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PUBLICATION

Analysis of the effects of funding cuts to part-time learners in further education in Wales: 2014 to 2017 (summary)

This research paper reports on the effects of reductions in funding to the further education (FE) on learners and the provision of FE.

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Introduction

Between 2011/12 and 2016/17 the Welsh Government cut revenue grant funding to the FE sector by £22 million, a reduction of 7% in monetary terms and 13% in real terms. Although funding for full time provision has risen by 3% in real terms, funding for part-time provision has seen a reduction of 71% over the same period. During this time, the Welsh Government also made significant reforms to the funding framework for post-16 education in 2014/15. As a result, funding for part-time FE was reduced by 37.5% in 2014/15 and the remaining funding was cut again by a further 50% in 2015/16.

Research aims and methodology

This research paper reports on the effects of reductions in funding to the FE on learners and the provision of FE.

The aim of the research was to understand how cuts to FE grant funding, and subsequent decisions made by colleges to implement these cuts, have impacted on FE learners and equality of access to FE among diverse groups of learners.

A range of methods were used. A literature review was undertaken to understand the impacts of cuts to FE. A quantitative analysis of secondary data from the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) was done to identify the trends in learner numbers by protected characteristics and the number of individuals in Further Education Institutions (FEIs) by qualification and sector. Secondary data from Department for Education and Skills (DfES) also showed the changes in full-time equivalent (FTE) staff numbers over time. Supplementary interviews and focus groups were also conducted with staff and

students across Wales.

Main findings

The value of FE

The literature review indicated that women earn smaller premiums than men. This is thought to be in part due to women studying less lucrative subjects. Men also perceived more positive job outcomes in relation to pay, responsibility and job security compared to women.

Protected Characteristics wider outcomes and barriers to FE

Qualitative literature suggests that FE is perceived as a way to break the poverty cycle however this is not always the case. The literature also indicated that part-time FE was viewed as more accessible than full-time provision for those with financial constraints. This suggests that part-time provision may contribute to closing the educational inequality gaps.

There is limited literature, research and statistics exploring how sexual identity interacts with FE take up, as identified in the literature review. Therefore, little is known about the prevalence of members of the LGBT+ community who undertake FE in Wales or the perceived benefits or disadvantages that FE offer this group.

Existing studies suggest that individuals from ethnic minority communities or minority religions were more likely to feel isolated in the academic setting.

Teaching staff who were aware of cultural issues, that can arise in the academic setting and the presence of role models for students from ethnic minority communities helped to facilitate feelings of inclusion.

Data in England on mature students indicated that over a fifth of FE students are aged over 25. Further, the prevalence of additional protected characteristics varies with age. An additional English report showed that a greater proportion of adults in FE colleges were from an ethnic minority community or were female colleges compared to the proportion of 16 to 18 year olds with these characteristics.

Analysis of Annual Population Survey by Office for National Statistics shows that disabled people who felt “limited a lot” by their disability were more likely to have no qualifications compared to non-disabled people. However, a combination of further research and statistics suggests that FE may contribute to reducing the education gap for disabled people, although benefits are theoretical which limits the conclusions that can be made.

Processes involved in implementing the cuts

Interviews with FEIs indicated that not all FEIs had the available time and resources to use evidence to inform decisions of how the funding cuts should be implemented.

Staff from the FE colleges interviewed also highlighted the importance of a co-productive approach when implementing the cuts, working with other colleges in the region as well as unions.

Some colleges had tried to become less dependent on funding from the Welsh Government by trying to diversify their funding sources, this included exploring available funding through the European Union (EU).

Approaches to implementing cuts based on learner impacts

There was a commonality among the way that FEIs appeared to approach the cuts from a student-led perspective through, for instance, protecting services that were directly student facing or considering the appropriateness of alternative provision (for example, online learning) if their own provision was removed.

All interview participants highlighted that part-time learners were more greatly affected than full-time learners due to a focus on continuing to deliver specific courses and prioritisation of the full-time curriculum.

Approaches to implementing cuts based on staff impacts

Several interviewees discussed how they implemented the cuts using approaches that aimed to cause the least amount of impact to staff numbers. For example, compensation schemes to encourage reductions in staff contracts and substituting additional non-teaching responsibilities for teachers with more teaching time to protect classes.

