of reconnecting with nature on wellbeing.

The pandemic has had some benefits via the shift to online working, allowing people to save time and meet more frequently and with more partners than previously. There could be a role for greater sharing of learning and partnership development with FE through Sport Wales's national partners meetings, where ColegauCymru is represented. This might raise levels of awareness about the possibilities for joint working. As one organisation commented during a focus group, collaboration is needed as partners are often *"all going after the same people. Can we think about it from a place-based offer?"* This again raises the importance highlighted in the Active Wellbeing Strategy of taking a person-centred approach. Signposting between partners would support the needs of individuals and help to avoid duplication of efforts and resources. Partners felt they shouldn't have to compete against each other, which may in part be driven by organisational targets and external funding requirements and the ways in which organisations and NGBs who support active wellbeing are funded and measured.

Resourcing and embedding provision

Staff and partner representatives in our focus groups highlighted that it is not enough to just have an active wellbeing strategy, it needs consistent resourcing. The funding for active wellbeing staff has been important and welcomed – the initial seed funding from Sport Wales and subsequently the funding from Welsh Government helps to remove risk, gives a lead and steer and a chance for colleges to test things and trial some programmes. Where things have worked well, and are valued, there is a greater likelihood they will be embedded and sustained. We heard an example of an externally-funded post made permanent and funded by one college as a result of the initial seed funding.

There are varying job descriptions for these leads – where do they 'sit', what sorts of skills are relevant? Some sit in sports departments, and can be isolated, while wellbeing leads might be based elsewhere, and we heard about some staff using arts opportunities as well as sport and physical activity as part of the wellbeing approach. 'Active Wellbeing' officers might be in more specific roles (and therefore vulnerable?) whereas those with more transferable skills such as project management can be moved to different roles if funding ends. There is not always internal communication and joined-up approaches. This point was also raised by the Welsh Government representative in a partner focus group: *"Lots of colleges employing wellbeing officers – are they linking with active wellbeing officers?"*

Active wellbeing officers were highly valued by the college representatives we spoke to but were described as a tiny resource in terms of their capacity to coordinate or deliver a widespread college offer. For example, one staff member described there being one active wellbeing officer among 1,500 staff and 12,000 learners. As a partial solution, it was suggested that there is a need to build active wellbeing into staff-funded time: staff used to have three hours of non-funded time to do wider activity, which would include active wellbeing where staff had the skills and interest. Generally, staff felt there was now less capacity in the existing workforce to support active wellbeing. This would need champions and advocates to increase provision much further, people who are naturally keen on doing something additional to their roles, unless changes are made that will help to embed the offer by freeing up capacity to in existing staff structures.

Lack of staff capacity rather than a lack of funding appears to be the most significant challenge with a desire to spend the latest available funding well rather than quickly. There can be too many short-term interventions and tasters for active wellbeing opportunities that have limited reach and quickly run out of steam. While learners often enjoyed them, some were cynical in that they would not last for long. The challenges of short term funding cycles and inconsistent budgets from one year to the next were again highlighted by staff and three year funding cycles such as this work better, with time to plan and consider the sustainability of provision and the capacity to deliver long term. Respondents describe there being lots of expertise among college staff already to deliver a wide range of active wellbeing provision, even if it is not directly related to their paid role. Buying in expertise using core funding (£9k per college from ColegauCymru was cited) doesn't go far if there are lots of sites to cater for and it was suggested that using the existing staff resource better could make provision more sustainable - if the time for delivery and CPD is built into college staff roles and responsibilities. Young Ambassadors are an additional workforce resource to add to the mix.

6. Peer-led research

One of the aims of this project was to provide further support on the development of group based research as a tool to evaluate the impact of participation in both online and face to face project activity. The proposal from ColegauCymru was originally for colleges to run a small number of focus groups in the 2021-22 academic year facilitated by learners and/or college staff members (as shown in Figure 1 above). BlwBo and ColegauCymru would provide training and offer research tools such as a revised topic guide and Mentimeter options. Due to the continued impact of COVID-19 and other constraints on time and resources, this peer-led part of the project has been postponed until the autumn of 2022.

