

# Blw Bo.

Wellbeing insight, FE sports learners and the recovery  
from COVID-19 – supporting the future of Welsh Sport

Final report  
June 2021



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# Executive summary

## Introduction

During the past year, the education system has faced significant disruption as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In Further Education Institutions (FEI), learners in academy and sport programmes have been severely affected by the loss of practical opportunities to apply their learning and to participate, volunteer, coach, lead, and compete in their chosen disciplines. ColegauCymru commissioned BlwBo Limited to review the impact of the last 15 months on further education (FE) sports learners.

Between April and June 2021, online focus groups took place with learners from 12 FEIs in Wales, providing an important opportunity to capture learner voice. We analysed learners' feedback in relation to the loss of sport on their social, emotional, and physical wellbeing, and the connections between this and their personal development and employability prospects. We heard from a mixture of male and female first and second year representatives, plus their tutors and/or Active Wellbeing Officers. In total, 93 learners contributed to the research.

## Key findings

### *Loss of structure*

College programmes for sports learners offer a quality sports experience, with support, training and competitive and work-experience opportunities and are marketed as such. Learners have missed out on the structure and routine that enrolling on a sports course would normally provide. Learners recognised that colleges had done what they could in the circumstances, and were keen to highlight that they had felt well supported by college staff. However, here was a high level of agreement that the loss of sporting opportunities had a negative impact on their ability to achieve their sporting goals, their social life and their general college experience. Sports learners had a good level of understanding of the link between college sport and the social, emotional and physical wellbeing benefits they normally experienced. The resulting strain on mental health and wellbeing was a key theme raised in each focus group. ColegauCymru and Sport Wales should continue to work with Welsh Government to ensure that the wellbeing of students is a primary consideration in planning the return to sport in future. Sports provision enriches the learner experience and plays a key role in achieving academic outcomes.

### *Lost access to training facilities and competition – motivation and fitness*

A lack of face to face training and the chance to compete affected learners' sense of purpose. For some, there was a real sense of demotivation and loss of fitness and learners reported that some peers had dropped out of sport completely. *"The worst thing was not playing. To train for a whole year with nothing to work towards, without goals, was actually quite draining."* Hard to keep fit and

*motivate yourself...everything becomes a 'tomorrow' day."* Learners and tutors highlighted the discrepancies in access for students in different regions and cross-border with England, where competitors may have had greater opportunities to return to training facilities and train with others.

Learners and tutors spoke of inconsistent access to facilities across campuses as well as some of the travel times required: maintaining fitness and skill levels was reliant on access to equipment and specialist facilities. To this end, colleges should prepare short-term plans that focus on practical delivery, while recognising the benefits of flexible blended learning offers. Colleges could consider the advantages and disadvantages of grouping modules that can be delivered online to free up time and maximise access to facilities that are likely to be in high demand.

### *Inclusivity*

Entitlement and addressing inequality continues to be a priority for the sector. A small number of learners spoke about how the return to structured provision and training opportunities (in and out of college) was favouring male provision over female. There was also a perception among some female learners that sport and fitness facilities generally were not as accessible for female students as males. Welsh language provision was raised by some learners as important in helping them engage and transition from sport experiences in Welsh medium secondary schools. Although references to inequalities were not widespread, it was important that a few learners raised these points so that colleges can be aware of the logistics they might consider as facilities reopen and activities can be programmed in for learners in ways that include and engage with all.

### *Access to work experience and future employment prospects*

College sports courses have previously enabled learners to volunteer, lead and coach in schools and community settings and to engage in workshops with National Governing body and other sector partners. The loss of these opportunities in the last year has resulted in a lack of awareness from learners about the opportunities that exist to work in sport and wellbeing in Wales and beyond. FE and sport sector should look to take proactive action to communicate and strengthen the link between learners and NGBs and other providers in the sector. It is likely that there will be an increased demand for community sport as restrictions ease, and therefore additional volunteer and workforce support required. The cohort of FE sports learners can provide much needed support whilst gaining valuable practical experience and access to future employment pathways.

## Returning to sport

A common reaction from learners as the country emerged from lockdown was *'relief'*, *'excitement'* and *'hope'* but countered with feeling *'overwhelmed'*, *'anxious'*, *'nervous'* and fearful of the situation returning. With the loss of motivation and fitness, many students spoke about losing confidence in their skills and sports performance: *"will I be as good as I was before?"*. This affected their wellbeing and had been exacerbated by a continued loss of social opportunities, communication development and teamwork skills that sport normally provided.

Learners offered solutions that described person-centred approaches to coaching and active wellbeing provision. Staff need to ensure that they are approachable and willing to provide constructive one-to-one advice. *“Coaches need to recognise and understand everyone’s personal situation and fit it to the individual.”* Making things *“enjoyable”* for those who had lost fitness/skills was important to learners: *“Have some basic sessions first to see where people’s skills are – but in a positive way, make it a fun time.”* These thoughts have strong parallels with the nine conditions for engagement highlighted by Sport Wales’s insight. Staff can create this enabling approach by continuing to listen to learners and building in mechanisms to understand the impact of provision. This will help colleges provide a genuine, appropriate, and inclusive sport and wellbeing offer.

## Conclusion

A range of studies in Wales undertaken over the last year have all highlighted the negative effects of the pandemic on young people, sport sector and the future workforce. Sport and physical activity have a positive impact on learning and wellbeing, and that the loss of these opportunities over the last 15 months have had a significant adverse effect on learners. Learners have been open and honest in their contributions, and the findings from this research reinforced these messages. It is important that these findings are not treated as ‘old news’ – they are the recent experiences of current FE learners who require more support now and future preventative action. Wellbeing is not something that should be reacted to when it may be too late. ColegauCymru launched the five-year Active Wellbeing Strategy in January 2020 in a pre-Covid-19 context and has taken the opportunity to listen to sports learners’ experiences. This study has raised a number of recommendations, and there is now an opportunity to share findings with colleges, tutors and learners to ensure that the strategy sufficiently responds to the challenges faced and to shape the short, medium and longer term actions required. This should also come with greater accountability for the FE sector as a whole and as individual institutions.

# 1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has delivered a profound shock to countries all over the world. The impact has reached deep into our lives, affecting people's health, income, job security and social contact. During the past year, learners and staff throughout the education system have faced significant disruption as a result of the pandemic. In Further Education Institutions (FEI), learners in academy and sport programmes have been severely affected by the loss of opportunities to apply learning and participate, volunteer, coach, lead and compete in their chosen disciplines. Since March 2020, all providers have made substantial changes to the ways in which they 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 assessment<sup>1</sup>.

In March 2021, ColegauCymru issued an invitation to tender<sup>2</sup> to explore in more depth the effects of the pandemic for learners on academy and sport programmes. These programmes have continued in a safe and innovative way during the pandemic through covid-safe sessions, and while this has been positive, it is clearly recognised that learner experiences and personal development, both educational and competitive, have severely affected the intended provision for learners to develop in a sporting environment, gaining experience through the opportunities to volunteer, coach, lead and compete in their respective disciplines. As highlighted in the invitation to tender, this type of work normally plays a big role in developing confidence, communication skills and leadership, fundamentally contributing to learners' future education and employment opportunities.

