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The value to learners of Active Wellbeing in FEI in Wales

Final report

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This report is available in Welsh



Table of Contents

Executive summary	3
1. Introduction	6
2. Research Context	7
3. Method	9
4. Findings	12
5. The future wellbeing offer	20
6. Measuring outcomes – a qualitative approach	22
7. Recommendations	28

Authors:

Becca Mattingley, Llyr Roberts & Tom Overton

BlwBo Limited

Company Number: 10958974

Executive summary

Introduction

Active Wellbeing¹ was launched in February 2020, setting a new strategic direction for ColegauCymru and Further Education Institutions (FEIs) in Wales. A key strategic outcome is “*Entitlement. Ensuring that everyone in the FE Sector has access to activities which improve their personal well-being*”. Between April and June 2021, ColegauCymru commissioned BlwBo Limited to undertake qualitative research to explore the connection between activity and eudemonic wellbeing (meaningful growth and self-realisation, and learners realising their potential and have fully functioning lives) as a basis for measuring the impact of activity on Further Education (FE) learners. There is a wealth of quantitative data showing a positive relationship between physical activity and wellbeing. Creating an environment where learners and colleges have a better knowledge and understanding of the physical, emotional and social wellbeing benefits, may support further growth of active wellbeing participation throughout the FE education sector in Wales.

Capturing learner voice to understand the connection between participation and impact is part of this process. A series of online focus groups took place with learners from 11 Further Education Institutions (FEIs) in Wales. In total, 87 learners contributed to the research, studying a range of different courses, representing different year groups and settings: mature teaching assistant students studying part time, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), performing arts, health and social care, childcare, Fresh Start, Independent Living Skills (ILS) and learners from Public Services courses. A tutor and/or an Active Wellbeing Officer also participated in each group.

Key findings

Eudemonic and hedonic wellbeing. Learners initially described their wellbeing in hedonic terms such as ‘happy’, ‘good’, and ‘enjoy’ – this terminology was at the forefront of their minds. When probed, learners made the link between active wellbeing participation and a sense of belonging, feeling part of something. They were able to articulate eudemonic concepts of meaning, purpose, functionality and an understanding of what active wellbeing could help them achieve. As one learner described activity to them meant “*I feel full inside*”.

Improving understanding of incidental learning benefits. We found there is scope to improve learners’ understanding of eudemonic aspects and the incidental educational benefits that can be gained through being active, and this could be incorporated into the design of future offers. Where there was good understanding, learners could recognise the impact on their personal development and employability outcomes: “*How you feel about yourself has a domino effect on achievement and*

¹ ColegauCymru (2020) Active Wellbeing Strategy 2020-25. Available at: <http://ow.ly/j9QU50Cgg1t> (Accessed June 2021)

employability.” Active wellbeing supports enrichment for learners beyond the academic – facilitating opportunities to improve teamwork, leadership, independence, confidence and to add value to the learning experience.

Inclusion: Tackling inequalities and recognising diversity. This remains a key focus within the Active Wellbeing Strategy. Our research findings reinforced the importance of recognising the diversity of learners and their needs when developing active wellbeing provision. We heard from a hugely diverse range of learners in terms of their backgrounds, lived experiences, ethnicity, age and area of study, but ‘active wellbeing’ was identified as an area that brought learners and communities together. There were specific needs identified for mature students, ESOL learners and those with full timetables of taught lessons. Time barriers, personal preferences and work life balance were important and the design of active wellbeing needed to be shaped accordingly for certain groups of learners to engage: *“If I wasn’t with a group of mature students I wouldn’t go on my own.”* For ESOL learners in particular, college may be the only opportunity to meet people and try new activities with new people and these opportunities should be valued more by FEIs. One explained it was: *“Hard to make acquaintances with people...Once you meet at an institution here there is a bit more trust, a same point that you have in common.”* Another said: *“If you have face to face exercise classes, same as online that would be perfect. Would be a big community for learners to find friends.”*

Mental Health and preventative approaches. The evidence provided by learners reinforced the link between active wellbeing and better mental health. Recognising that ‘active’ means different things to different people as part of a person-centric approach, this should be embraced and amplified. Learners spoke about the increasing pressure on mental health over the last year, with Covid-19 significantly affecting their wellbeing. Activity had helped them: *“Being active everyday keeps the stress out of my head – and with Covid, stress levels were up here (gesturing high)”*. Through support from an active wellbeing officer one learner told us: *“I understand more about meditation and exercise and the need to eat healthily. Now I try to do that. (How do you feel?) Changed. Feel less stress and less anxiety – all change around me. Learning to see life in different ways.”* Many felt that further interventions should be proactively made to prevent challenges further down the line for learners and staff. Wellbeing is not something that should be reacted to when it may be too late and linking active wellbeing provision to existing learner services will help provide a holistic system of support.

Awareness. It was clear that significant measures were now in place to support the wellbeing of learners across the FEIs that were involved in the review. However, the range of interventions, the scale and the visibility across and within colleges were all varied, especially when there are multiple campuses and facilities to deal with. It is not just about having activities to support learners; the learners – and their tutors - must be aware of them. They must be easy to access and take a person-centred approach and be conscious of the conditions that enable learners to participate. To assist in this process, Colegau Cymru could re-share their Active Wellbeing Communication toolkit as guidance.

Evidencing progress. While quantifiable data is useful and can be collected through existing systems such as Upshot and national surveys, it is important that this supports a learning approach that focuses on evidence to improve, not to prove. It would be of value to review the Active Wellbeing strategy - and the wellbeing of learners linked to their active wellbeing - through ongoing reflective learning

sessions that evidence progress, highlight learning and lead to prompt actions. The focus group approach used in this research is one that would support this process.

Valuing active wellbeing, growing capacity and ensuring accountability. Time and resource must be given to normalising active wellbeing provision in every FEI. Time is often seen as a barrier, but only when active wellbeing is seen as a 'bolt on' or 'something additional' – this language and approach needs to change to one of wellbeing at the heart of learners and staff. FE institutions vary, both in terms of the value that they place on active wellbeing and their understanding and awareness of the impact of active wellbeing on their learners. There has been some significant funding in wellbeing roles and activity in recent months, but this must become long term investment and embedded across FEIs and their staff, such as using tutorials, so as not to fall into the trap of leaving it to someone else. The research showed that active wellbeing approaches have continued to develop across FEIs despite the challenges of the last year. There is scope for further work at every level to ensure that active wellbeing is valued across the FE sector, and the importance and value must be recognised, supported and invested in at a Welsh Government level right down to individual tutors recognising and valuing the impact on their learners.

Dissemination. The methodology allowed focus groups to span a range of FEI across Wales, across a range of learners and course types. To maximise the outcomes from the review, the report findings will need to be shared at different levels with tailored, bespoke messages for different stakeholders: ColegauCymru (including the Active Wellbeing Group); Sports Wales; Welsh Government, individual colleges; Young Ambassadors and cascaded to research participants and other learners.

Conclusion

The last 15 months have reset the context in which the Active Wellbeing strategy will be delivered. Arguably, there is an even greater need in 2021 for its vision and purpose to be actioned. While the findings from this research have highlighted previously known areas i.e., that being active has a positive impact on learning, along with the increasing need to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people, it is important that this is not treated as 'old news'. Active wellbeing provision can vary greatly due to the circumstances of different college sizes, range of campuses, facilities and staff capacity to support this important area of work. It is recognised that ColegauCymru and the FEIs already undertake a great deal of work to support learners through physically active wellbeing opportunities, as well as the support that is in place for mental health. Our research has heard directly from learners and staff about the current challenges and potential benefits of active wellbeing support. Their feedback has reinforced the need for active wellbeing work to continue and to remain a high priority with appropriate resources for the sector.

