



COVID-19 AND THE
FURTHER EDUCATION
(FE) SECTOR IN WALES

April 2020

INTRODUCTION

The spread of Covid-19 (or Coronavirus) has brought severe disruptions to communities and families across Wales. This briefing aims to help our stakeholders understand the position Further Education Institutions (FEIs) in Wales are taking in response to the pandemic to date, and what steps the CollegesWales Principals' Forum have taken to work with the Welsh Government and other organisations, in the best interest of post-16 learners across the country.

Background

On February 28th 2020, the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in Wales. Since then, the total number of cases and deaths has risen rapidly. On April 15th the total number of deaths in Wales caused by the virus was 463, while the number of confirmed cases stood at 6,118, although the true number is said to be higher¹. According to Public Health Wales, south east Wales is the worst affected area of the country, with 1,570 cases in the Aneurin Bevan Health Board, and 1,471 cases in the Cardiff and Vale Health Board (with Cwm Taf and Abertawe Bro Morgannwg following close behind)². The geographical areas covered by these Health Boards include seven colleges and over 30 campuses which house both academic and vocational learners aged 14+.

Challenges faced by the education sector

On March 18th, during the CollegesWales Principals' Forum, Principals and CEOs from all colleges across Wales met to discuss a coordinated response across the FE sector to Covid-19. The decision was made to suspend all face to face provision by March 20th and take a phased approach to working differently, with the emphasis on online delivery. Importantly, the decision was made to keep college campuses open with a skeleton staff wherever possible, to

ensure learners still had access to libraries and support. The Welsh Government online learning platform is not currently available to FE learners or apprentices. As a result, FEIs have invested in a range of Virtual Learning Platforms or VLEs to reach their students. College support staff have also made use of online platforms like Teams or Zoom for staff meetings, ensuring administration of the colleges continues during these difficult times.

Following the meeting of the Principals' Forum on March 18th, ColegauCymru wrote to the Education Minister on behalf of the sector, and received a swift response on March 20th. The Minister praised the continuous proactive collaboration between colleges, and thanked ColegauCymru for coordinating discussions with officials. In response to specific concerns raised by ColegauCymru, she confirmed that EMA payments, which supported 15,090 FE learners last year³, will still be made in spite of the suspension of face to face teaching, and Financial Contingency Fund payments to learners and suppliers can continue to be made. Colleges are aiming to be as supportive as possible to their vulnerable learners, as well as the companies who provide essential services, at this very challenging time.

¹ <https://coronaviruscymru.wales/>

² <https://public.tableau.com/profile/public.health.wales.health.protection#!/vizhome/RapidCOVID-19virology-Public/Headlinesummary>

³ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Student-Support/Educational-Maintenance-Allowances-Further-Education/approvedemaapplications-by-gender-learningcentre-type-award-type>



The table below shows the most recent data for the number of learners enrolled at FE colleges and gives an indication of the numbers experiencing disruption as a result of Covid-19. Each individual learner will face their own challenges in continuing their learning at this time. Colleges have taken

specific steps to support the most vulnerable learners and those at risk of disengaging from studies. The challenge of disengagement has been a primary concern for all FEIs.

NUMBER OF LEARNERS ENROLLED AT FE COLLEGES IN WALES 2018/19⁴

Fig.1

College	Learners
Bridgend College	6,775
Coleg Sir Gâr	8,020
Coleg Gwent	10,835
Grŵp Llandrillo Menai	16,160
The College Merthyr Tydfil	2,170
Pembrokeshire College	5,095
St David's Catholic College	1,380
Gower College Swansea	10,595
Cardiff and Vale College	11,450
Coleg Cambria	16,135
Coleg y Cymoedd	9,450
Addysg Oedolion Cymru / Adult Learning Wales	12,510
NPTC Group	10,985
Total	121,560

Source: StatsWales

⁴<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Further-Education/providerlearnersenrolledfurthereducationinstitutions-by-level>

EXAMS AND ASSESSMENTS

GCSEs, AS & A Levels

On March 18th 2020, after consulting with Qualifications Wales and WJEC, the Education Minister announced that summer GCSE and A Level 2020 exams (mainly affecting learners in years 11 and 13) would be cancelled. The Welsh Government also confirmed that they would not be producing achievement or value-added performance measures for 2019/20. Following this announcement, Qualifications Wales made a statement saying they were working with other regulators across the UK “to ensure that learners due to sit their GCSEs and A levels will be awarded a fair grade to recognise their work.”⁵ During this time ColegauCymru has been keen to ensure meaningful engagement with the regulator and also with the awarding bodies. Given the volume of learning taking place in FEIs, see Table 1, this engagement is slowly improving and will be key for both academic as well as vocational assessment.