This research therefore was designed to determine the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of further education (FE) learners involved in sport and volunteering, with a view to enabling ColegauCymru and Sport Wales to:

- Identify the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the wellbeing of FE learners involved in sport and volunteering.
- Identify how to better support the wellbeing of these learners while transitioning out of the pandemic into future employment and education.
- Have a better understanding of the learner's experience of online provision and alternative delivery.
- Provide guidance on developing future training and delivery resources based on insight from research.

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<sup>1</sup> 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/2021-03/Learner%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Emotional%20Wellbeing%20in%20the%20Post-16%20sectors%20.pdf> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

<sup>2</sup> ColegauCymru Invitation to tender

During this timeframe, we have been undertaking a related project for ColegauCymru, which explores the connection between activities offered through FE and the wellbeing of FE learners from a range of different course types offered in Wales. The fieldwork for both projects ran concurrently, and this has allowed us to cross reference findings and enhance the analysis opportunities for each study.

## 2. Research context

It is well established that being active has multiple benefits to individuals, families and communities. People who are engaging in regular physical activity perceived themselves as having more autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, purpose in life, positive relations with others, self-acceptance, sport competence and conditioning than non-exercisers<sup>3</sup>. There is good evidence to show that through sports participation, volunteering, coaching and leading, young people can develop confidence, enjoyment, wellbeing and skills for future employment<sup>4</sup>.

ColegauCymru's Active Wellbeing Strategy 2020-25<sup>5</sup> was launched in February 2020, setting a new strategic direction for sport, physical activity and wellbeing in the FE sector in Wales from 2020-2025. 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 FE community should have the right to participate, inspiring a lifelong enjoyment of activity which supports positive emotional, social and physical wellbeing".

The Active Wellbeing Strategy was developed pre-Covid-19, in the wider national context of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which gives public bodies and others the "ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic wellbeing."<sup>6</sup> The strategy also complements the Welsh Government strategy, *Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales*<sup>7</sup>, especially in relation to Active Environment aspirations.

With the emergence of Covid-19 as a global pandemic in 2020, the connection between being physically active and the effects on wellbeing has become more important than ever. Provision for sport in general has of course suffered greatly across Wales throughout the year with statutory lockdown from 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and leisure/fitness centres pools and gyms closed until 10<sup>th</sup> August, when restricted provision resumed, with indoor activity limited to 15 people. Learners have faced considerable disruption to their education throughout the 2020-21 academic year. As noted by Estyn,

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<sup>3</sup> Edwards SD, Ngcobo HS, Edwards DJ, et al. Exploring the relationship between physical activity, psychological well-being and physical self-perception in different exercise groups. *South African J Res sport Phys Educ Recreat* 2005;27 <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.597.7447&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

<sup>4</sup> British Active Students Survey: Further Education 2019-20. Available at: <https://www.ukactive.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/BASS-2019-FE-Report-2.pdf> (Accessed 25 March 2021).

<sup>5</sup> ColegauCymru (2020) Active Wellbeing Strategy 2020-25. Available at: <http://ow.ly/j9QU50Cgg1t> (Accessed June 2021).

<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales. Welsh Government. Available at: [https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-10/healthy-weight-healthy-wales\\_0.pdf](https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-10/healthy-weight-healthy-wales_0.pdf) (Accessed 10 May 2021).

most post-16 learners could return to some face to face learning in September 2020 but this was followed by the firebreak lockdown in Wales from 6pm on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October, until 9<sup>th</sup> November 2020. Depending on where learners were based, there were further complications with regional and local variations and cross border differences. In September 2020, local lockdown restrictions were imposed, beginning in Caerphilly and followed by Rhondda Cynon Taff and eventually 17 areas of Wales were affected. For sports learners in Wales, there have been additional barriers resulting from stringent Covid-19 rules about participation in organised sport - and some differences in timings/guidance with the situation in England - and this has affected learners' ability to train, compete and travel to play sport.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> December 2020, Wales moved into Alert Level 4 and facilities were closed again. It has only been recently that restrictions have eased slightly. Wales moved to Alert Level 3 on 8<sup>th</sup> April, and public sports facilities such as leisure centres were able to reopen (with restrictions on numbers) from 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2021. Learners have continued to learn from home in the spring term of 2021 although from 12<sup>th</sup> April, learners were able to return with a blended learning approach adopted<sup>8</sup>. Some vocational learners have been able to attend onsite learning to complete practical learning and assessments. We have heard from our research that learners are restricted to bubbles so there has been minimal opportunity to bring larger groups together or to mix across different years, courses and tutor groups.

### 3. Potential issues for students' wellbeing

We were aware from research conducted over the past 15 months that a number of issues may arise during the focus groups, for example:

- Evidence of 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.

Between 16<sup>th</sup> November and 20<sup>th</sup> December 2020, Welsh Government ran an online survey to provide a baseline and improve their understanding of the impact the pandemic has had on learners in Wales<sup>9</sup>. The survey had three main areas of focus: (1) current and pre-Covid-19 learning and learning choices, (2) learning experience and learning online and (3) wellbeing and safety. The analysis of open comments left in the survey revealed a number of challenges to working online / remote working, an overall feeling of dislike for working online (although it should be noted that for some, this way of working is preferred) and the view that the pandemic has a detrimental impact on individuals' mental

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<sup>8</sup> Further education: coronavirus. Welsh Government. Available at: <https://gov.wales/further-education-coronavirus-guidance> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

<sup>9</sup> The survey was aimed at current learners aged 16 or older, in a school sixth form, further education or work-based or adult learning in college or in the community, and received 6,088 responses. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2021-03/survey-of-effect-of-covid-19-on-learners-2020-results-summary.pdf> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

health. We are particularly aware that young people's mental health and wellbeing has been negatively affected during the last year and perceived academic pressure and the importance of gaining qualifications can exacerbate negative issues. Recent research from the Children's Commissioner found that from mid-teens on, signs of additional distress were compounded by worries about exams and futures. 30% of 17 and 18-year-olds were worried 'most of the time'<sup>10</sup>. Mental health and emotional wellbeing were widely identified as a growing concern across the UK even before the Covid-19 pandemic, and the pandemic has presented society with many additional challenges and has placed further pressure on individuals' mental health and emotional wellbeing. The Mental Health Foundation and Swansea University found that the mental health of 13-19 year olds in Britain is under severe pressure across a range of indicators and has worsened during the pandemic. When surveyed in late summer 2020, around one in ten teenagers said their mental health had been 'poor' before lockdown. When questioned again in November 2020 the proportion describing their mental health as 'poor' had risen to almost one in six. The study also highlighted that teenagers from less advantaged backgrounds, including those with unemployed parents, appear to be at especially high risk of experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression<sup>11</sup>.