1. Introduction

ColegauCymru's approach to sport, physical activity and wellbeing has been developing since 2014. ColegauCymru's Active Wellbeing Strategy 2020-25² was launched in February 2020, developed in partnership with Sport Wales and a wider organisational network to set a new strategic direction for the organisation and its member colleges. The strategic vision of *Active Colleges, Active Lives, Active Wales* involves a common purpose: to "enhance the emotional, social and physical wellbeing of the College community through Active Wellbeing" and is guided by the belief that "everyone in the further education (FE) community should have the right to participate, inspiring a lifelong enjoyment of activity which supports positive emotional, social and physical wellbeing". The strategy encourages colleges to adopt a person-centred approach with wellbeing at the core of strategic decision-making. In recent years, individual colleges have developed specific strategies to support this area of work and implement projects to increase access to wellbeing activity. Actions taken have included the employment of specific project staff linked to physical activity and wellbeing, investment in new resources and facilities, and the use of tutorial programmes, ambassadors and leaders to engage with staff and learners. Inclusivity is a key driver, and we are aware that project work connects to wider Welsh Government funding for mental health related projects and the Healthy and Sustainable Colleges and Universities Framework.

Wellbeing is at the forefront of policy in Wales and the Active Wellbeing Strategy was developed pre-Covid-19, in the wider national context of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015³, which gives public bodies and others the "ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic wellbeing."⁴ The strategy also complements the Welsh Government strategy, *Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales*⁵, especially in relation to Active Environment aspirations, and highlights the key role further education institutions (FEIs) play in contributing to the Vision for Sport in Wales⁶ and the Sport Wales strategy⁷.

There is a wealth of evidence to show that participation in physical activity and sport has a positive impact on wellbeing, but while ColegauCymru has some well-established quantitative approaches to assess the impact of their work⁸, there has been less emphasis on measuring outcomes using qualitative approaches. Therefore, in March 2021, ColegauCymru issued an invitation to tender⁹ to undertake research to determine the impact of project activity on the wellbeing of FE learners. As set out in the invitation to tender requirements, this research study addresses the following themes:

² ColegauCymru (2020) Active Wellbeing Strategy 2020-25. Available at: <http://ow.ly/j9QU50Cgg1t> (Accessed June 2021)

³ Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. Available at: <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

⁴ Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. Available at: <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

⁵ Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales. Welsh Government. Available at: https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-10/healthy-weight-healthy-wales_0.pdf (Accessed 10 May 2021).

⁶ Sport Wales. The vision for sport in Wales. Available at: <https://visionforsport.wales/> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

⁷ Sport Wales. The vision for sport in Wales. Available at: <https://futures.sport.wales/#1> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

⁸ Upshot and the national FE, sport and wellbeing survey are examples.

⁹ ColegauCymru Invitation to tender.

- Providing new insight into the connection between activity and the Wellbeing of FE learners;
- Investigation into the use of Eudemonic and Hedonic wellbeing as new measurement tools against strategic level outcomes;
- Identifying learners' understanding of the long term benefits of activity;
- How to better use group based research to evidence the impact of activity from projects on individual wellbeing; and
- Development of remote (online) research approaches that embrace the skills of young leaders in colleges.

A key strategic outcome for ColegauCymru is the “Activity Outcome: **Entitlement. Ensuring that everyone in the FE Sector has access to activities which improve their personal well-being**”. In discussions with the ColegauCymru project manager for these studies, it has been recognised that college Active Wellbeing provision has been disrupted by the pandemic. Many learners have not been able to experience enrichment activities and opportunities to be active in the same way as colleges (and this research) originally intended. This has resulted in a slight shift on the focus of the work. Therefore, our discussions with learners around their experience of ‘active wellbeing’ in the last 15 months have taken a broader approach where necessary, expanding on the original brief. As we worked through the focus groups, we explored the activities that learners may have been taking part in their personal lives that were perceived to contribute to wellbeing. These personal interests could help inform future college-based offers.

During this timeframe, we have been undertaking a related project for ColegauCymru, which explores the impact of Covid-19 on the wellbeing of FE learners involved in sports courses¹⁰. The fieldwork ran concurrently and this has allowed us to cross reference findings, enhance the analysis opportunities for each study and add significant value to the review. The information we have gathered across both studies will be used to support ColegauCymru in guiding future strategy and project funding for the FE sector in Wales. It is anticipated that the research will inform the future development of new qualitative measures of Active Wellbeing among young people.

2. Research Context

Wellbeing is ‘how we are doing’ as individuals, organisations, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable this is for the future. It is defined as ‘a positive physical, social and mental state’.¹¹ The benefits of being active have always been known to those involved and/or participating in regular activity but there has always been a challenge around the language that ‘activity professionals’ have used to enable a greater understanding of the benefits of ‘active wellbeing’ - in a world of health, education and community development. We now clearly know and understand that physical activity

¹⁰ BlwBo (2021) FE, Sport and Wellbeing. Report for ColegauCymru

¹¹ Department of Health (2010). *Healthy Lives, Healthy People: Our strategy for public health in England*. London: The Stationery Office. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/216096/dh_127424.pdf (Accessed 10 May 2021).

is also beneficial for your mental health and wellbeing¹². We need to change the way we view activity so not to see it as something we ‘have to do’, ‘should do’ or ‘ought to do’ for our health, but as something that we do because we personally value its positive benefits to our wellbeing.

During the past year, learners and staff throughout the education system have faced significant disruption as a result of the pandemic and young people in particular have been adversely affected. As identified in our related study, we are keenly aware of a range of evidence that has shown that learners have experienced factors such as:

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

This means that the Active Wellbeing Strategy goals and the connection between being physically active and the potential positive effects on wellbeing has become more important than ever. Since March 2020, all providers have made substantial changes to the ways in which they deliver teaching and support learners’ mental health and physical & emotional wellbeing. Most support has continued to be delivered remotely due to lockdown restrictions. Over the whole pandemic period, nearly all providers have made the wellbeing of learners and staff their overriding priority and have worked hard to maintain continuity of support as well as of teaching, learning and assessment¹³. Active wellbeing opportunities have the potential to offer a proactive, preventative approach to support mental health. Wellbeing is not something that should be reacted to when it may be too late and linking active wellbeing provision to existing learner services and tutorials will help provide a holistic system of support.

As we move into a new phase in the pandemic with restrictions across the UK beginning to ease, FEIs play an enabling role in providing an environment that allows every learner to access active wellbeing opportunities. What affects wellbeing is different for everyone. Active wellbeing opportunities encourage learners and staff to become involved in physical activity and active wellbeing has become part of the college enrichment approach. Entitlement to wellbeing should be for every post-16 learner of all ages – regardless of their learning situation and environment and course type. A recent podcast highlighted that the new Welsh Government needs to recognise that FEIs see this as an integral part of their offer and want to see this resourced consistently across Wales to avoid disparate offers and unequal access.” In the current climate, college representatives spoke about how they see a need and want to:

¹² Mental Health Foundation (2020) How to look after your mental health using exercise. Available at:

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-usingexercise#:~:>

[text=Physical%20activity%20has%20a%20huge,can%20reduce%20stress%20and%20anxiety](https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-to-usingexercise#:~:) (Accessed 10 May 2021).

