
**COVID-19 AND WORK-BASED
LEARNING (WBL) IN FURTHER
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS
(FEIs) 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 WBL providers in the Further Education sector 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 apprentices and those undertaking traineeships, 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 although there are signs that these are now starting to stabilise and slow. On April 21st the total number of deaths in Wales caused by the virus was 609, while the number of confirmed cases stood at 7,850, 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 1,835 cases in the Aneurin Bevan Health Board, and 1,828 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 where both apprentices and trainees are enrolled.

The WBL sector in Wales

All colleges in Wales deliver WBL as either a lead contract holder or member of a consortium. Table 1 shows how many learning programmes took place in 2018/19 across the entire WBL sector. In the current climate, it is clear that healthcare and public services learners will see considerable disruption to their studies as they are asked

to work/volunteer more within their sector. Due to work demands as a result of Covid-19, some of these learners are currently unable to complete formal assessments and written knowledge learning. Colleges are supporting these learners by ensuring tutors and assessors are in regular contact by phone and video call for learning discussion, reviews and further support.

Other vocational sectors are also disrupted and the basis upon which assessments will be made to enable apprentices, as well as vocational learners within mainstream college provision, are yet to be decided. Assessment will be required to establish the level of technical proficiency, underpinning knowledge and in some cases essential skills. In addition, WBL providers support apprentices across a range of other learning areas to ensure that apprentices receive a holistic learning experience. In addition to traditional vocational apprenticeships, WBL includes activities to support individuals to re-engage in formal learning and training. These are referred to as 'traineeships' and there are also programmes funded by Welsh Government to enhance individuals' employability such as the Jobs Growth Wales programme. The content of these programmes is determined by a detailed programme specification and they are delivered via contracts established under a procurement framework. Vocational requirements are determined by the specific apprenticeship frameworks and apply to both Welsh Government and privately funded apprenticeships, which are also delivered by colleges. For an apprentice to successfully complete their programme, they must demonstrate technical competency as well as the required underpinning knowledge. For Welsh Government funded programmes, they must also complete the additional requirements set out in the programme specification.

¹ <https://coronaviruscymru.wales/>

² <https://public.tableau.com/profile/public.health.wales.health.protection#1/vizhome/RapidCOVID-19virology-Public/Headlinesummary>

This table provides the number of learning programmes in work-based learning (WBL) in Wales. The data includes WBL that is delivered by further education institutions and also WBL delivered by other training providers³.

WORK-BASED LEARNING PROGRAMMES BY SECTOR AND PROGRAMME TYPE

Table 1

	2018/19			
	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4+	All Programmes
All Programmes	21620	25510	10370	57500
Agriculture	335	255	40	630
Construction	2700	2770	125	5595
Engineering	2110	2695	215	5020
Manufacturing	855	150	15	1020
Transportation	130	20	0	150
Management and Professional	900	2710	3905	7515
Business Admin	2015	3415	1200	6630
Retailing/Customer Service	1175	1155	45	2375
Leisure, Sport, Travel	760	1535	20	2315
Hospitality	1555	1115	90	2760
Hair and Beauty	1150	590	10	1750
Healthcare and Public Services	7915	8985	4685	21585
Media and Design	20	115	25	160

Source: StatsWales

This table provides the number of unique learners enrolled in work-based learning (WBL) in Wales. The data includes WBL that is delivered by further education institutions and WBL delivered by other training providers⁴.

UNIQUE LEARNERS IN WORK-BASED LEARNING PROVISION BY AGE GROUP, GENDER AND PROGRAMME TYPE

Table 2

Apprenticeships and Traineeships in Wales					
2018/19	Foundation Apprenticeship (Level 2)	Apprenticeship (Level 3)	Higher Apprenticeship (Level 4+)	All Apprenticeship Programmes	Traineeships
All Learners	19870	24775	10145	54790	6,500

Source: StatsWales

³ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Learners/Time-Series/numberofworkbasedlearningprogrammes-by-sector-programme>

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

AWARDING OF VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS 2020

Based on this range of learning requirements, colleges are continuing to ensure that learners finish their studies and complete their assessments as expected, wherever possible. Most apprentices are still being taught with assessments and reviews taking place remotely. In order to support these learners, some colleges have offered use of laptops and other resources to ensure that learners can continue learning and finish their assessments. Supporting vulnerable and/or disadvantaged learners is a key consideration for the Further Education sector.

Concerns have been raised with providers that employers would not take apprentices back on once the UK lockdown is over. However, the message to colleges has been that in many cases, employers are welcoming of apprentices returning after the current circumstances ease. Employers appreciate the difficulties of the situation at present. Apprentices who have been furloughed under the UK Government Job Retention Scheme are still classified as apprentices, as they remain employed, and can continue to participate in learning activity.

On April 9th, Qualifications Wales announced⁵ further details of the steps that will be taken to award vocational qualifications in summer 2020 to learners impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Qualifications Wales stated that, to ensure consistency for all learners, the same approach will be taken for learners in Wales as that set out by Ofqual⁶. More details are expected shortly regarding the process for generating calculated results with awarding organisations, who will provide detailed information to their centres (colleges) in the coming weeks.