Again, this makes the aims of the Active Wellbeing Strategy even more pertinent and the contribution of physical activity to overall wellbeing has become more prominent in cross sector policy in Wales. During lockdowns, the importance of exercise was a key message from UK governments, and in Wales, at alert level 4, this was clearly referenced: "Exercise is important for physical and mental health. While alert level 4 restrictions are in place, you can leave home as often as you like to exercise"<sup>12</sup>. Physical activity is also seen as an acceptable intervention to support students with managing their mental health and can provide suitable support alongside mental health services. The British Active Students survey reports that it has been argued that college and university students should be supported to increase their physical activity levels, and that this is a responsibility that is shared between the educational institutions, policy makers, and welfare organisations<sup>13</sup>.

Coupled with pressures on mental health and emotional wellbeing, a lack of employment opportunities in the near future may disproportionately affect young people who are entering the market with limited work experience, and who are already facing challenges with gaining qualifications. The Welsh Government's survey showed that 57% of respondents agreed with the statement – "I have concerns about the future of my employment options as a result of Covid-19" and 61% agreed that "I have concerns about the future of my education or training options as a result of Covid-19". Like the rest of the UK, Wales has an increased concentration of young workers in low-paid roles. The proportion of young adult workers in low-paid sectors (like retail, hospitality and leisure)

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<sup>10</sup> Children's Commissioner for Wales (January 2021) Coronavirus and Me: A second nationwide survey of the views and experiences of children and young people in Wales. Available at: <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/coronavirus-our-work/coronavirus-and-me-survey-results-2021/> (Accessed February 2021).

<sup>11</sup> 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/2021-03/Learner%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Emotional%20Wellbeing%20in%20the%20Post-16%20sectors%20.pdf> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Coronavirus guidance. Welsh Government. Available at: <https://gov.wales/leaving-your-home-and-seeing-other-people-alert-level-4> (Accessed 2 June 2021).

<sup>13</sup> British Active Students Survey: Further Education 2019-20. Available at: <https://www.ukactive.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/BASS-2019-FE-Report-2.pdf> (Accessed March 2021).

has risen in Wales in the last decade<sup>14</sup>. These sectors are adversely affected by the pandemic. The ONS report that young people aged 18-24 saw the greatest decrease in numbers employed on payrolls between February 2020-21<sup>15</sup>. Reduced future employment opportunities<sup>16</sup> could disproportionately affect young people, who are entering the market with limited or zero work experience and are already facing challenges with gaining qualifications as a result of their disrupted education. Public Health Wales has reported that “young people, and those in precarious work have been identified as being especially vulnerable to employment changes caused by the pandemic, with mental wellbeing and struggles to find or keep work cited as major concerns.”<sup>17</sup>

There are also concerns that existing inequalities and gaps in participation are likely to increase as a result of the pandemic and those living in disadvantaged communities have been disproportionately affected<sup>18</sup>. The sport and physical activity sector has a valuable role to play in supporting young people to develop the vital skills needed for future employment, both by providing participation opportunities to develop confidence and teamwork, but also through formal and informal training and qualifications. For the long term success of sport too, the development of the future workforce is critical and has been disrupted by the pandemic. The Sport and Recreation Alliance has reported that the community coaching structure has been severely hit by the pandemic, and paid coaches were the hardest hit workforce over the last year. Compared with pre-pandemic levels; paid coaching roles fell by 63% during the pandemic and are projected to return at 14% lower after restrictions ease<sup>19</sup>.

With clear recognition of the issues faced, Welsh Government are investing a further £9.4m to support children and young people struggling with the impact of the pandemic<sup>20</sup>. ColegauCymru and FE Institutions play a key role in supporting young learners through their sports related courses and connections with local communities, and ColegauCymru has highlighted the need for learners and staff at further education institutions (FEIs) in Wales to receive high quality wellbeing and mental health provision<sup>21</sup>. FEIs are well placed to help ensure a continuation of opportunities for organised and informal activity to take place as learners move from the school environment to further education and work based learning.

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<sup>14</sup> The Resolution Foundation (2020). Charlie McCurdy. From locking down to levelling up. The past, present and future of Welsh living standards. Available at <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/from-locking-down-to-levelling-up/> (Accessed February 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Office of National Statistics Labour market overview, UK: February 2021. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/february2021#main-points> (Accessed February 2021).

<sup>16</sup> BBC website (27 May 2021) ‘Covid: Young people ‘worried about jobs’ after pandemic. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-57253556> (Accessed 28 May 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Public Health Wales website (27 May 2021) ‘Addressing young people’s employment challenges important for good health after pandemic’. Available at: <https://phw.nhs.wales/news/addressing-young-peoples-employment-challenges-important-for-good-health-after-pandemic/> (Accessed 28 May 2021).

<sup>18</sup> See examples from StreetGames (April 2021) Wales Covid-19 Impact report. The Impact on Young People living in low income areas and sport and physical activity in Wales.

<sup>19</sup> Sport & Recreation Alliance website (28 May 2021) ‘Community coaching structure expected to be severely hit by COVID’. Available at: <https://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/news/covid-19/community-coaching-structure-expected-to-be-s> (Accessed 29 May 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Welsh Government Announcement 1<sup>st</sup> February 2021. Available at: <https://gov.wales/pledge-support-youth-extra-ps94m-investment-children-and-young-people-mental-health-services> (Accessed 25 May 2021).

<sup>21</sup> ColegauCymru Policy asks for the next Welsh Government, Theme 3: Entitlement to wellbeing for learners and staff (March 2021) ColegauCymru website. Available at: <https://www.colleges.wales/image/publications/briefings/Policy%20Asks%20Senedd%20Elections%202021/Eng/Theme%2003%20brief.pdf> (Accessed March 2021).

## 4. Method

This research explored five areas, shown in Diagram 1:

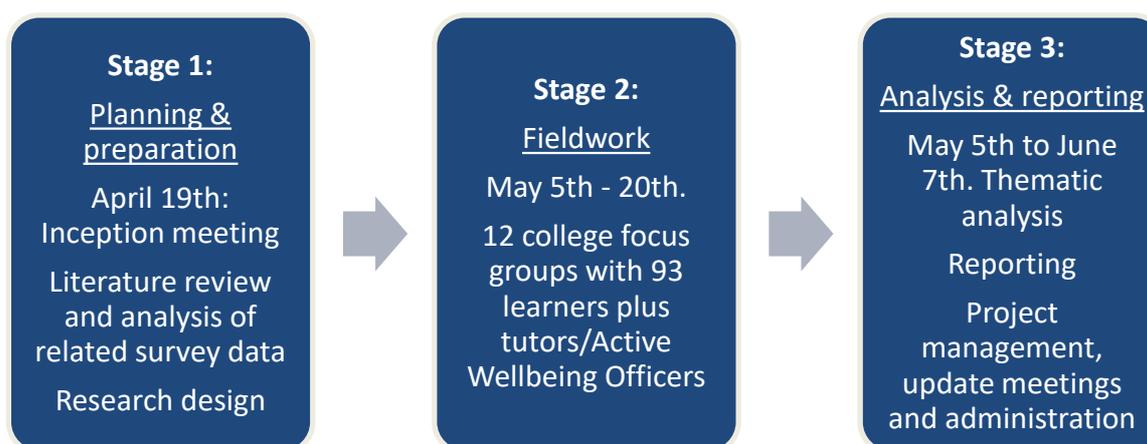
Diagram 1: Areas of wellbeing exploration



Our questioning and analysis introduced these five areas and explored learners' views on the relationships and connections between them and how they are interlinked. How might a loss of opportunities to develop wellbeing in one area affect the chances of achieving others? Which areas do learners see as a priority in the coming months? Which areas require the greatest amount of support, and for which groups?