Nevertheless, there has been an opportunity for BlwBo and ColegauCymru to explore this proposed approach with project leads (learners and young ambassadors were not able to attend). In June and July 2021, two online sessions took place to explain our research approach and to provide a brief overview of the summary findings of the BlwBo-facilitated fieldwork phase. At the first meeting, project leads attending suggested taking a more staged approach in training project staff and tutors first, followed by training for learners later. At the second meeting, the session involved running through a proposed training (format and content rather than detail) and getting some feedback on how best to pursue the idea of peer/college led evaluation of activity.

It became apparent that the group felt it most practical to begin this process with project leads or tutors as facilitators, with the potential for some proactive young ambassadors to be involved if possible. The group suggested the following:

- There is a move towards showing the evidence of the impact of active wellbeing provision on learners, and undertaking focus groups and qualitative research is a way of demonstrating this.
- Staff, as well as learners and Project Leads, could run focus groups. Staff are also prepared to work with learners to facilitate the approach.
- Learners could undertake elements of research as part of existing/future courses, where modules lend themselves to this approach. Examples include business studies and marketing.
- Training tutors to undertake the groups themselves could be a means of raising awareness about active wellbeing and helping learners to have a better understanding of the potential gains – an educational process as well as participating in the opportunities to be active.
- Generally, a welcome addition/alternative to undertaking surveys of learners, with the qualitative approach a way of capturing soft skills and social outcomes – both research approaches are needed.

- The feedback suggested that shorter, 30-40 minutes might be useful and that both 'engaged' and 'less active' groups would provide useful insight.
- Some college leads are in the process of developing their ambassador programme so there are more opportunities to give further education young ambassadors these kinds of options/training in the next academic year and beyond.
- Experience has shown that individuals who become ambassadors are often physically active themselves, and therefore need to be empathetic to less active and non-active peers if undertaking research and consultation.
- Active wellbeing provision may be undertaken by external partners such as local authority colleagues, NGBs and community providers – these partners also need to be considered if an educational element (the connection between active wellbeing and wider outcomes) is to be advocated as part of delivery.

We have explored some of the pros and cons of using the focus group approach in our previous research²¹ and these have been summarised below, along with some preliminary considerations that might arise from peer-led research. This does not consider common time, capacity and resourcing issues that affect any research project.

Advantages of (online) qualitative approach

- ✓ The use of central systems and the ColegauCymru Microsoft Teams software to facilitate groups ensure digital security and compatibility with local college requirements.
- ✓ ColegauCymru can securely record the sessions to support the analysis process (with permission sought at the outset).
- ✓ Cost effective – travel and time savings, online has environmental benefits.
- ✓ Increased access to a range of different learner cohorts and course types.
- ✓ Raises the profile of active wellbeing at the same time as consulting and facilitating opportunities for learner voice to be heard.
- ✓ Avoids risk of transmission of COVID-19.
- ✓ Learners and tutors have become familiar with online approaches and appropriate technology and connectivity is generally in place.
- ✓ An external research team provides a consistent and experienced approach to facilitation. External researchers can draw on what has been heard in different colleges to prompt and share findings with learners and staff and are aware of wider evidence to inform the discussion.

²¹ Blwbo Limited (June 2021) *The value to learners of Active Wellbeing in FEI in Wales*. Available from: <https://www.colleges.wales/en/blog/post/further-education-active-wellbeing-projects> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

- ✓ External teams have the capacity and expertise to undertake the analysis process with both quantitative and qualitative data captured.
- ✓ However, external researchers need to spend some time pre/during the session getting to know the local context to make best use of the feedback. Peer researchers/college led approaches are more likely to be 'up to speed' with this which may save some time.

Disadvantages

- ✗ Learners may feel pressured to agree to recording/participating and be less open than they might be in a face to face setting. The converse might be true as the approach means learners can contribute off camera if they prefer and via chat or anonymous Mentimeter exercises.
- ✗ Facilitator challenges – it is sometimes difficult to build rapport and engage with all participants if they are not visible on screen, especially in large groups. Some learners prefer to be off camera and remain quiet.
- ✗ Whole class set-ups where a group is on one screen/system can sometimes make learners difficult to hear. Individual devices are preferable if connections are good.