¹³ Estyn (March 2021) Support for learners’ mental health and emotional wellbeing. The work of further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Available at:

[https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-](https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-03/Learner%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Emotional%20Wellbeing%20in%20the%20Post-16%20sectors%20.pdf)

[03/Learner%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Emotional%20Wellbeing%20in%20the%20Post-16%20sectors%20.pdf](https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2021-03/Learner%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Emotional%20Wellbeing%20in%20the%20Post-16%20sectors%20.pdf)

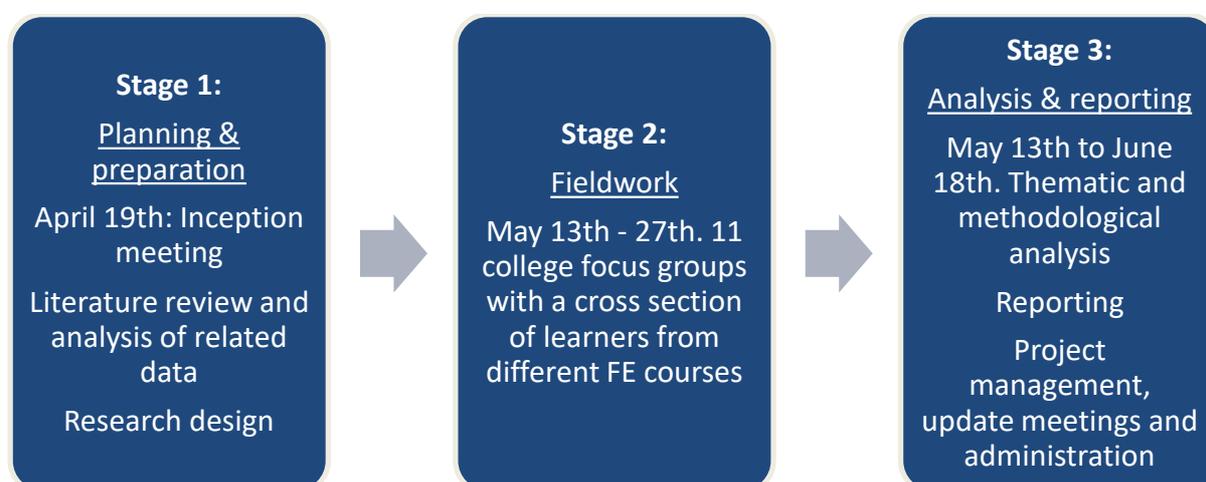
(Accessed 10 May 2021).

- Focus on being more proactive rather than reactive to addressing mental health and wellbeing needs;
- Recognise the importance and benefits of collaboration, sharing learning and good practice;
- In doing so, going beyond regional boundaries and connecting with communities – the wellbeing of an FEI can contribute to the wellbeing of local communities;
- Focusing clearly on inclusion, understanding that existing inequalities and access have become exacerbated by Covid-19 and that enjoyment and opportunities for physical wellbeing activities and sport should be for all students, not just those on sports courses and academies; and
- That the wellbeing of the workforce, or the wellbeing of learners should not be seen in isolation – they are related. Ensuring the wellbeing of the workforce is part of an enabling approach to achieving student wellbeing.

3. Method

This research study took account of eudemonic wellbeing themes, where wellbeing is focused not just on hedonic attaining happiness and avoidance of pain, but on meaningful growth and self-realisation, and the ability for young learners to realise their own unique potential – having fully functioning lives. The study focussed on a broad cross section of learners in terms of their college year, age, course type and learning environment. Diagram 1 shows our research approach.

Diagram 1: Our approach



3.1 Planning and preparation

An inception meeting was held on April 19th and was followed by a further meeting between the researchers and the ColegauCymru project manager on May 7th to explore lines of questioning for the forthcoming focus groups. BlwBo prepared a topic guide which included three Mentimeter tasks for learners, to be used flexibly, and this was signed off by ColegauCymru.

During this phase, literature related to the impact of Covid-19 on young people, the population of Wales was explored to help inform the discussions and familiarise the team with some of the expected themes and issues that may arise. The use of qualitative approaches to gather wellbeing data was considered and the various wellbeing measures that are being used to assess this area nationally. The team are familiar with the methodology and results of the National Survey for Wales¹⁴, School Sport Survey¹⁵ and Further Education Surveys¹⁶ that have taken place regularly over the last 5-10 years. We also considered the current 46 national wellbeing indicators¹⁷ used in Wales and work of the ONS for a Children's Wellbeing Indicator review UK:2020, which included some focus group work with young people aged 10-15¹⁸.

3.2 Fieldwork

ColegauCymru arranged the focus group meetings and communication with colleges, including confirming participants and consent for research. BlwBo provided ColegauCymru with a privacy notice and consent form to explain the purpose of the study and how learners' feedback would be used. The ColegauCymru Sport Project Manager liaised directly with colleges and facilitated the booking of pre-agreed focus groups of FE learners in 11 colleges. The focus groups were held online using Microsoft Teams between 13th and 27th of May 2021, with a total of 87 learners taking part. The learners were studying a range of different courses and represented different year groups and settings. We heard from mature teaching assistant students studying part time, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), performing arts, health and social care, childcare, Fresh Start, Independent Living Skills (ILS) and learners from Public Services courses.

A tutor and/or an Active Wellbeing Officer attended group sessions. For those staff members supporting ESOL and ILS learners, a shortened topic guide was shared in advance to help participants prepare for the focus group. Two BlwBo researchers facilitated each session, one facilitating the discussions, and the other supporting - operating three Mentimeter questions and the chat function and recording notes throughout. Permission was sought from learners and any staff to record the sessions in Microsoft Teams, and all groups agreed. The recordings were held securely on a ColegauCymru SharePoint folder and used only for analysis for this report and were available only to the researchers involved.

The topic guide covered the following:

- Learners' perceptions of what wellbeing means to them;
- The changes to their learning environment over the past 12-15 months;

¹⁴ Welsh Government (2020) The National Survey for Wales. Available at: <https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

¹⁵ Sport Wales (2018) School Sport Survey. Available at: <https://www.sport.wales/content-vault/school-sports-survey-2018/> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

¹⁶ Sport Wales (2018) Further Education Survey. Available at: <https://www.sport.wales/content-vault/further-education-survey/> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

¹⁷ Welsh Government (2020) National Wellbeing Indicators. Available at: <https://gov.wales/national-wellbeing-indicators> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

¹⁸ Office for National Statistics. Children's well-being indicator review, UK: 2020. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/childrenswellbeingindicatorreviewuk2020/20-09-02> (Accessed June 2021)

- The type of college active wellbeing opportunities available to learners and their level of involvement;
- The impact of these activities on their wellbeing; and
- Their views on the support required for learners /colleges in the coming months.

As the opportunities for colleges to provide their intended enrichment programmes and active wellbeing opportunities have been affected by online learning and restrictions, it was decided that the focus groups would also explore out of college experiences in activities that learners felt contributed to their wellbeing, along with learners' views of what they might have expected to have as an offer.

3.3 Analysis and reporting

We explored learners' emotional, social and physical wellbeing in our questioning and analysis but we were also keen to be led by learners' own terminology and descriptors of wellbeing rather than imposing a definition from the start. This was felt to be important in helping to define and shape any future qualitative approaches to measuring 'wellbeing', and especially 'active wellbeing' as a concept. We did not directly introduce the terms 'hedonic' and 'eudemonic' wellbeing in our discussions, rather considered the discourse the learners had used in these terms during our analysis of the emerging themes and differences. The conversations introduced potential connections between wellbeing outcomes and personal development and employment prospects to see the learners' views on whether active wellbeing was likely to have an impact on these areas.

The qualitative data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The key themes and topics were identified through the focus group discussion guides and through a joint review of the group sessions with all researchers present, allowing us to compare the findings from within and across the different groups we had attended.

We were also able to draw on the associated research findings of the FE, Sport and Wellbeing study¹⁹. During this study 12 focus groups were completed with sports learners who were asked the similar questions around their perceptions of wellbeing, their experiences of active wellbeing activities pre and post lockdowns and their future support needs. This allowed us to compare the issues raised by sports students with learners in the range of different courses for the Active Wellbeing study. In total, 180 learners have provided feedback for the two related studies.

A further aspect of our analysis has been to review the process of using a qualitative approach to explore and measure learner wellbeing. We will explore how the focus group process deployed here could be developed in the future to assess and understand the strategic outcome measures contained within ColegauCymru's Active Wellbeing Strategy.

¹⁹ BlwBo (2021) FE, Sport and Wellbeing. Report for ColegauCymru.

As set out in the invitation to tender, this report sets out information that will help ColegauCymru and Sport Wales to:

- Identify new ways of measuring Active Wellbeing outcomes;
- Provide insight into the impact of project delivery on Learners' wellbeing and their understanding of the wider Eudemonic and wellbeing factors;
- Have better understanding of the connection between activity and wellbeing of future generations;
- Develop a sound assessment tool / methodology for Active Wellbeing research.