This exploration will help us identify and understand the key enablers, and this will shape the resources and support that is developed in order to have the best chance of alleviating any negative impacts. Diagram 2 below shows our research approach.

Diagram 2: Our approach



## 4.1 Planning and preparation

An inception meeting was held on April 19<sup>th</sup> and was followed by a further meeting between the researchers and the ColegauCymru project manager on the April 27<sup>th</sup> to explore lines of questioning for the forthcoming focus groups. BlwBo prepared a topic guide which included three Mentimeter tasks for learners, 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 and in particular the effects on sports participation<sup>22</sup> were explored to help inform the discussions and familiarise the team with some of the expected themes and issues that may arise.

The topic guide covered the following:

- Learners' perceptions on what wellbeing means to them;
- Their views on activities (particularly active wellbeing activities) that they had attended during lockdown;
- The impact of the past 15 months and how they were feeling as restrictions began to ease; and
- Their views on the support required for learners /colleges in the coming months.

## 4.2 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 12 colleges. The focus groups were held online using Microsoft Teams between 5<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2021, with a total of 93 learners taking part. Learners were a mixture of first and second years and just over two fifths were female. A tutor and/or an Active Wellbeing Officer attended group sessions. Two BlwBo researchers facilitated each session, one

<sup>22</sup> Including attendance at a Sport Wales online CLIP event on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2021: 'ComRes research - how do people feel about returning to sport?'

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 used only for analysis for this report and were available only to the researchers involved.

### 4.3 Analysis and reporting

The qualitative data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach, and took account of eudemonic wellbeing themes, where wellbeing is focused not just on hedonic happiness and enjoyment, but on meaningful growth and self-realisation, and the ability for young learners to realise their own unique potential. 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 the different groups we had attended.

We were also able to draw on the associated research findings of the Active Wellbeing study. During this study ten focus groups were completed with learners who were asked the same 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 a range of different courses.

## 5. Results

We consider the following in turn:

- Learners' perceptions on what wellbeing means to them;
- Learner views on activities (particularly active wellbeing activities) that they had attended during lockdown;
- The impact of the past 15 months and emotions as restrictions began to ease; and
- Learners' views on the support required in the coming months.

### 5.1 Defining wellbeing

During the focus groups, we were keen to hear about learners' own views and definitions of what 'wellbeing' meant to them. Before discussing aspects of social, emotional and physical wellbeing we asked learners to take part in an anonymous word cloud exercise via Mentimeter. Using smartphones or laptops, learners were 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 3 below shows a combined word cloud from the responses across the 12 college focus groups.



learners in a face to face situation. *“I didn’t realise how important socialising was for me until we didn’t have it”*. Linked to this, was the opportunity for practical face to face provision to also provide a social opportunity. One group of learners spoke about how pre-Covid they would have taken part in a variety of different sports and activities together, to practice coaching each other. One learner commented, (and the group agreed) that you *“didn’t realise how much you enjoyed it”* until the opportunity to take part in mixed classes and access a variety of activities was lost.

Learners generally demonstrated less knowledge and awareness of how active wellbeing opportunities might contribute to their **personal development and employability** in the longer term. These are the aspects that college experiences and structure can highlight and facilitate. However, from all of our groups, there was some sense that the experience of lockdown had given learners some time to reflect and develop a ‘wellbeing self-awareness’, described in a variety of ways. Learners spoke about having a greater appreciation and realisation of the things that were important to their own individual wellbeing. However, as restrictions returned and there was a continued loss of structure, routine and face to face college experiences, this caused specific effects, as discussed below.

## 5.2 Activity during lockdown – levels of engagement and views

Pre-Covid, colleges were providing a range of active wellbeing opportunities as well as curriculum provision for sports learners. As structured face to face provision and organised sessions in colleges and the community came to a halt, learners spoke about how their physical activity participation adapted and turned towards individual training sessions, cycling, walking with family, walking the dog and online classes. In general, Sport Wales have shown that young people (aged 16 to 34) have generally seen a self-reported net increase in participation levels compared with pre-pandemic<sup>23</sup>. The cohort we studied demonstrated the same variability seen in the population – some learners spoke about increasing their levels of activity, others decreased it. There were also individual changes from the first lockdown to the second. Many spoke about the novelty and time available during the first lockdown to take part in different things and participate more in outdoor recreation opportunities that were allowed during the first wave of Covid-19 restrictions. A greater connection with family members through additional time spent together was an unexpected benefit for many. *“You take the smallest things more seriously now – your time and how you spend it. You spend more time with your family.”*

However, there was a sense that the initial positive gains began to wane over time. As the country moved towards the second lockdown, there were comments about how the news of the return to restrictions *“deflates you”* and many spoke about an increasing **lack of motivation** - *“hard to keep fit and motivate yourself...everything becomes a ‘tomorrow’ day”, “no way to motivate yourself with no one around you”, and “first lockdown I trained at home more – in the latest lockdown I’ve been demotivated and did very little”*.

This has had a knock on effect on confidence levels and many learners spoke of **losing confidence** - *“will I be as good as I was before?”* This is a particular issue for those learners who competed nationally