On April 20th, Qualifications Wales announced that Essential Skills Wales (ESW) learners would receive a “calculated result based upon the outcome that their tutor/assessor believed they would receive had they taken the tests”⁷. Every year, many college learners undertake Essential Skills Wales. Unlike previous years, this year these learners will receive a predicted grade. Colleges are currently supporting ESW learners by setting targets for ESW progression including the use of resources, and signposting learners to digital tools to support new ways of working.

Current challenges and successes

While this is an unprecedented situation for both colleges and other WBL providers, the sector is keen to ensure that learners continue their programmes where possible, and are given the best opportunities to complete their assessments as expected.

During these uncertain times, colleges continue to support their apprentices and trainees through weekly contact with learners and regular progress reviews being conducted remotely. One college WBL consortium noted that 73.6% of apprentices are continuing to work for their employer, while around 26% are furloughed, with nearly all continuing to progress with their qualification. All colleges reported that a large number of apprentices are still working, whilst others are undertaking theory work whilst furloughed.

All colleges are in regular contact with their WBL learners by using online platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams for meetings and weekly review sessions, while continuing

⁵ <https://qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/qualifications-wales-statements/awarding-of-vocational-qualifications-this-summer---9-april-2020/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/awarding-vocational-and-technical-qualifications-this-summer>

⁷ <https://qualificationswales.org/english/coronavirus---covid-19/qualifications-wales-statements/essential-skills-wales-contingency-arrangements---20-april-2020/>

to prepare work and following government advice. Staff are also recording contact with learners via screenshots, e-mail correspondence and work logs. Assessors are using alternative assessment methods to capture practical real work experience. In plumbing, for example, one learner is completing all small domestic plumbing jobs at home, and sending a video recording to the assessor. In hospitality, home-based projects, such as cooking on a budget and making essential staples such as bread, are also being encouraged. Some of this activity can then be evidenced towards meeting skills and behaviours whilst gaining new knowledge and understanding.

Wellbeing and mental health support for learners at this time is a key issue for all colleges. Student support services have moved online to widen access, and assessors are focussing on mental health and wellbeing with students. Almost all staff are continuing with the level of work required to support learners and employers and maintain the appropriate level of audit trail. Maintaining the same number of staff is essential to support learners to continue their studies and to keep them engaged. Some staff have actually seen an increased workload due to learners needing extra support during this difficult time.

While some more vulnerable learners may struggle with isolation or loneliness, those on traineeships have continued to work from home, sometimes in creative ways. One trainee even made his own patio and sent a photo of the results to his tutor. This highlights the ongoing home learning which is taking place, as well as online theory work. Other trainees are undertaking voluntary opportunities, and are using online resources to improve their soft skills and course specific skills. College providers are also focussing on Employability Skills training for those learners undertaking traineeships to maintain focus on progression when the lockdown is lifted. It should be noted that however diligent apprentices may be and despite the best efforts to maintain learning and instruction, it is inevitable that some of the outcomes of traineeships, apprenticeships and programmes such as Jobs Growth Wales will be disrupted. This will need to be addressed and funded into the next contract round (August 2020/July 2021). Failure to do so will mean a waste of the

funded activity that has already taken place and a skills gap for employers. Colleges, as both FE and WBL providers, are keen to explore with Welsh Government a phased return to face to face instruction and in particular the reintroduction of assessment for vocational competence, especially in key sectors.

Additional activities from WBL colleges

As anchor institutions, colleges are currently using the skills of their WBL learners to help their local communities in a variety of ways, such as volunteering at food banks or producing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and distributing to the NHS. In some colleges, assessors are working with apprentices in certain sectors to set up and maintain "buddy systems". The impact of these systems sees learners remaining motivated and engaged, work-based relationships are enhanced, and mental wellbeing is supported.

The challenge of Covid-19 has given learners the opportunity to evidence new skills development, particularly where industries are adapting their production to meet current requirements. e.g. production of face masks, or in the health and social care sector where apprentices are often learning new skills or having to immediately adapt to what they have previously learnt whilst on programme.

CONCLUSION

Learners and apprentices across all aspects of WBL provision, have shown resilience during extremely difficult times, moving from face to face to online digital learning and dealing with disruption to the activities and assessments that they would have expected. Some have dealt with increased job pressures, while others have been furloughed. Keeping WBL learners engaged with their studies is crucial, therefore colleges in Wales are dedicated to providing the best digital and distance learning and other necessary support possible. Likewise, staff across the WBL sector have adapted to very challenging circumstances and continue to be a source of support to employers and learners. 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. It is vital that learners in the WBL sector receive the same level of consideration, support and continuity planning for their futures as their academic counterparts.

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 website⁸ or Twitter page⁹.

⁸ <http://colegau.cymru/>

⁹ <https://twitter.com/colegaucymru>



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