4. Findings

In this section we cover the following areas:

- I. **Wellbeing definitions** – learners' understanding of wellbeing and terminology used;
- II. **The Learning Environment** – how this supports or inhibits wellbeing outcomes.
- III. **College Wellbeing Activity** – the activities that learners personally chose to do to support their wellbeing over the last 15 months
- IV. **Impact** – the effects of this activity (or the lack of it) on personal goals and development

We look at the feedback learners spoke about for each area, before exploring suggestions for how future support could be designed in Section 5.

4.1 Wellbeing definitions

Following introductions to the focus group process, facilitators introduced the concept of wellbeing and shared the key message and infographic from the Active Wellbeing Strategy, demonstrating the links to college life and the connections between physical, social and emotional wellbeing²⁰. Learners were given an anonymous Mentimeter task and asked, "*What words or sentences come to mind when you hear the term 'wellbeing?'*". Learners were reminded that they could not be identified by anything they suggested and that there were no right or wrong answers. Diagram 2 below shows a combined word cloud from the responses given across the 11 college focus groups.

²⁰ We shared the infographic on page 4 of the Active Wellbeing Strategy.

Diagram 3: Learners' knowledge and awareness of wellbeing and descriptors



We found there was less familiarity with the term 'active wellbeing' as used in the strategy: *"Not familiar with the term 'active wellbeing', but 'wellbeing', yes, through college and therapy"*. One learner had a slightly different interpretation of the word 'active' as being more 'continuous': They described wellbeing as *"looking after self and making sure you are well. If you're not right in yourself then how can you look out for others and your family? Sometimes need time out to refresh. Active wellbeing is continually doing that on a regular basis"*. More frequent communication from colleges using this language may help increase awareness and assist with future measurement of 'active wellbeing' provision, and this is discussed further below.

4.2 The learning environment

Structure: In both this cohort of learners and with the sports students, the learners felt they had reached a stage where there was 'too much online delivery' and 'too much theory'. They understood why this was, and recognised it being outside of the colleges' power to change at this time, but it felt like it was "assessment after assessment" and it became difficult to achieve holistic wellbeing and retain a level of motivation. Learners have 'missed out' this year with there being no trips, excursions and expeditions – all the aspects that would have provided opportunities for socialising with others from across the college and this has had a negative impact.

In general, online delivery has been challenging for many learners with most feeling that they missed the day to day and face to face contact with their 'teams': *"I don't like online. Makes you feel isolated."* The enforced lack of structure of getting up and going out to college had a real impact on learners as they were used to a daily routine and the separation of homebased and external learning spaces. This, according to some, increases their chances of participating in activities. A student from Coleg Merthyr said, *"The best thing would be to have our normal active lessons back again. The first year before Covid"*

was great.” A group of ILS students from Coleg Sir Gar mentioned that “all they could do during lockdown was walk and cycle”. They were therefore very positive returning to college. Students at NPTC noted that the sport activities were really important. “Without the goal of competing, it’s really hard to stay motivated.” The negative effects were also experienced by staff and learners seemed to be aware of this and were appreciative of the efforts made on their behalf. As one officer described to their group, “I really struggled with not having face to face as an engagement officer. I found it a struggle to be in front of a screen all day, like a caged animal. I like to be out there doing practical things.”

However, for some, remote provision and online learning was an important enabler that allowed them to continue their education in an environment that suited them. *“Made me work better, I had nothing else to do.”* We heard examples from mature students of how the online approach had removed a significant time barrier, especially those learners who had children, and found it difficult (logistically and personally) to prioritise their own opportunities to learn above the needs of family members. *“Being able to do the course in Covid has given me more time... I would have had the hustle and bustle of daily life and kids.”* In this respect, online learning has opened up access and we heard examples of how individuals felt it had improved their chances of educational success and future opportunities.

Create shared and social experiences: Despite the benefits for some around remote provision, there was still a desire to experience wellbeing opportunities that would build up the social opportunities when returning from Covid. While a number of students (non-sports learners) enjoyed the competitive element that sport offered, a number of other students explained that taking part in wellbeing activities wasn’t about competition – for these students, the competitive element put them off getting involved in activity. The social aspect proved key, with some students describing how they enjoyed meeting people from different courses. Students also talked about the positive impact of returning to college after lockdown. One ILS student from Coleg Gwent said, *“I was scared... I’ve lost my dad’s mum... coming back to college has lifted me. I’m happy, excited and feel great about the future. I can’t wait... I love being part of the gang.”*

Enabling learners to ‘belong’: Colleges should also consider, where possible, provision of opportunities to mix across campuses and courses where learners feel this would be beneficial. For some cohorts, this is of vital importance to their overall wellbeing. The college facilities create an environment which is far more than ‘just’ an educational experience. For ESOL learners, it provides a trusted community space, a common experience and talking point to meet people and gain a new ‘family’ and friends and achieve a sense of belonging. *“Live a real life like my old life when I came here. When I came here it was hard to start everything over, last year was very hard for me. I got asthma because of the stress but when I started (college) everything changed and started to feel like I did before. College helped get that back.”* Some learners have arrived in the country or at college knowing no one and spoke of the difficulties of trying to meet new people when there is a general lack of trust in strangers striking up a conversation in this way: *“Totally agree. Hard to make acquaintances with people, especially moving down the street. Once you meet at an institution here there is a bit more trust, a same point that you have in common”.* Such opportunities also provide a necessary means of practising new language skills with native speakers in day to day situations. For others though, such as mature learners, there was a preference to participate in active wellbeing opportunities (with social elements incorporated) within their own tutor groups and subject areas – none that we spoke to would feel comfortable taking part

in an environment alongside large groups of younger learners. *“If I wasn’t with a group of mature students I wouldn’t go on my own”*. They spoke about how they would like to meet for walks, wine, picnics, fun outdoor activities and were far more likely to participate in activities that were planned for them in their tutor group.

4.3 College Wellbeing Activity

All respondents felt that there were significant - and obvious - links between physical activity and wellbeing. Building on aspects that support eudemonic wellbeing, it will be important for colleges to continue an approach of listening to learners and part of this could involve hearing about the activities they choose to take part in independently and the types of activities they would like to incorporate into college life. Many reported that daily activity such as walking, enjoying nature, walking dogs, being with family led to a better ‘mindset’ and there was an understanding and reinforcement of the link between activity helping the mind and mental health as well as physical health. Some sports and higher level physical activity participation was mentioned, including netball, dance, jogging, running, cycling, football, basketball, swimming, kayaking – and these were things that learners had done generally outside of the college environment. In some cases these were pre-Covid choices and some opportunities had since been lost as a result of the pandemic and restrictions on participation.

Variety: One tutor stressed that it was important to experiment and try new activities. She explained that some of these activities might not work with students but they’ll take a lot of lessons from the experience. Many agreed that college might be the only place where learners would have an opportunity to access a broad range of activities. Learners reaffirmed this point and suggested that they are more likely to try new activities during these formative years, and the introduction to new activities could lead to a genuine interest and pathway into longer term participation. Some learners were proactively thinking about how to encourage others to get involved, as a group of performing arts students described: *“We’re thinking of having a new street dance crew for people who don’t do physical activity to come to at lunchtime and do an hour of dancing.”*

Wellbeing spaces: There are academic studies that look at the theory and practice of learning space design for school children and students. The research highlights vital, yet generally overlooked relationships between the learning environment and student learning and wellbeing. Learners in some colleges praised the spaces that had been created for students to relax and participate in activities. *“We’re always in the wellbeing room, we go in there a lot, it’s quiet, not a place for chatting. You can have a quiet conversation but it’s a room to clear your thoughts, away from college life.”* Another added *“We got introduced to it by our tutor who advised us to go there if we were feeling stressed.”* Others highlighted how *“a room for all to stretch out and listen to fun music”* would greatly contribute to their college and wellbeing experiences.