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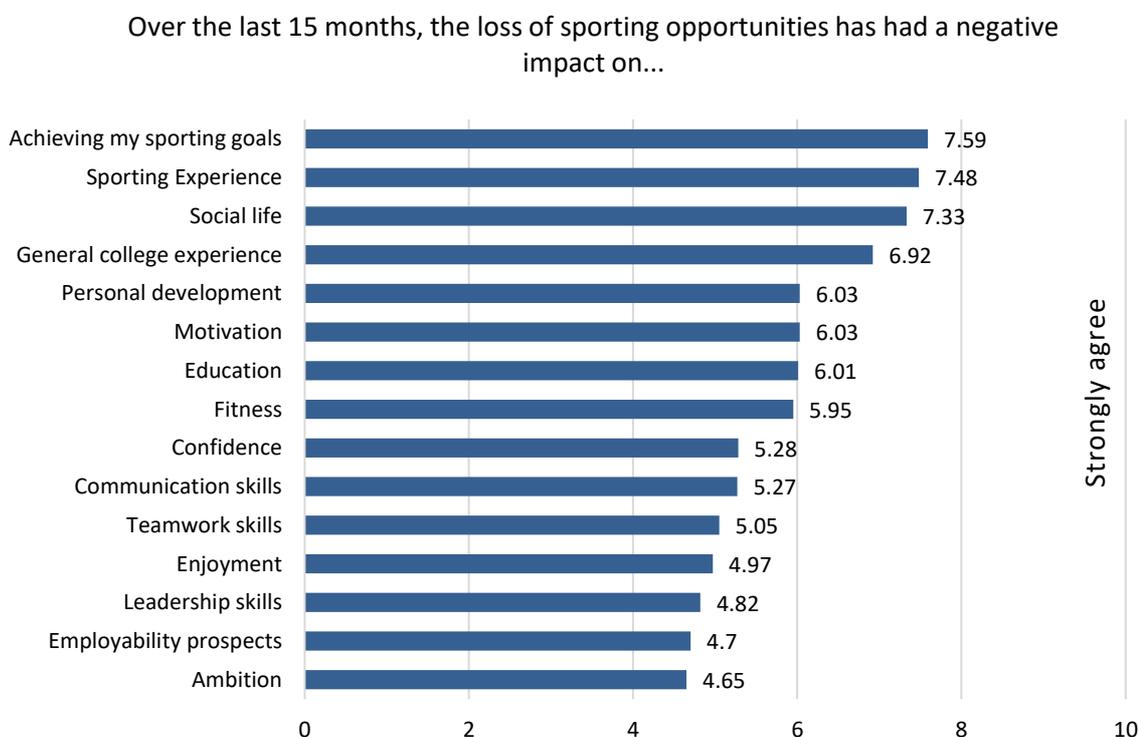
<sup>23</sup> Sport Wales (2020). ComRes Survey – October 2020. Available at: <https://www.sport.wales/comres-research/comres-survey-2-october-2020/> (Accessed 10 May 2021).

- or aspired to - who raised concerns about competing with others who have experienced different levels of restrictions cross-border. For example, learners spoke about sports participants training in England may be able to return to sport sooner than they could in Wales. Learners were concerned that other participants could be performing better than they were: *“no idea of what to expect from anyone”* and had no milestones/reference points from being with others in college to measure themselves against. There was mention of the increased pressures of academic learning and assignments, and with that, a loss of **physical fitness**: *“Will I be fit?”, “It’s been difficult to keep body in shape – this is difficult for me”*. The reduction of the physical practical elements, coupled with the extreme loss of social opportunities has had an increasingly negative impact on learners’ emotional wellbeing. Over the last year there have been fewer personal and social development opportunities that could usually be boosted by college provision and structured support.

## 6. The impact

Diagram 4 below shows the results of the second Mentimeter exercise, where learners were asked their views on how the loss of sporting opportunities has had an impact on them. Learners were given a series of options, shown in the diagram below, and asked to rate each on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 = strongly disagree, and 10 = strongly agree. Diagram 4 shows the average scores given by 79 respondents from 12 colleges.

Diagram 4 Learners’ views on the loss of sporting opportunities



Of greatest concern to sports learners has been the impact on their **sporting experience** and intended goals, closely followed by the negative effects of the **loss of a social life and face to face interactions** with peers. *“Missing that huge amount of social – it’s a massive impact on mental health – not just the sport itself but team and social. As sport comes back it will have a massive impact on people’s mental health”*. Another noted *“To not have social interaction in a year can be nerve racking for a few people”* and one identified the potential consequences: *“If you struggle with social skills, you’re not going to get a job.”*

The general college experience has been completely different with the **loss of practical opportunities and the chance to compete**. Theory aspects appear to have been relatively easily delivered remotely and for some, this has had advantages of less travel times and cost savings. However, the ability to put theory into practice has been extremely limited for these students and it has affected their **sense of purpose**. For some, there was a real sense of demotivation. Having access to lots of sports events was seen as a positive before Covid and national competitions were particularly important to these learners. Not being able to compete was a huge loss. The learners spoke of how they knew of some people who dropped out of sport completely. As an example from one sport, the loss of opportunity has a clear effect on wellbeing. UEFA have recently found that *“there is preliminary evidence that the reduction in participation in 11 a side football as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic is associated with a 20% reduction in the value of subjective wellbeing amongst those who play”*.

*“The worst thing was not playing. To train for a whole year with nothing to work towards, without goals, was actually quite draining.”* Others added to this comment: *“You’re training but you’re not getting the results.”* Many reported that *“training for no outcome”* had reinforced the sense of a lack of purpose.

Those academy/sports participants who are involved in outdoor sports have been able to return to organised activity quicker than others and take advantage of joint training sessions. Sports such as netball, swimming, boxing and gymnastics have all been mentioned as harder to return to with the ongoing restrictions around indoor gatherings, and clearly some sports have limited opportunities for remote provision and alternative training ideas: *“there’s nothing to imitate swimming”*. In turn, learners highlighted the knock on effects on confidence and related to this, concerns about the impact on skill levels and ability to compete on a level playing field with others. While learners have continued to train, training in isolation over the long term has been difficult. *“I haven’t had proper contact in boxing for a year. This has affected my confidence. I think I’ve lost my skill over the past year.”* *“As I start to compete again, I’m nervous.”*

## 6.1 Inequality in access to provision

There were some groups that mentioned aspects of college provision that suggested some inequality of access for Welsh language provision. Some learners have been through Welsh language education in secondary school and are now seeing more English terms being introduced in college. They felt that it was very important to have things available to them bilingually. There were also some references to gender inequality:

*“As female rugby players we missed out on Ospreys/Scarlets try outs and there’s a big jump from girls’ club rugby into regional”.*

*“Girls’ rugby needs the same status”.*

*“I’ve noticed that boys return to rugby has been quicker at college and club level – quicker than the girls and this has affected the girls and the team – the girls want to get back to contact. Some of the girls have dropped out as travel is further for smaller numbers of girls’ team”.*

There was also a perception among a few female learners that sport and fitness facilities at one site were not as accessible for female students as males, while the male students did not have the same opinion and felt there was equal access.

The Welsh Government *Digital Inclusion Forward Look* notes that Covid-19 has *“has drawn attention to the widening inequalities caused by digital exclusion in accessing services, receiving vital information and purchasing goods online”*<sup>24</sup>. Some are practical issues that also affect access to learning opportunities. Digital deprivation is a real challenge. In January 2021, the Children’s Commissioner for Wales facilitated a survey of schools and colleges in Wales. More than 52% reported there were some households without access to the internet and in 46% there were some households with insufficient data allowances<sup>25</sup>. 12% of schools had at least 20% of learners without access. Colleges reported a range of 0-20% of learners without access to devices. Having shared, rather than exclusive, access to a device is common - more than half of learners were sharing access in 36% of schools or colleges. This of course not only restricts learners’ access to education, but also their ability to access online sport and leisure provision, and a lack of access to suitable equipment and poor internet connections can equally affect the workforce.

