



**ADULT LEARNING AND
LIFELONG LEARNING IN WALES**

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INTRODUCTION

As Wales seeks to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, increased levels of unemployment brought on by the economic downturn caused by the crisis means that there will be a considerable number of adults who will need to retrain or upskill. This will be in addition to current efforts by Welsh Government to increase the number of adults who are economically active to help communities across Wales to thrive once more. Undoubtedly, the Wales we build post-Covid-19 will be economically different to that before the crisis but we have opportunities to create positive social, economic and cultural change. Adult Learning, including Adult and Community Learning (ACL), will be an essential part of this.

There is considerable research in place which demonstrates the value of adult learning in Wales, both in the community and within a college setting, and the positive difference this makes to people's lives (ARAD, 2016¹; Estyn, 2016²). Lifelong learning supports the development of skills, improves health and wellbeing and is a catalyst for social engagement and

integration. ACL is essential for those individuals who are hardest to reach, and furthest away from education and employment.

Adult learning in Wales was given a renewed focus when a formal agreement was made in December 2018 between the First Minister and the Minister for Education. The agreement highlights the need to 'explore how we can deliver a new Welsh right to lifelong learning, investing in the skills which people need throughout their lives, for individual, societal and economic benefit'³. In July 2019, the Minister for Education made further progress on her commitment to lifelong learning with the announcement of a two-stage restructuring of ACL in Wales⁴.

The figures below show the detrimental effects that funding cuts between 2013 and 2018 had on the number of learners engaged in adult and community learning.

THE DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS FUNDING CUTS HAVE HAD ON ADULT AND COMMUNITY LEARNING⁵

Table 1

	2013/14	2017/18
Further education learners part-time 20+	88,655	46,585
ACL learners aged 20+	26,695	11,945

Source: StatsWales

¹ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/a-review-of-adult-community-learning-in-wales.pdf>

² <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/www.estyn.gov.wales/files/documents/Adult%20Community%20Learning%20in%20Wales.pdf>

³ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-12/FM%20Agreement%20with%20Kirsty%20Williams%20%28E%29.pdf>

⁴ <https://gov.wales/written-statement-welsh-government-response-consultation-restructuring-community-based-adult>

⁵ <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/7493/College-staff-to-stage-protests-over-50-funding-cuts-that-will-decimate-adult-education-in-Wales>



THE NUMBER OF LEARNERS AGED 25 AND OVER IN FURTHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (FEIS), ACL AND WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL) PROVISION IN WALES BY YEAR⁶

Table 2

2015/2016	85,740
2016/2017	90,295
2017/2018	86,155
2018/2019	91,505

Source: StatsWales

The table above shows the number of learners aged 25 and over in FEIs, ACL and WBL provision in Wales by year, showing fluctuation but a general upward trend.

Workers in sectors that have been particularly impacted by Covid-19, such as tourism and hospitality, are more likely to have been made redundant during the pandemic, and are therefore likely to be looking for retraining and reskilling opportunities. Effective adult learning provision will be key

to delivery. The sector has a significant role to play to ensure the creation and development of robust links with all those who can benefit from the adult learning offer. The Covid-19 pandemic has re-ignited concerns about the future of ACL funding and provision. Therefore, it is important to highlight the significance of the ACL sector in delivering adult skills to support economic recovery in the post-virus period.

⁶ <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Post-16-Education-and-Training/Further-Education-and-Work-Based-Learning/Outcomes/Adult-Learning/successadultlearningactivities-by-age-year>

ADULT COMMUNITY LEARNING (ACL)

ACL supports a wide range of formal and informal learning options. Often learners look to achieve Entry Level to Level 2 skills, usually essential skills such as numeracy, literacy and digital, and employability skills. Learners who engage in this form of education are often more socially and economically disadvantaged- affected by poverty, homelessness, ill health or addiction. ACL also supports learners in the Probation Service and those receiving rehabilitation services. ACL also offers a range of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses which differ from those offered in a college setting, often targeting more vulnerable learners.

There are 15 ACL partnerships across Wales each consisting of ACL providers (some being FEIs), the intention to ensure a collaborative approach in response to ACL needs in each region. There have been issues of equity within the adult learning community, resulting in the review published in 2016⁷ and subsequent restructuring of the Community Learning Grant which will be phased in over five years, from April 2020.

The close relationship with communities enjoyed by ACL also comes about through delivering equality of access to Welsh medium provision, supporting health and wellbeing initiatives, and providing opportunities for disabled people or those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). ACL aims to provide equality for all communities and their residents across Wales.

A continuous challenge for adult learning in Wales, is to offer a broad curriculum that enables learners to access

their learning through their preferred language. With nearly 600,000 Welsh speakers in Wales, it is vital that learners have the choice of language, and are able to seamlessly access their learning, be it in Welsh or English. All providers are working to meet this challenge, through partnership arrangements with Y Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol/The National Welsh College, the Urdd, and Dysgu Cymraeg/Learn Welsh.

ACL is provided by both traditional FEIs and Addysg Oedolion Cymru|Adult Learning Wales. The availability of FE colleges to support adult education depends upon the part time funding allocation for delivery from Welsh Government.

Funded by Welsh Government, Addysg Oedolion Cymru|Adult Learning Wales delivers a national programme of adult learning in communities and workplaces, and has over 22,000 enrolments each year. Their aim is to provide a curriculum offer that would otherwise not be available to the majority of learners who are economically inactive and hardest to reach. Similarly, all FEIs in Wales deliver adult learning provision, either in partnership with the community, or with Addysg Oedolion Cymru|Adult Learning Wales.