Awareness: We have found that there is limited awareness of the college wellbeing activities available to learners. This might be because of college variations in funding for wellbeing staff and staff changes, inconsistent communication, nothing has been allowed to happen, or there has been an online information overload. Indeed, it became clear in some of the focus groups that opportunities had been promoted, but this had been overlooked or had not resonated with the learners. *“They need to advertise the opportunity more. They need to make it more approachable so that if you feel down, you*

know where to go. We know where to go on Teams, but not in college.” One college had shared a wellbeing planner of activities online with students, but many in the focus group had ‘no idea’, with some reporting that they had screen overload and too many emails so they had probably missed it. There were also some perceptions from non-sports students that the facilities available in their colleges were only for those on other courses: *“Are we allowed to use the gym? If we are, I will definitely use it”* (perception it was sports students only). Another said: *“There’s a sports hall here too but can people other than the sports go?”* and on finding out from the wellbeing officer that activities were available through their college said: *“Will definitely join sessions when I can find them.”* The wellbeing focus groups in this respect offered wellbeing staff a chance to consult, promote the offer and find out more about the barriers different learners were experiencing. Communication needs to be direct and bespoke, and there are a number of existing networks and channels to do this, such as those set out in ColegauCymru’s Active Wellbeing Communication Toolkit²¹, which could be re-visited with staff as a reminder of the guidance already available.

Benefits of college provision: Despite the lack of awareness in some groups, there were other examples from learners who had benefited greatly from the support they had received from the tutor or active wellbeing officer during the last year, with staff members providing online exercise classes, virtual dinners, film nights, karaoke, meditation and yoga opportunities and general opportunities for tutor groups to meet and develop relationships with others. One ESOL learner described: *“This year I was at home with nothing to do, she helped me with (online) exercise classes, getting back to exercise again and looking forward to movie night again... yes, I see the link between exercising and wellbeing. I started to wake up at 8 again, before, it was 11...”*. Another learner commented: *“I understand more about meditation and exercise and the need to eat healthily. Now I try to do that. (How do you feel?) Changed. Feel less stress and less anxiety – all change around me. Learning to see life in different ways.”*

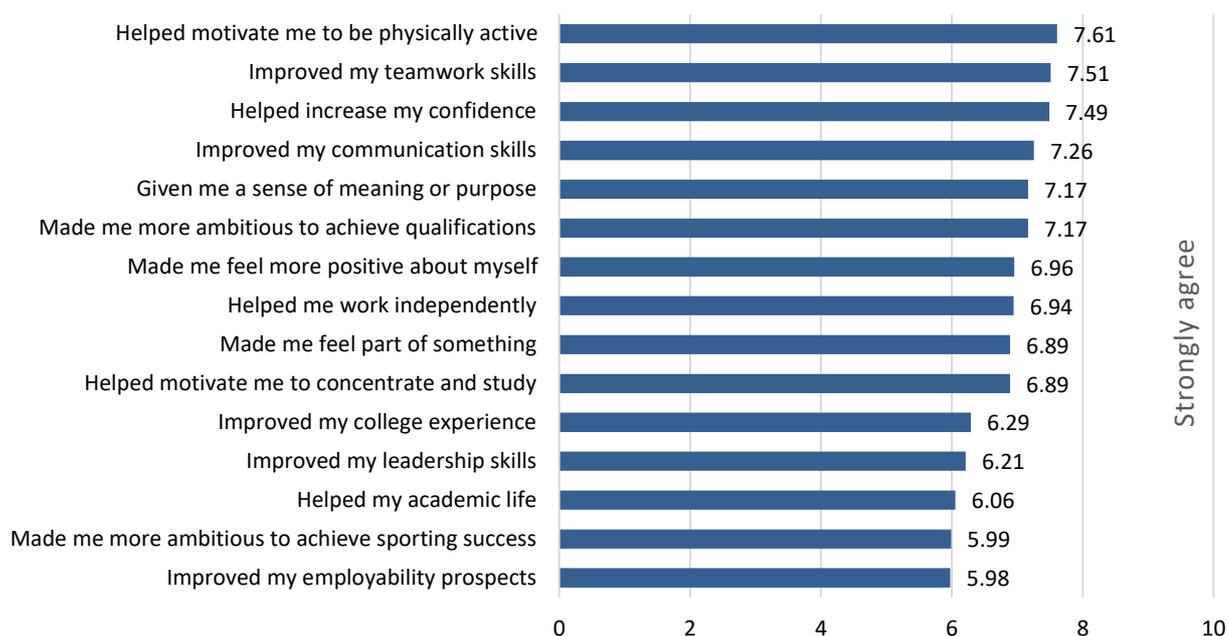
These learners reported that they were aware of support and made it clear how beneficial and important this support was for students. There was a great deal of positive feedback for the way college staff had made efforts to provide these opportunities and check in with and keep in contact with them as a group and individually as well. One learner shared that they had accessed professional therapy support. All agreed that more of this ‘type’ of support would be needed as we come out of Covid-19.

Tailored approaches: For ILS students, one college in our sample offered a mix of generic activities but also tailored activities to those who want to do more study, higher level activity and/or employment. The tutor added that their curriculum is person-centred. *“We want them to bloom and blossom.”* Some suggested building in time for students to share and reflect at the end of activities. Colleges can now play a supporting role in enabling access again. A Mentimeter exercise was used to ask learners about their preferences and interests that colleges could facilitate.

Diagram 4: What type of active wellbeing opportunities interest you?

²¹ ColegauCymru (November 2020): Active Wellbeing Project Communications Toolkit. Available at: <https://www.colleges.wales/search/communications%20toolkit> (Accessed 20 June 2021).

Diagram 5: How much do you agree that wellbeing activities have had an impact on these options?



There was strong agreement that it helped with motivation to be physically active – and once the effects are experienced, motivation levels can be reinforced, as this learner described: *“I’m not really an active person but I wanted to lose weight so forced myself to go for walks, and then started to enjoy them. It was relaxing and therapeutic.”* The mental health connections and importance of physical activity in maintaining good mental health were a theme throughout the discussions. *“Being active everyday keeps the stress out of my head – and with Covid, stress levels were up here (gesturing high). Pre-Covid, netball was my thing. Now, I walk to clear my head.”*

There was a particular correlation between being active and its impact on happiness, motivation and confidence, and evidence of agreement that wellbeing activity could improve communication skills. According to students, there should be a focus on providing fun and enjoyable active wellbeing activities. These build confidence and such activities could be targeted at those who are new or have limited experience of them. There was little effect on learners’ ambitions to achieve sporting success, which was somewhat expected due to the learners being drawn from non-sport related courses.

There was a high level of agreement that activity could improve teamwork skills. This of course has been a gap during the past year. Most learners felt that the lack of team activities had affected their dedication to remain active and had a negatively impacted these skills. It became clear during discussion groups that students had been accustomed to communicating online, but also that some learners were withdrawing from proactively communicating with others. Although it’s particularly important in customer facing industries, good communication is an extremely versatile skill that’s an important part of every role – which contributes to the smooth running of any workplace. Consideration should be given to the role of wellbeing activities in developing new and existing transferable skills, especially teamwork skills. *“If we socialise more with each other it could help us work together as a group. Teamwork. Always need it, not just during Covid.”*

There was also a good sense of eudemonic outcomes such as *“give me a sense of meaning or purpose”* and ambition to achieve qualifications. Generally, the lockdown hasn’t impacted on future learners plans. In fact for some (i.e. public services and healthcare) it had galvanised their resolve to continue with their plans of going into public service.

Alumni activity: The mature students also highlighted that alumni activities would be welcomed. During the last year and through the wellbeing opportunities facilitated through their tutor they spoke about making connections through college that will go beyond the course and suggested that colleges could facilitate opportunities to meet up again after people have qualified: *“A network of support”* that would go beyond the college experience.