There will be different advantages and disadvantages to consider depending on whether the research is undertaken by external researchers, members of staff, or learners themselves. Once the peer-led approach is tested in the autumn of 2022-23 academic year, these pros and cons can be revisited. BlwBo will also review the outputs and recordings of a small sample of the groups that colleges undertake and produce a short update paper. This will complete the remaining part of the overall active wellbeing research project for Welsh Government and ColegauCymru.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This research project has collated further insight into the connection between activity and wellbeing of FE learners and staff, and how active wellbeing can positively impact mental health. The project aimed to evaluate the impact of participation in active wellbeing offers, although not all colleges have been able to run activities as they intended due to COVID-19. Research exploring active wellbeing has now taken place at different points during the pandemic, allowing us to build up a bank of evidence on the benefits and challenges of embedding active wellbeing in college life. Although to date the focus of the work has been on learners, this project has also included research with staff and partner organisations. Further research and discussions with staff in FEIs and external partners would add to these emerging findings:

Funding and resourcing: Colleges have valued the additional capacity enabled by external funding for active wellbeing initiatives, in some cases funding a member of staff long term. However, the approach is inconsistent across colleges in Wales. In our previous studies, we recommended that a) the Welsh Government should consider introducing active wellbeing as a theme in their core funding to colleges and b) as access to activities which improve personal wellbeing is an entitlement, there is a case to be made to ensure there is long term funding and consistency of staff resourcing across Wales for the entitlement to be a reality. This must also come with greater accountability.

Renewing the Active Wellbeing Strategy would present an opportunity to do this. Strategically, active wellbeing has become more important to colleges in recent years and is developing a higher profile, aided by external funding to support it. As identified in earlier reports, it is a timely opportunity to use the findings from this research to review and refine the ColegauCymru Active Wellbeing Strategy launched in January 2020. The strategy remains highly relevant and ColegauCymru should review their learning to date and their ongoing commitments to ensure that it sufficiently responds to the challenges faced by FE and other sectors in Wales.

Part of this review should include working collaboratively with partners and looking to map the stakeholders/partners involved in the delivery of the strategy. This research found that while external partners are supportive of the strategic outcomes identified in the strategy, they were unclear on how and where they could play a role in achieving them. For example, the work between ColegauCymru and NGBs is quite operational and there is an opportunity to take a more strategic and long-term view. ColegauCymru and NGBs should look to formalize the relationship. Community exit routes will be important to develop to ensure the sustainability of participation and to add to the existing facility and workforce capacity.

Inclusivity, extending the reach of active wellbeing and embedding provision remain key themes arising from the research and a continuing focus of the work staff do. Highlighted by both learners and staff, the type and location of active wellbeing provision varies from college to college and learners' access is affected by their chosen course type and timetabling difficulties. Where possible, there is case to be made to embed the offer within the curriculum and structure of the college day. This can help to improve access, reach and inclusivity and ensuring learners studying different subjects can gain the same benefits of participating. For example, ILS learners seem well catered for and cite the positive benefits of active wellbeing because this is built into their day to day college experience, not an optional addition.

The Minister for Education and Welsh Language has highlighted how the Welsh Government and the FE sector are currently working together on the most far-reaching reforms to post-16 education our nation has seen. The design of a new curriculum beyond 16 will be a shared responsibility of the Welsh Government and the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER)²². The Minister identifies wellbeing and resilience as important areas for learners and the workforce²³. There needs to be serious consideration for how active wellbeing is supported in a post-COVID world. There's a risk of going backwards if FEIs/courses continue to timetable days filled with desk-based/online lectures. The new curriculum and the post-COVID world present a timely opportunity to review and adopt the best ways of working.

Actions to improve access to and awareness of active wellbeing: We have identified how access and awareness of active wellbeing is inconsistent among learners and staff. Awareness of what was available was quite low among some learner cohorts. Every effort should be made to normalise active wellbeing, and as part of embedding it within the curriculum, it can form part of tutorials. Some colleges are finding the tutorial approach very successful in terms of increasing participation. Learners suggest a good way to find out about active wellbeing is via tutor groups – a consistent means of reaching people. This raises the question about whether there are consistent ways for tutors themselves to find out about what is available, for who, and when, so they can share those messages properly.