The further development of online digital learning is a huge opportunity for ACL to reach even more learners. There is a need to resource the sector appropriately to develop material and provide suitable IT (both for students and staff) to enable this to happen. Digital poverty continues to be a huge issue to be addressed.

⁷ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/a-review-of-adult-community-learning-in-wales.pdf>

WELSH GOVERNMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS AND PILOT PROJECTS

Welsh Government's Adult Learning in Wales (2017)⁸ policy statement, sets out the priorities for adult learning, with a key aim 'to support adults to play an active role in the economy and society through enhancing their learning opportunities'. The statement highlights the issues of past funding cuts to adult and part time learning and acknowledges the vulnerability of the sector to further cuts – echoing concerns raised by ARAD and Estyn.

In August 2018, funding vulnerabilities and lack of clarity around policy strategy for the future delivery of ACL in Wales resulted in a consultation on the delivery and structure of community-based adult learning in Wales⁹. The restructuring of community-based adult learning in Wales will help to ensure that more learners will benefit from a co-ordinated approach to the funding and curriculum offer across all regions, communities and workplaces. After considering responses to the consultation, the Minister for Education made a statement in July 2019¹⁰ setting out the approach for the restructuring of community-based adult learning.

Two phases are intended, the first being the introduction of a revised funding model. Phase two sees the wider restructuring of this provision, through the introduction of a national body by 2024 to oversee all adult community learning in Wales. The planned Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) was due to take responsibility for adult learning, although its establishment is on hold as the necessary legislation cannot be passed during the current Senedd term. Once a National Body for adult learning is established, it will be funded, monitored, and quality assured by the CTER in accordance with the proposals for all other FEIs. It is not yet clear how Covid-19 has impacted the timetable for these changes.

In 2019, Welsh Government launched two pilot schemes, both aimed at upskilling adult learners, and to offer new routes into re-skilling, training and continuation in vocational education:

- Personal Learning Accounts (PLAs)¹¹
- Flexible Adult Learning programme¹²

In the current climate, these schemes have never been more important. The Personal Learning Accounts are currently available for learners who meet the essential criteria, and also for those who are furloughed due to Covid-19. The original pilot offered access to part-time study in north and south Wales colleges, however this is due to be extended to all colleges across Wales, although details and full year funding are still to be confirmed.

The Flexible Adult Learning programme has been successful in colleges across Wales in engaging adults who want to either upskill or set up their own business. Three colleges were selected to pilot the programme, each located in one of the three Regional Skills Partnership (RSP) areas. The needs of each region, as identified in the RSP plans, were a key reference point for each of the college projects; Bridgend College focussed on the motor vehicle industry, Coleg Sir Gâr tailored its project to tackle the challenges faced by those in rural areas to access entrepreneurship training, and Coleg Cambria linked its project to the priority sectors of advanced manufacturing and digital skills in North East Wales. While current delivery has been on a face-to-face basis, there is flexibility for the scheme to be delivered digitally. Welsh Government should explore with colleges how to offer the programme on a digital platform in the next academic year.

Both programmes are another example of the further education sector supporting people to develop new skills to meet technological changes and the challenges posed by Brexit.

⁸ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-08/adult-learning-in-wales.pdf> p3

⁹ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2018-12/delivery-and-funding-of-community-based-adult-learning-summary-of-responses.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://gov.wales/written-statement-welsh-government-response-consultation-restructuring-community-based-adult>

¹¹ <https://workingwales.gov.wales/personal-learning-account>

¹² <http://collegeswales.ac.uk/NewsContent.php?N=146>

FUTURE OF ADULT AND LIFELONG LEARNING

In Wales, a commitment to improve personal or professional development through lifelong learning was formalised in December 2018. However, there has yet to be much clarity on what the right to lifelong learning will be and how it can be tangible to learners. Post-16 education organisations are working together to discuss how it should be defined. Regardless of its definition, the 'right' to lifelong learning needs to be meaningful and something that can be understood by all those involved in the sector as well as learners past, present and future.

The post Covid-19 economy in Wales will require heavy investment in adult and basic skills. Provision for adults will need to be short and sharp to enable them to return to the workforce as quickly as possible. The education offer is likely to change in the future as a result of the pandemic and the skills which may be required by a changing economy. Further investment in digital exclusion is key- resources such as laptops need to be readily available in preparation for changes in the way education is delivered in future.

Conclusion

Adult learning and reskilling, including the necessary funding, must be a priority as Wales seeks to address the challenges of economically recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic. The Further Education sector will be key to any effective delivery as will working in partnership with the range of voluntary

and statutory services be. Welsh Government should look to build on the success of pilots such as the Personal Learning Accounts and Flexible Adult Learning and ensure that access to online and blended learning is available to all. For these programmes to form an integral part of the offer to adult learners, government should set out clearly the plans to fund provision and ensure that the initiative has time to bed in and provide assurances for learners to access PLAs in the future. Neither should ACL be forgotten. Welsh Government must provide an update on their commitment to develop a right to Lifelong Learning as well as the restructuring of ACL in Wales. The economic, social and civic advantages of developing a truly lifelong learning culture in Wales are profound, providing the cutting-edge needed for our communities to be resilient, for our economy to adapt to changing circumstances and for our democracy to thrive.



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