Although references to inequality were not widespread, it was important that learners raised these points so that colleges can be aware of the logistics they might consider as facilities reopen and activities can be programmed in for learners. Indeed, college representatives have highlighted the need to focus on inclusivity when considering learners’ entitlement to active wellbeing<sup>26</sup>. There is a good deal of evidence from multiple sources 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.

## 6.2 Fitness loss

The lack of opportunity to play, coupled with a loss of confidence and motivation in some also affected learners’ perceived fitness levels. One learner mentioned training five times a week as a national

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<sup>24</sup> Welsh Government (2020). *Digital Inclusion Forward Look: towards a digitally confident Wales*. Available at: <https://gov.wales/digital-inclusion-forward-look-towards-digitally-confident-wales-html> (Accessed March 2021)

<sup>25</sup> Getting online: barriers and successes for the provision of online learning during the January 2021 Tier 4 Lockdown. A briefing from the Children’s Commissioner for Wales, January 2021. Available at [https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GettingOnline\\_ENG\\_270121.pdf](https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GettingOnline_ENG_270121.pdf) (Accessed February 2021).

<sup>26</sup> ColegauCymru PolicyPod: Entitlement to wellbeing for learners and staff. Available at: <https://www.colleges.wales/en/blog/post/entitlement-to-wellbeing-for-learners-and-staff> (Accessed February 2021).

golfer and in basketball – and went from *“being very active to doing next to nothing - sedentary. Had a massive knock on my participation”*. Another noted *“The way you feel physically can lead to struggles – if you don’t exercise regularly then you can put on weight and feel much worse.”*

The study *Sports in time of COVID-19: Impact of the lockdown on team activity* reported the effects of detraining – the partial or complete reversal of previously developed training adaptations. An accepted convention was that each week of inactivity brings up to 10% overall loss in fitness and notes that other expected adverse effects of lockdown included an increase in body mass, body fat percentage, loss of mental sharpness and toughness, insomnia and depression. The study considered evidence in relation to young athletes and found that upper and lower explosive strength can be retained in teenagers during 16 weeks of reduced training if sports-specific loads (with jumps, frequents accelerations, decelerations, and change of direction) are maintained. However, it found *“The problem is that it was not the case for the vast majority of athletes during the lockdown.”*<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note that while there was general discussion about loss of fitness, this wasn’t the same for every learner. One learner had spent more time running and felt *“fitter”* going back to football. Another had done weight training and found it beneficial. Adaptations to sports had also had some positive effects – a netballer mentioned their fitness has increased being outside being on a bigger pitch – and playing outside is going to be more of an option going forward. However, achieving fitness is also reliant on access to equipment and facilities and not all learners will have that: *“body weight exercises can’t replace weights”, “It was really hard to find motivation when doing sport over zoom and most sessions within gymnastics were very basic as most athletes didn’t have room to participate”, “Felt hard going back to training (lacked fitness) but positive impact on me spending more time on academic work. A challenge to get back into it.”*

In relation to colleges responding to reduced fitness levels and confidence issues, learners suggested making activities fun, ensuring there was plentiful information and clear communication and going back to practical activity slowly, so that learners can build back to normal levels of fitness. *“Have some basic sessions first to see where people’s skills are – but in a positive way, make it a fun time.”*

### 6.3 Linking the college experience to wellbeing

As raised above, learners generally demonstrated less knowledge and awareness of how active wellbeing might contribute to employability in the longer term, and Diagram 4 also shows, (perhaps encouragingly), that learners perceived there was less negative impact resulting from the loss of sporting opportunities on their leadership skills, employability prospects and ambition.

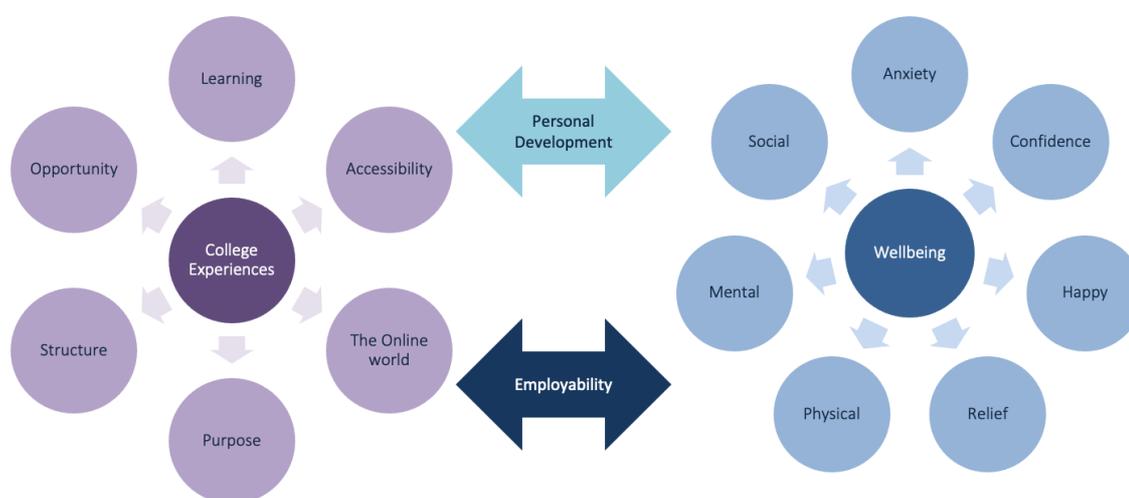
We found from the learners’ feedback that there were many elements of the college experience – past and present – that contributed to an enabling environment where learner wellbeing could thrive. The ‘typical’ college experience provided academic and practical learning opportunities, routine and structure and gave that framework to help learners have a sense of purpose in their lives. For these

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<sup>27</sup> Javier Peña, Albert Altarriba-Bartés, Jordi Vicens-Bordas, Beatriz Gil-Puga, Gerard Piniés-Penadés, Clàudia Alba-Jiménez, Jordi Merino-Tantiñà, Arnau Baena-Riera, Eduard Loscos-Fàbregas, Martí Casals, *Sports in time of COVID-19: Impact of the lockdown on team activity*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apunsm.2020.100340> (Accessed June 2021).

learners, their concept of themselves as sports learners and their sporting aspirations and goals were interlinked. Without the structure, they could identify how their personal development had been affected and how the changes had substantial effect – both good and bad – on their social, emotional and physical wellbeing. What was less explicit was the knowledge and awareness to be able to articulate some of the transferable skills that sport and active wellbeing participation created, allowing them to enhance their employability prospects in the future. These are aspects that colleges have an opportunity to build on in the future.

Diagram 5: Connections between the college experience and learner wellbeing



## 6.4 Personal development, aspirations and employability pathways

*“During lockdown we’ve not had any experiences to put down on our CV.”*

Learners have not had the usual coaching and volunteering opportunities, particularly in relation to opportunities to gain work experience in educational settings. Many learners had expected to be gaining work experience in primary schools during a typical year’s course. Learners were happy to resume volunteering roles - but found there was confusion over what was allowed and what was not, especially when coaching or volunteering with young children. Provision of clear information and signposting to the latest guidance could help build confidence and avoid risks. As schools have increased levels of risk in allowing external visitors to schools (including parents) then such work-based learning opportunities look likely to be difficult for some time. Even peer to peer coaching “practice” has not been allowed during much of the academic year.