As with our related study, the options where wellbeing activities were perceived to have the least impact were ‘employability’ and ‘academic life’, although there were comments that demonstrated learners’ understanding of the connections: *“How you feel about yourself has a domino effect on achievement and employability”*. We believe this presents an opportunity to expand on developing this level of understanding and the wide range of incidental educational benefits that can be achieved through active wellbeing as college provision starts to return. This could be incorporated into the design of future offers. Where there was good understanding, learners could recognise the impact of activity on their personal development and employability outcomes.

5. The future wellbeing offer

We have heard that those learners who were new to college in 2020 didn’t really know what the true college experience is like. They have not experienced the transition from school to college life that they might have expected. As we return to more face to face learning and opportunities to take part in wellbeing activity, there are several aspects that colleges can consider when designing a future offer.

Communication needs to be direct and stand out

During lockdown, we heard examples of how wellbeing activities were emailed to students. Whilst some learners had taken notice of these emails, others had not. After a while, all of the college information that came through on email wasn’t seen as a priority and so communication needs to be as direct as possible. Learners from different colleges talked about the role of the tutor in informing them of activities. Learners also noted that some activities were visible on campus e.g., an entertainment stage where people are performing, and from previous reviews of active wellbeing provision²² we have seen that activities work well when they take place in shared spaces on campus such as canteens, or indoor and outdoor recreational areas. The visibility is considered to help make active wellbeing a norm in college life and available to everyone.

²² BlwBo (2018). Review into the impact of Sport Wales funded projects in further education colleges from 2014 to 2017. Report for ColegauCymru.

A good induction helps introduce activities

Learners have missed out this year on the usual freshers' fairs and face to face induction processes where connections could have been made and active wellbeing offers promoted. This year, learners spoke about how they liked the idea of a planner that could be introduced at the start of the year. One college explained how they are going to look at the induction process for students, and the possibility of developing a planner for students setting out the nature of the activities and when they were available. This would help ensure learners know where, when and how they can access opportunities, and help avoid examples that we have heard where learners perceived that only sports students would have access to certain facilities or active wellbeing provision. Reinforcing this communication through tutorials would help all learners have access to the same information, and communication can be more continual rather than one off induction processes.

Activities need to be broader and go beyond the traditional sports

Learners discussed their interests in different types of active wellbeing activities. Some mentioned that they enjoyed dog walking whilst others would take part in arts, crafts and nutrition and cooking activities, outdoor offers connecting with nature. There could be an opportunity to develop a menu of options that range from the traditional sports (football, rugby, basketball, netball) to new and different activities (dodgeball, table tennis, walking, arts, etc.). Listening to learners remains key to creating an accessible and enjoyable offer that includes options that appeal to learners with different needs and barriers to participation.

Incorporate activities into college life as much as possible

There is a tendency to look at wellbeing activities as something that learners need to get changed and prepared for. Some activities can be easily offered as part of everyday college life. Some learners mentioned how they played table tennis or Wii for example. Any barriers to participation should be overcome where possible.

A considered and coordinated approach when scheduling of lessons and tutorials

The availability of staff to deliver activities was an important factor according to some tutors. One explained that they would benefit from tutorials being aligned so that they can get sufficient members of staff to help with wellbeing activities. Consideration also needs to be given to timings for organised and structured activities, and how this fits into facility availability to give learners from different courses and campuses equitable access. Organising opportunities through tutor groups has benefits for those with full schedules of teaching time, part time learners, mature students and work based learners.

The lack of time is a barrier for students

Students described how they had more time to take part in activities such as walking and cycling during lockdown. Some of the part-time students also mentioned that they enjoyed activities with their children and grandchildren. This had made them appreciate the importance of wellbeing activities on themselves and on their children and grandchildren. They feared a return to doing less when coming out of lockdown. One student said, "*Life's getting busy again with children's activities starting up.*" Consideration should therefore be given to the balance between study and active wellbeing activities, especially with the added responsibilities of family and everyday life. There is an opportunity to build learning around wellbeing activities rather than see it as a bolt on but seeing it as something that

contributes to the formal learning experience – such as an example from one college that uses Yoga practices in the classroom to support ILS learners.

Working in partnership

There could be an opportunity to deliver activities like the Duke of Edinburgh Award across colleges at some point in the future (post-Covid). This could prove more effective in areas such as South-East Wales where there are a number of campuses in close proximity. There are also opportunities to connect with community providers including National Governing Bodies. Learners who took part in the FE and Sport study, who have not had the opportunity this year to volunteer and coach in practical sessions have been less aware of the wide range of community provision they can get involved with and contribute to, while simultaneously developing skills for future employment.

The role of technology is key

Sessions can now be delivered using a mix of online and face-to-face. The use of technology could prove useful when offering counselling or mediation support for example. It would be interesting to see if take-up is higher and more accessible through online delivery, and exploration of whether online opportunities are preferred by learners on any particular courses or demographic characteristics.

Counselling and meditation should form part of the future offer

The increasing concerns and importance of support for mental health has been a consistent theme raised in these studies. A few students said that they were being more aware of others and asking about wellbeing (mental health). *“I used to say: ‘say you’re not OK if you’re not’. Lockdown taught me that people are very good at pretending and say they are fine when they’re not.”* In another group, one learner suggested *“I feel we need more circle groups to communicate with each other and talk more. Keep mind active as well as body.”* A number of students shared personal stories and struggles during discussions and described how counselling had played an important role at the right time. *“Personally for me what helps my wellbeing is not exercise but I have counselling as that helps my wellbeing. I can vent, vent, vent to someone without feeling guilty”*. Some described how meditation had helped them *‘de-stress’*. Lockdown had clearly been a testing time for several students. These aspects should ideally form part of any future wellbeing offer.

6. Measuring outcomes – a qualitative approach

In comparison with the related study on the impact of Covid-19 on sport, this study has a longer-term aim of identifying new ways of measuring Active Wellbeing outcomes and developing a sound assessment tool / methodology for Active Wellbeing research. In this section we review and reflect on the process of using qualitative online focus groups to gather insight on Active Wellbeing and to measure strategic progress.

There have been pros and cons of using this approach, particularly at a time when the vast majority of college and working life has been done remotely. Nevertheless, we feel that the approach has many advantages that will continue for the long term, and we offer some suggestions for improving the

process with future learner cohorts. We look at the following aspects of the approach, before turning to specific recommendations overall:

- Setting up the groups;
- Running the groups – practicalities, content and style;
- Analysis and ongoing reporting; and
- Opportunities to add value.

6.1 Setting up the groups

The administration for this project and liaison with individual colleges was managed in this instance by the ColegauCymru project manager. This had many advantages for an external research team and ensured that the project ran smoothly and was set up and completed in a short time frame: under three months from inception meeting in April to report completion in June 2021. As well as the time saving, the practical advantages included:

- Benefiting from the existing relationship between project manager and colleges – this increases the likelihood of gaining a positive response to the research process and buy-in from busy college staff from the outset;
- The project manager can talk broadly about the wider aims and ‘fit’ of the research within the college and strategic contexts, and how it can contribute and add value;
- The use of central systems and the ColegauCymru Microsoft Teams software to facilitate groups ensured digital security and compatibility with local college requirements;
- ColegauCymru could oversee processes to ensure vital data protection and informed consent procedures were covered. BlwBo provided tailored documentation which was then shared via the project manager; and
- ColegauCymru could securely record the sessions to support the analysis process (with permission sought at the outset).

6.2 Running the groups

Attendance of the tutor/active wellbeing officer: We had some initial concerns that having a tutor or active wellbeing officer in attendance might discourage participants from speaking up if they wanted to raise things that might be construed as negative feedback on their college experience or feeling awkward about talking about personal experiences in front of staff. However, this did not seem to be the case here. Learners were open about providing views on what was not working well, as well as what was. This demonstrated a level of comfort and openness between staff and learner, and on many occasions, the learners spoke about how they could go to staff (those in the session and others) and felt they were well supported. This was very positive.