An induction by colleges for learners would help explain the connection between activity and wellbeing. This would have been particularly useful as students moved from school (where there was a structured offer) to college (where it is mainly unstructured) during COVID. There should be a focus

²² Welsh Government (4 November 2021) *Commission for Tertiary Education Research*. Wales: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://gov.wales/tertiary-education-and-research-commission> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

²³ FE News (11 March 2022). *A vision for further education in Wales*. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.fenews.co.uk/exclusive/re-jeremy-miles-wales-minister-for-education/> (Accessed 2 February 2022).

on providing a 'frictionless experience' and person-centred approaches - the support needs to be tailored to ensure it is accessible and enjoyable and engages with different individuals.

Social opportunities and boosting employability skills: Finally, we heard about what kind of approach learners wanted to see in future active wellbeing provision and how mental health could be supported. Use of social activities and not just traditional sports offers was key, and staff spoke of structured, but informal opportunities including outdoor activity and walking. Team activities and opportunities to get to know other people through active wellbeing offers were the things that learners thought could have (and did have) the greatest impact. Designing the offer in these ways is a means of developing the communication and team-building skills that link to employability – something that learners were keen to see developed in future offers. Learners who have participated are positive about active wellbeing's contribution to the overall college experience and feel they are supported. As an extension of this support, connecting the active wellbeing offer with opportunities and partners operating outside of college (opportunities which were often lost during the pandemic) can provide a vehicle for students to integrate in their local community, build relationships and create exit routes to future volunteering and employment opportunities.

Policy recommendations

Recommendation 1: Funding and resourcing

The Welsh Government should strive for longer-term investment to encourage colleges and the overall sector plan and deliver strategic and more consistent approaches to active wellbeing for staff and learners. Changing the funding model could help increase the chances of realising longer term outcomes through collaborative working and avoid stop-start programmes of support and reactive ways of working.

Strategic recommendations

Recommendation 2: Embedding active wellbeing

The FE sector should place an emphasis on embedding active wellbeing to improve its reach and inclusivity. While the current focus is on full time learners and staff, a longer term goal should be to address the needs of part time and work-based learners and consider how this can be resourced and supported.

Recommendation 3: Strategic position and importance of active wellbeing

Senior management in FEIs should consider where active wellbeing sits in college strategies and staff structures to ensure accountability and consideration of how provision contributes to overall college outcomes and learner and staff experiences.

Recommendation 4: Review of Active Wellbeing Strategy and stakeholder mapping

ColegauCymru should review the Active Wellbeing Strategy, to include a stakeholder mapping exercise, to clarify how it can be actioned as the sector emerges from the pandemic. Short-term, mid-term and long-term priorities should be identified.

Operational recommendations

Recommendation 5: Programming and resourcing

Colleges need to look at programming and staff resourcing as a whole, and how they prioritise learner and staff access to facilities where sport and physical activity can take place.

Recommendation 6: Staff knowledge and information sharing

Tutors need to be given time to coordinate and organise provision – even if this is just liaising with active wellbeing officers or their equivalent. Tutors need to be aware of what is available in order to promote it.

Recommendation 7: Learner knowledge and information sharing

To help overcome the lack of awareness and confidence issues, hold facilitated inductions and ensure they are offered at stages throughout the college year to avoid the communication getting lost in information overload at enrolment. Inductions could be organised via active wellbeing officers, tutors and / or further education young ambassadors.

Recommendation 8: Maximising the benefits of active wellbeing

Colleges should ensure that active wellbeing offers include social elements, team building and opportunities to develop employability skills. Active wellbeing provision also provides a vehicle for

delivering on other key themes including use of Welsh language and the importance of environmental sustainability.

Recommendation 9: Embedding a qualitative research approach and sharing best practice between colleges

Colleges should test the peer-led research approach in the autumn of 2022 to complete the outstanding element of this Welsh Government funded project. This will enable the research team to review peer-led processes and outputs. They will then offer any further recommendations that help to monitor, evidence, and share the impact of college active wellbeing provision and the national Active Wellbeing Strategy.

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