Although community coaching and volunteering opportunities are available as alternatives to educational settings, we found that there was limited awareness of how to get involved. Some learners referenced that they didn’t know how to start on a coaching pathway or where to find the opportunities that were out there. In the recent Duke of Edinburgh Award’s (DofE) report *A Youth*

*Manifesto for the Covid Recovery*<sup>28</sup>, one of the asks from young people was around ‘Employment and training’ with the suggested policy “Encouraging employers to work with schools and colleges to create more work experience and mentoring opportunities”. This of course presents an opportunity for the many NGBs and community clubs that will be looking for additional volunteers and coaches to help with the adapted delivery taking place. There is certainly an expectation within the sports sector that there could be major implications from a loss of coaches to the community coaching structure<sup>29</sup>. As the numbers of coaches and volunteers available to support the provision of sport and wellbeing opportunities is falling, FE learners could play a key role in addressing this issue.

In relation to volunteering – learners have been keen to highlight that they had felt well supported by college staff and recognised that colleges were doing what they could in the circumstances. “Our personal tutors – every week they have kept really good communication going and happy to message if any problems.” “Interaction online with teachers has been really good to getting us involved – important that we can’t just ‘get away’ with it (not participating)”, “as our lecturers are so supportive, none of us are afraid to speak up”. Staff too have been affected - one describing it as one of the most challenging experiences physically and emotionally that they had experienced in teaching. For any courses that involve practical elements and roles that involve face to face teamwork, there are aspects that cannot be replicated through remote provision and individual learning.

Despite the challenges, there was self-reported evidence of individuals developing and gaining from their experiences: Learners suggested how the impact of Covid had allowed them to develop personally, “*learnt to improvise*” and although the word ‘resilience’ was not widely used, it demonstrates resilient attributes developing that could be drawn on to support future employability prospects. As one learner mentioned: “*I feel like I’ve grown as a person, mentally especially. It’s a busy world and when you have time to focus on yourself, it can go two ways - you can fall into a hole or you can work on yourself and grow.*” Another said “*I learnt a lot about myself through lockdown, I’m quite thankful for that. Before, I would never have been in the house, always out doing something. I learned to be independent with (college) work and to look after myself more*”. Others found that the extent of time spent learning online had made them rethink their intended career in a sport related desk-based role and how they had “*realised what you don’t want to do*”.

The research has identified evidence of learners developing a range of skills such as independent working, developing as a team in challenging circumstances, increasing levels of digital capacity, adopting creative approaches to being physically active, and aspects of self-reflection. The enhancement of these skills and their longer term benefits is perhaps an area for colleges to highlight as the active wellbeing offer resumes and develops over the coming year.

We asked learners how they were feeling as we come out of lockdown – which at the time of the fieldwork was during May 2021. Diagram 6 shows their perceptions.

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<sup>28</sup> DofE (June 2021). A Youth Manifesto for the Covid Recovery. Available at: [https://www.dofe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/DofE\\_Manifesto.pdf](https://www.dofe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/DofE_Manifesto.pdf) (Accessed June 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Sport and Recreation Alliance (May 2021). ‘Community coaching structure expected to be severely hit by COVID’. Available at: <https://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/news/covid-19/community-coaching-structure-expected-to-be-s> (Accessed June 2021).



## 7.1 Strategy implementation and learning

ColegauCymru launched the five-year Active Wellbeing Strategy in January 2020. Whilst the strategy's vision, purpose and mission all remain highly relevant in a rapidly changing world, the last 15 months have reset the context in which the strategy will be delivered. Arguably, there is an even greater need in 2021 for the sector to implement active wellbeing opportunities to support learners. There is now an opportunity for ColegauCymru to review the learning that has taken place since the strategy's launch to better understand what strategic and operational commitments are required in the short, mid and longer term strategy timeframe. The goals within the strategy will need to sufficiently respond to the challenges faced by FE and other sectors in Wales and in this case, challenges faced specifically by sports learners.

Colleges have developed a strong track record of delivering active wellbeing activities over time and ColegauCymru can support college staff by filling any knowledge gaps and improve overall performance through the sharing of good practice across the college network. The value of sport and active wellbeing provision in further and higher education is substantial and evidence based. There is an increasing body of research showing the benefits of physical activity in improving cognition and students' learning abilities and studies have shown positive association between student participation in sport and better outcomes in both academic attainment and employability<sup>30</sup>. The good practice should also highlight the extended benefits of sport and wellbeing participation to wider college and learner outcomes, especially as the sport and active wellbeing offer has the power to enhance and enrich learners' overall experiences of college life.

## 7.2 Resourcing and delivery models

While the flexibility of college delivery models (including the necessity of introducing blended learning approaches) has been a positive aspect of the support, consideration should also be given to the advantages and disadvantages of different management and delivery models. Further thought should be given to the factors that could enhance and expand the existing offer as part of this exercise. Sports learners are likely to have structured access to facilities, organised activity and opportunities to play as a priority over non-sports learners. However, additional opportunities and access to informal activity will benefit sports learners and non-sports learners alike. Due to various restrictions and the difficulties of working across multiple campuses in some examples, not all learners will have access to the same opportunities or quality of experience. Wherever possible, colleges could consider how their offer provides a frictionless experience for learners, as easy to access as possible, and normalised, visible and valued within college life.

There is high demand for sport and wellbeing opportunities, with an emphasis on practical sessions in the short term. After spending so much time in front of the computer and then in the classroom, students were eager to catch up with the practical elements. However, this creates a logistical challenge and FEIs may be able to maximise the time and facilities available to them by creating a

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<sup>30</sup> Brunton, J., & Mayne, V. (2020). The value of university sport and physical activity: British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS) position statement and evidence. Available at: <https://shura.shu.ac.uk/27616/9/Brunton-ValueUniversitySport%28VoR%29.pdf> (Accessed June 2021).

flexible overall offer. This would be particularly useful in rural areas, and some learners identified personal benefits from a remote approach that they did not want to lose entirely. While face-to-face learning was the preferred model, colleges should look identify the modules that could be delivered online and group them together so learners cut down their time commitment.

As well as maximising access to practical participation, the return of competitive sport is key for this cohort of learners and links directly to their personal development and sense of purpose. *“It doesn’t really matter what you’re doing if you’re not playing games.”* Competition provides structure and something for learners to aim for, and the structure learners had experienced in college pre-Covid-19 was seen as a positive.