On March 27th 2020, the Education Minister announced how current year 10 and year 12 learners in Wales will be assessed, following the outbreak of Covid-19 and the cancellation of summer 2020 exams⁶. Learners in year 10 will receive a grade based on evidence including teacher assessments during the academic year to date. ColegauCymru is supportive of this form of assessment as it is the most realistic and practical way forward for both learners and college lecturers. AS level qualifications will be awarded in a similar way. However, in summer 2021, current AS learners will be given two options for their A level award:

- only sit the A2 units, with the A level grade based on their performance in the A2 units;
- or sit both the AS and A2 units. They will be awarded the best grade from either route.

Using the most up to date data from the Welsh Government, in 2018/19, there were 121,560 unique learners enrolled at FEIs in Wales⁷. Of these learners, there were 23,385 AS and A level learning activities⁸ (an activity being one exam entry). Although this is not the most up to date figure (2019/20 data has not yet been released) it gives a clear indication of the number of exams which will be cancelled this year.

Vocational Qualifications

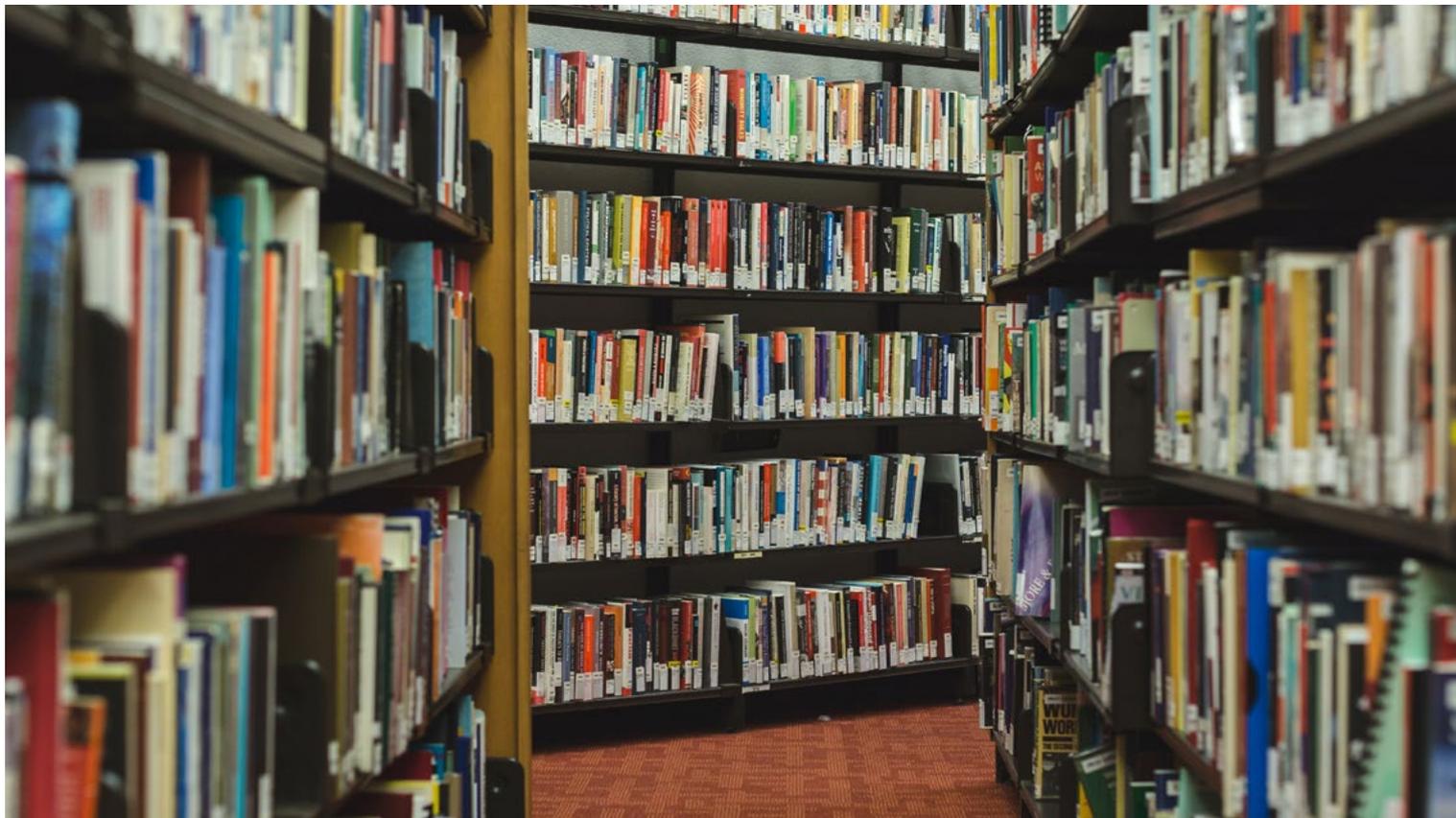
While the situation with regards to GCSEs and A Levels is clearer, there are ongoing discussions with regard to how to award vocational qualifications. ColegauCymru are pressing for a level of parity and consistency. A statement on the assessment of vocational qualifications has now been released by Ofqual and Qualifications Wales, and the sector will consider and respond to the varied requirements placed upon colleges.