As researchers, the inclusion of the tutor added value to the fieldwork outcomes. Tutors were able to expand on some of our questions to probe and remind learners of some of the local college provision that they might not have considered, because the ‘active wellbeing’ terminology we used did not necessarily trigger a connection with what they were involved with. Tutors reminded learners of things

like physical spaces within the college, and online sessions, specific projects and opportunities that were designed to support overall learner wellbeing. Learners then expanded on these points.

Facilitation skills: It became clear early on that each focus group would function and unfold in different ways and styles. Although we heard some consistent messages around wellbeing, the process for eliciting this feedback needed to be adaptable according to the group's needs and level of communication and engagement. In some cases this was challenging for facilitators, who needed to draw on their experience in managing such situations. The sample of learners involved in each group turned out to be very varied. Colleges were asked to invite 5-10 learners per group depending on availability, although our groups contained between 5 and 20+. Usually 6-8 in a group works effectively and allows each participant a chance to speak in an environment that is not too daunting to feel able to contribute. Some groups were very quiet and partly disengaged with the process and it required a good deal of probing, quick thinking and use of a range of approaches to get a conversation flowing. Examples included moving between Welsh and English facilitation within a session with learners who appeared to be more open through the medium of Welsh, rephrasing questions, being flexible in not following the 'script', drawing on tutors' experiences and using this to follow up with learners, and using the chat function to speak to learners who indicated they wanted to contribute in this way.

Our questioning style and use of Mentimeter tasks also had to be adaptable and flex according to the virtual room set up and the type of course/year groups the learners represented. We discussed the possibilities and scenarios when creating our topic guide so we could adapt instantly when required in terms of the questions we would ask, and the format they were asked in. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, we had a mix of class-based learners and learners accessing the focus group remotely from their homes. There were again pros and cons of both. An advantage of having class-based groups was their ability to communicate amongst themselves and with their tutors to remind themselves of certain points they wanted to contribute. Remote learners had to engage more independently, although tutors could still encourage where necessary. However, it was sometimes difficult for the researchers to be able to see whole classes and to know exactly who was speaking (especially when learners were required to wear masks) and for every learner to be able to contribute to Mentimeter exercises if they didn't have a device available nearby.

We want learners to enjoy the research experience, especially when they are giving up their time to contribute to an exercise that might not seem relevant to them at the time. We understand that it has become the norm in online learning for learners to have their cameras and microphones off when participating in sessions (and sometimes is necessary as use of the camera can slow down systems and connection speeds). A large part of the research and facilitation process takes account of non-verbal cues and language of the 'room' so not being able to see individuals added to the challenge of facilitating an effective group session that everyone could get value from. After reflecting on the initial sessions, we overcame this to a large extent by encouraging learners to put their cameras on at the start to have brief, very informal introductions. This was aimed at breaking the ice and putting learners at their ease, allowed us to see who was in the room so they could be included and encouraged to participate throughout the session. It also allowed us to understand our sample, their learning environment and any barriers. We suggested that learners left their cameras on throughout if they were happy to do so. ColegauCymru also assisted with this process by asking tutors to encourage a few participants to be on camera throughout when they knew they would be comfortable doing so.

This has the benefit of setting the ‘tone’ and encouraging peers to follow suit. However, we were clear that if learners did not feel comfortable being visible – or speaking up – then they could contribute via the chat function or via their support worker in some cases. For those that might have felt overwhelmed, we also provided an email address so that learners could follow up after the group if they wanted to contribute – or send further comment. This was not taken up, but it added to the range of communication options that we feel it is important to provide.

Online approaches have now become familiar to us all. While face to face approaches may work better with some groups (and can be included in future measurement) the online approach will remain a part of working life in the future and is a skill that learners are likely to find essential in the future, even if the process feels somewhat uncomfortable to some now. The speed and ease of using online approaches to undertake qualitative work has been an advantage. For the purposes and aims of this study we see the approach continuing to work effectively in the future, especially with continued reflection and additional options built in to ensure accessibility for every learner to have their voice heard.

6.3 Analysis and reporting

Our analysis found that wellbeing issues highlighted in recent quantitative surveys and Covid-related research studies have been reflected in our qualitative findings. The fieldwork process has provided us with a rich set of data that is current enough to action the suggestions made locally (some actions were identified immediately by active wellbeing officers and raised awareness of the local opportunities) and to provide a basis for identifying important wellbeing factors that can be used to monitor the ongoing success of local and national active wellbeing investments.

Future analysis and reporting might benefit from building in an additional focus group to bring together Active Wellbeing staff across colleges to explore their own views and the findings of this research. They can both contribute feedback and get involved in the analysis and reporting process. A similar approach could be taken with FE young ambassadors. This project has involved producing a full report of findings. Shorter reporting templates could also be considered to feedback results clearly and quickly to individual colleges as well as nationally. Alternative (additional) ways of reporting findings such as presentations, podcasts and workshops are also being considered.

The barriers to active wellbeing and the suggestions from learners will help ColegauCymru achieve the strategic outcomes of growth and entitlement, aiming to ultimately contribute to their personal development, enjoyment and long term engagement in activity. We have heard about key factors such as mental health and wellbeing, confidence and awareness, enjoyment and quality of experience. Using these as qualitative outcome indicators ensures a coherent link to measures used by Sport Wales via national surveys and from their insight into the nine important conditions²³ that need to be in place to enable participation and engagement in activity. Exploring these through qualitative approaches as well as the current quantitative measures adds value as it allows us to unpick and highlight the complexity and intricacy of different individual and group needs. It also has the benefit

²³ These are motivation, confidence, skills, awareness, opportunities and resources, access to places, positive experiences, inspiring people and understanding the value of sport (in the case of this area of work, ‘active wellbeing’ has clear parallels with ‘sport’).

of helping to connect and collate the range of insights gathered by different partners in the sector and share findings more widely across the active wellbeing network. We suggest the factors highlighted here continue to be explored and refined through a Mentimeter (or similar) ‘impact’ question shown in Diagram 5 to gather data and prompt discussion. The outcomes of this can be revisited over time to see change, nuances and attitudes of different learner intakes over time. We also suggest including a ‘life satisfaction’²⁴ measure in discussions that allows for benchmarking/comparison with the National Survey for Wales²⁵ and ONS data. This will provide data to understand how learners compare with others not in education, as well as comparing the feedback of learners involved in active wellbeing provision with those who are not. Alongside this, focus groups can be used as a learning opportunity to raise awareness of the links between activity and personal development and employability, which was a gap we identified in the two studies.

6.4 Opportunities to add value

Maximising resources and ensuring consistency: We feel that the overall approach has used resources efficiently and effectively and has provided a sound basis for developing and improving the use of this approach to measure wellbeing in the future. Colleges already make use of Upshot to measure and monitor active wellbeing funding through ColegauCymru and will need to continuously find ways to listen to learner voice and consult around wellbeing. The focus group approach could be built into college structures and potentially administered through tutor group work, which might provide the most consistent structure nationally while active wellbeing resourcing and staffing is not yet part of a core offer. This would also have the added benefit of raising the profile of wellbeing across all tutors and learners. The approach has potential to add value and save college resources through providing an externally facilitated consultation opportunity. A level of independence provides a consistent approach to fieldwork, analysis and reporting across Wales – making it more appropriate to compare and contrast findings across different colleges and campuses. External facilitation eases the burden on colleges (and active wellbeing officers) to each set up, design, administer and analyse 14 separate FEI projects if this research approach can be built into the overall system.

If future sessions continue to be supported by independent researchers and facilitators, the process would benefit from some additional preparation work to understand what active wellbeing opportunities have been provided and participated in locally and nationally prior to running the group session. A discussion with a college-based officer in advance of sessions would add value to the questioning – what issues would the officer raise themselves or like to gather feedback on – are there specific local active wellbeing interventions at play that the focus group process will help evaluate or shape? This would help inform the context and subsequent discussion and probing that takes place. The additional preparation could involve i) a review of available Upshot monitoring data and ii) a preliminary discussion between researchers and local tutor/active wellbeing officer. This could be built into the planning and preparation stage and would have limited impact on the overall timescale.