### 7.3 Inclusive, person-centred approaches

One of the intended Active Wellbeing Strategy outcomes is entitlement and to ensure that everyone in the FE Sector has access to activities which improve their personal wellbeing. All learners are entitled to experience sport and wellbeing opportunities, and the impact of sport and physical activity on the wellbeing of learners is undeniable. There needs to be a continued focus on tackling inequalities, and Covid-19 has heightened the inequalities that exist in society, in sport and in college life. Sharing this knowledge and evidence with FEIs is important, as FEIs will need to prioritise and accelerate interventions to address this imbalance and use the opportunity of starting afresh to ensure that the sport and physical activity offer is fully diverse and inclusive. As well as the quantitative evidence of inequality that is available nationally and locally, the perceptions of learners and their experiences should also inform any actions taken.

Listening to learners and adopting person-centred approaches (learners and staff) will help colleges provide a genuine, appropriate, and inclusive sport and wellbeing offer. FEIs can use both informal and formal mechanisms (such as this series of focus groups) to ensure there are opportunities for learner voices to be heard – and opportunities to gather qualitative feedback can be incorporated as a regular part of the offer. This will support outcome measurement and continuous improvement to ultimately enhance the learner experience.

We have seen from this research and other evidence of the enabling factors for participation that future support should be tailored as much as possible. Some learners are anxious and nervous about returning after so long out, tutors and coaches need to ensure that they are approachable and willing to provide constructive and one-to-one advice. *“Coaches need to recognise and understand everyone’s personal situation and fit it to the individual.”* Indeed, in general, learners raised the issue of increasing mental health concerns in daily life, exacerbated by the pandemic, and there was a demand for mental wellbeing support, advice and guidance from colleges. We understand that this area of work is being supported through ColegauCymru, and there may be an opportunity to further develop preventative approaches to enhance mental health through the use of sport and active wellbeing offers as part of this work.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> ColegauCymru. Mental Health. Available at: <https://www.colleges.wales/en/page/mental-health> (Accessed 10 June 2021).

A key enabler for sports participation and retention is to ensure sessions are fun and enjoyable - and more so than ever as learners spoke about returning to sport and their concerns about losing their confidence, fitness and skills. There should be a focus on fun and enjoyment and an understanding of why people take part in the sport in the first place. As part of this, it is vital to concentrate on building and rebuilding social relationships through more group-based work. In turn, this can lead to personal development and social and communication skills that will be required in future work based situations.

Considering that some students expressed a demand for Welsh language provision and that the FE sector has a significant role to play in delivering the Wellbeing of Future Generations goal of 'a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language,' every effort should be made to ensure that the Welsh language is seen and heard during active wellbeing activities.

## 7.4 Communication

The process of listening to learners has highlighted the importance of continuing to provide clear information communicated in a way that reaches different audiences and resonates with learners. 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 Toolkit<sup>32</sup> - as well as embracing the skills of learners and young leaders to make use of technology and share experiences. Simple aspects such as providing learners with a timetable of the different sports and training sessions – specifying what can happen and some dates was considered a means of giving people more motivation. Tutors and coaches can help reassure learners and manage expectations by laying out what to expect over the coming months. In the main, learners we heard from appreciated the honesty from staff during an uncertain time. They want to be reassured that they will come out of this and have positive futures. Teams and WhatsApp were given as examples of effective channels during the past few months. Going forward, learners may prefer other options, so continuing to listen to learner voice is important.

Staff can also make the link between sports activities and personal development and future employment opportunities. Some mentioned that volunteering opportunities had been lost during Covid and the summer provides a window to catch-up. There is an opportunity to raise awareness of the type of jobs available in the sector and in Wales and this has the dual benefit of supporting the sports sector to address the likely workforce challenges and additional demand for community sports opportunities following the pandemic. Connections need to be made with providers and National Governing Bodies (NGBs) so that learners have the knowledge, awareness and information available to access these opportunities and gain essential experience for their future.

## 8. Recommendations

The study offers 16 recommendations to consider moving forward.

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<sup>32</sup> ColegauCymru (November 2020). Active Wellbeing Project Communications Toolkit. Available at: <https://www.colleges.wales/search/communications%20toolkit> (Accessed 3 July 2021).

### *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. Considering that competitive sports provided a structure and that the area of sport and education are the remit of two separate Welsh Government departments, ColegauCymru and Sport Wales should work with Welsh Government to ensure that the wellbeing of students is a primary consideration in planning the return to sport in future. Sports provision will enhance and enrich the learner experience and plays a key role in achieving academic outcomes.

### *Resourcing and delivery*

3. 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 facilitating learning and the sharing of good practice and insight, for example, connecting learners to regional sports networks to raise awareness of work opportunities within the sector, or promoting to staff the incidental learning and wellbeing benefits from sports participation.
4. The findings and recommendations of this study should act as the basis for redesigning activities that address the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. Colleges should prepare short-term plans that focus on practical delivery if returning from a long period of online teaching in future.
5. While the majority of learners expressed their preference for face-to-face learning, there are recognised positive aspects of a flexible blended learning offer. In planning, colleges should consider the advantages and disadvantages of grouping modules that can be delivered online and allowing learners the opportunity to study from home on certain days of the week.
6. 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 be a reality. This must also come with greater accountability. 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.

### *Inclusive, person-centred approaches*

7. Colleges should look to adopt a more tailored, person-centric approach where possible to alleviate the natural anxiety on returning to sport that learners have told us about. Tutors and coaches should ensure that they are approachable and willing to provide constructive, one-to-one advice and guidance.

8. ColegauCymru should explore whether there is sufficient workforce capacity and capability with mental health awareness knowledge to provide a tailored, person centred approach. The workforce is likely to need more support going into next academic year and sport and active wellbeing can be used as a preventative approach.
9. There should be a focus on fun and enjoyment and understanding what made learners take part in sport in the first place when planning a programme of activities.
10. Tutors and coaches should place an emphasis on rebuilding social relationships through group-based activities in the short term.
11. There should be a focus on the quality of the learner experience when planning future provision and measuring the outcomes of the provision. The experience of learners representing different protected characteristics should also be built into measurement processes.

#### *Communication*

12. With the overwhelming evidence that learners across FE institutions have missed out on volunteering and employment opportunities as a means of strengthening their knowledge, learning and experiences, colleges should take every opportunity to link activities to personal development outcomes. ColegauCymru should communicate this message to colleges and encourage them to proactively support sports learners to gain positive practical experiences. This should be a priority in the immediate months ahead.
13. Considering the lack of awareness from learners of the opportunities that exist to work in sport and wellbeing in Wales and beyond, the FE and sport sector should look to take proactive action to strengthen the link between learners and NGBs and other providers in the sector and consider how to connect virtually as well as through the face to face elements of college programmes for sport.
14. Some students expressed a demand for Welsh language provision. 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,' and every effort should be made to ensure that the Welsh language is seen and heard during active wellbeing activities.
15. Colleges could adopt new ways of evaluating activities and providing feedback to learners through video and online content.
16. ColegauCymru should encourage the sharing of research findings with learners, particularly those who contributed directly to this research study, and with FE young ambassadors (FEYA) who can cascade key messages to peers.

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