⁵ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/news/decision-to-cancel-2020-exams/>

⁶ <https://gov.wales/education-minister-announces-exam-arrangements-years-10-and-12>

⁷ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Further-Education/providerlearnersenrolledfurthereducationinstitutions-by-level>

⁸ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Further-Education/learningactivitiesfurthereducationinstitutions-by-qualificationtype-age-gender>



LEGISLATION

Two large education Bills- The Curriculum and Assessment Bill and a Bill on establishing a Tertiary Education and Research Commission (sometimes referred to as the "PCET Bill")- were set to be introduced by the Welsh Government before the end of the current Programme for Government. Management and scrutiny of both Bills in a relatively short period of time was already challenging before the outbreak of Covid-19.

On April 1st 2020, the First Minister, Mark Drakeford made a statement on the Welsh Government's approach

to legislation in light of Covid-19. He confirmed that the Bill on Curriculum and Assessment is "a key priority for the Government", and the remainder of the legislative programme "remains under continual review"⁹. ColegauCymru and the members of the Principals' Forum remain supportive of the principals and objectives of these two important bills, however, the priority for FE leaders is addressing the challenges of the pandemic.

⁹ <https://gov.wales/written-statement-governments-approach-legislation-light-covid-19>

WHAT NEXT?

Most urgently, ColegauCymru is awaiting confirmation from Qualifications Wales regarding assessment for vocational qualifications. We will update stakeholders via social media once a response has been received.

It is still unclear exactly how long schools and colleges will be unable to provide face to face teaching due to Covid-19. The situation is changing on a daily basis, so it is impossible to predict what may happen in the future. If postponement of face to face activities, including teaching, carries on beyond September 2020, it will create a challenge for college enrolments. This would be an unprecedented situation for colleges.

ColegauCymru will continue to monitor updates from the Welsh Government although Welsh Assembly plenary sessions are now scheduled to be held on Wednesdays only via video conferencing.

On February 12th 2020, Kirsty Williams announced the Welsh Government had invested an additional £2 million to develop mental health and well-being support in colleges across Wales. She said,

“Ensuring students of all ages can access mental health support is one of my priorities and I’m pleased we’re providing additional funding for colleges to develop their front-line support services.”

The sector is now considering how best to use the available funds to support learners, taking account of the impact of the covid-19 situation. Securing positive learning outcomes

and the wellbeing of learners are the sector’s joint priorities. Planning for an uncertain future has also commenced and the sector will continue to engage with all its key stakeholders as this evolves.

Conclusion

Colleges and their learners have shown resilience during extremely difficult times, moving from face to face to online digital learning and dealing with disruption to the assessments that they would have expected. Keeping learners engaged with their studies is crucial, therefore colleges in Wales are dedicated to providing the best digital and distance learning possible. During this time and throughout the period of the public health crisis, colleges will collaborate to develop and share best practice to ensure the most positive learning experiences possible for their learners. As the situation is changing on a daily basis, we have aimed to keep this briefing as up to date as possible. Any further updates are available on our website¹⁰ or Twitter page¹¹.

Useful links

<https://gov.wales/further-and-higher-education-coronavirus>

<https://gov.wales/higher-education-and-student-support-coronavirus>

<https://qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/>

¹⁰ www.colegau.cymru www.colleges.wales

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/colegaucymru>



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