²⁴ What works wellbeing (2020) Wellbeing in policy: exploring issues of measurement and methodology. Available at: <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/wellbeing-in-policy-exploring-issues-of-measurement-and-methodology/> (Accessed 20 June 2021).

²⁵ Welsh Government (2020) The National Survey for Wales. Available at: <https://gov.wales/national-survey-wales> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

Closing the loop: Providing feedback to learners and colleges about the outcomes of this work is even more important as part of the overall approach so that they are aware and perhaps reassured about how their feedback has been used and the value of this to future interventions in colleges. If they can see it being valued and perhaps even actioned during their time at college, then this is likely to improve future engagement in the process – the ongoing collection and sharing of information and insight becomes a normal part and expectation of the college experience.

Embedding the approach through mentoring and upskilling: Should the next phase of this qualitative approach be rolled out further, we see an opportunity to include a mentoring role for learners (and perhaps for active wellbeing officers) to become involved in the research process. This could provide support to develop additional transferable skills that contribute to their personal development and future employment options. Learners who might benefit from the opportunity could be supported by the independent researchers to get involved in the whole research process from start to finish, but especially the fieldwork. Learners/ambassadors could share facilitation, freeing up researcher resources to run additional group sessions. Learners could also repeat the sessions with their peers and gather additional local data and insight. Some learners might be more open speaking to a peer than an adult, or to a gender age / ethnicity religion / disability specific cohort. Every opportunity should be sought to make the research process as inclusive as possible and involve a diverse range of learners from different courses, backgrounds and with different life experiences.

Contribution to national agenda: The measurement of wellbeing cuts across different funding streams and policy areas. ColegauCymru's Active Wellbeing work contributes to Sport Wales's insight into the nine important conditions referenced above that need to be in place to enable participation and engagement in activity. We have heard particularly that developing learners' confidence and helping them regain motivation has become even more important at this time. The insight gathered from (non-sport) learners representing a range of different subject areas can add value to Sport Wales's insight into the barriers faced by different parts of the Welsh population. The findings offer some solutions and support ideas suggested by learners that would help encourage them to get involved, continue to be involved and enjoy being active, allowing the sector to grow participation and contribute to the nation's physical and mental health.

Welsh Government has provided funding to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff and learners for 2020 to 2021 and 2021 to 2022 and Estyn has recommended that "The Welsh Government should ensure that the outcomes of Welsh Government-funded mental health projects are evaluated fully and share the findings across all post-16 sectors." In response, Welsh Government have reported that "We are working with the Colleges Wales Active Wellbeing Group and via Hwb to support sharing of experiences and good practice. As part of the application process for all funded mental health projects, providers must show how they will evaluate the outcomes of their activities."²⁶ While this research is not solely concerned with mental health funding, it may well help inform the approaches and design of future projects, in line with our objective of providing ColegauCymru with information that will support the development of future training and delivery resources for Active Wellbeing.

²⁶ Welsh Government (2021) Support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing: government response. Available at: <https://gov.wales/support-learners-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing-government-response-html> (Accessed 21 May 2021).

7. Recommendations

The last 15 months have reset the context in which the Active Wellbeing strategy will be delivered. Arguably, there is an even greater need in 2021 for its vision and purpose to be actioned. This research has highlighted previously known areas i.e., that being active has a positive impact on learning, and that there is an increasing need to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people. It is important that this is not treated as ‘old news’. It is recognised that ColegauCymru and the FEIs already undertake a great deal of work to support learners through active wellbeing opportunities, as well as the support that is in place for mental health and wellbeing through the FE sector in Wales. Active wellbeing provision can vary greatly due to the circumstances of different college sizes, range of campuses, facilities and staff capacity to support this important area of work. Our research has heard directly from learners and staff about the current challenges and potential benefits of active wellbeing support. Their feedback has reinforced the need for active wellbeing work to continue and to remain a high priority for the sector.

The study offers 12 recommendations for key stakeholders to consider moving forward.

Strategy

1. ColegauCymru launched the five-year Active Wellbeing Strategy in January 2020. Whilst the strategy remains relevant in a rapidly changing world, ColegauCymru should review their learning to date and commitments to ensure that the strategy sufficiently responds to the challenges faced by FE and other sectors in Wales. Short-term, mid-term and long-term priorities should be identified.
2. Having a long-term vision and an overarching strategy has been key to the approaches adopted within colleges. ColegauCymru and FE colleges should consider how they can proactively address active wellbeing needs and ensure accountability across the FE sector in Wales. Plans should also be developed to address inclusivity, especially considering that existing inequalities and access have been exacerbated by Covid-19.
3. ColegauCymru should continue to work with Welsh Government to ensure that a focus on active wellbeing and encouraging students to be physically active is a primary consideration. To help avoid short term funding and inconsistency of the support, Welsh Government should consider introducing active wellbeing as theme in their core funding to colleges

Resourcing and delivery

4. As “Entitlement” to activities which improve personal wellbeing is seen as a strategic level outcome for Active Wellbeing, 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 active wellbeing to be a reality. Further thought should be given to the factors that could enhance and expand the existing offer to provide a frictionless experience and access for learners as part of this exercise

5. Colleges have developed a strong track record of delivering active wellbeing activities over time and ColegauCymru should support staff to fill knowledge gaps and improve performance through the sharing of good and emerging practice, aiming for active wellbeing to be consistently valued across the college environment, from learner to tutor and college level. Long term funding should be put in place to support lead wellbeing professionals in every college, whose role is not just to run activity but to hold colleges to account over the priority they are giving to delivering against the Active Wellbeing strategy.
6. Colleges should look to integrate active wellbeing activities into lesson plans and formal learning where practically possible. Communication and delivery of active wellbeing could be embedded into tutorials for example. The evidence suggests that this approach would greatly benefit different groups, including ILS and part-time learners.

Inclusive, person-centred approaches and communication

7. Considering that some learners have moved from Welsh language secondary education provision, every effort should be made to ensure that the Welsh language is seen and heard during active wellbeing activities. The FE sector has a significant role to play in delivering the Well-being of Future Generations goal of 'a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language'.
8. This study heard from a diverse range of learners with different backgrounds, lived experiences, ethnicities, ages and course types, but 'active wellbeing' was identified as an area that brought learners and communities together. Specific needs were identified for mature students, ESOL learners and those with full timetables of taught lessons. Time barriers, personal preferences and work life balance were important and the design of active wellbeing needed to be shaped accordingly for certain groups of learners to engage and experience the benefits they could identify from participation. Continuing the good communication processes that have been established is critical. Further thought should be given by colleges to the approaches that could target key groups. Colleges should look to adopt a more tailored, person-centric approach where possible to both delivery and communication and promotion of the opportunities that are available.
9. ColegauCymru should encourage the sharing of research findings with learners, particularly those who contributed directly to this research study, and with FE ambassadors who can cascade key messages to peers.

Measuring and evaluating performance

10. The wellbeing of learners should be an area/theme for consideration when measuring/demonstrating the success of college provision/experience. Active wellbeing approaches offer a preventative approach and participants can gain incidental learning benefits. There should be a focus on the quality of the learner experience when planning future provision and measuring the outcomes of the provision. Ensuring learners leave with positive physical and mental wellbeing and having enjoyed a quality active wellbeing college experience is as important as passing exams.

11. The experience of learners representing different protected characteristics should be built into measurement processes.
12. Online qualitative approaches to exploring active wellbeing with learners have functioned effectively. These should be continued and developed further as a means of supporting outcome measurement for the Active Wellbeing Strategy. The focus group approach also provides an opportunity for staff to capture timely learner insight to shape local wellbeing offers and to provide a consistent national mechanism for hearing learner voice. There is also an opportunity to include mentoring support to learners as part of a future research approach.

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