Perceived effects of the cuts on FE learners across learner characteristics

The number of all part-time learners decreased over time, with the largest reduction in numbers occurring in 2014/15 and 2015/16 (in line with the years that the cuts were made) whilst full-time learners showed very small increases over the same time period. Qualitative evidence suggested that colleges with considerable part-time provision perceived greater impacts from the part-time

funding cuts.

Middle-aged learners (those aged between 25 and 59) had the greatest number of part-time learners compared to full-time. Part-time students of all ages decreased between 2013/14 and 2015/16, indicating that learners of all ages were affected by the cuts to part-time provision. However, as middle-aged and older learners appear to rely on part-time provision more than younger learners, this could suggest that they are more greatly affected by these cuts.

Asian, Mixed ethnicity and White students appeared to be the most greatly affected by cuts to part-time provision in 2014/15 and 2015/16, with greater reductions in part-time learners in these groups.

The number of both female and male part-time learners decreased in 2014/15 and 2015/16. There are a greater number of part-time female than male learners in FE which suggests females may be more adversely affected by cuts to part-time funding.

The number of part-time learners with a self-reported learning disability or difficulty (LDD) decreased between 2013/14 and 2016/17, the greatest decrease occurred between 2014/15 and 2015/16. Learners without a self-reported LDD also decreased between 2013/14 and 2015/16, with a small increase in 2016/17. The number of part-time learners in both groups fell by close to a third between 2013/14 and 2016/17. Findings suggests that part-time learners with a self-reported LDD were no more negatively affected by the cuts than part-time learners without a self-reported LDD.

Qualitative findings indicated the disproportionate effect the cuts to part-time provision had on those experiencing mental health and wellbeing issues. FEIs noted the reduction in the quality of student support services, which appeared to be an issue whether FEIs tried to protect these services from cuts or not.

Interview participants recognised that cuts had the potential to affect learners

from lower income households as they are less likely to afford course fees. FE staff suggested that means testing student support could help services that were still available to have the most impact.

Quantitative analyses found that the number of learners in full-time FE remained relatively stable within all local authorities compared to the number of part-time learners between 2013/14 and 2016/17. A particular region in Wales (for example, north, south east etc) did not appear to be more negatively affected by cuts to part-time FE than others.

Changes in activity in FE Institutions at the time the cuts were made

The number of FTE staff decreased steadily between 2013/14 and 2015/16 which indicates that funding cuts may have contributed to a reduction in staff numbers. Unfortunately, there is no available data on full-time staff numbers to compare this against.

Interviews with staff in FE colleges also showed that the cuts led to reductions in staff budgets with some colleges offering redundancy schemes, voluntary where possible. Staff highlighted how this sometimes led to a loss of experienced staff members and increased pressure on remaining staff to absorb the roles of redundant employees.

FEIs interviewed reporting prioritising the protection of particular subjects like those associated with basic skills and with a direct link to employment opportunities. Part-time courses were seen as offering 'softer' skills and so did not have the same level of protection when the cuts took place.

Recommendations

Welsh Government should engage with UK Governments that collect Official Statistics on Further Education to seek opportunities to produce more granular breakdowns for minority groups. This would allow for trend monitoring that is often masked by grouping different identities together (for example, ethnic minority communities, LGBT+, disabled).

Some key gaps in data availability were identified as useful to address to obtain a fuller picture of the impacts of funding reductions on specific protected groups. They are as follows:

- **LGBT+:** Welsh Government should collect LGBT+ monitoring information alongside other diversity characteristics in FE monitoring to allow trends, and impacts to be examined over time for this group. This should include the impact of cuts to peripheral services for LGBT+ groups, such as onsite mental health services.
- **Socio-economic class:** Policy, KAS researchers and statisticians should explore the possibilities for measuring of socio-economic class, including suitably robust proxy measures. This will allow for monitoring the class inequality gap more accurately for assessments of future increases/ decreases in FE funding. For example, receipt of free school meals or profession of the highest earner when the learner was at a certain age.
- **Ethnic minority communities:** Welsh Government should, in cooperation with Office for National Statistics and other partners, work to create appropriate data infrastructure and data sharing agreements to allow robust monitoring of the impact of cuts on learners from ethnic minority communities. Welsh Government should explore the experiences of disabled part-time learners in Wales, examining the interaction between their health and education, as well as barriers to accessing and completing FE.

Gender: Welsh Government should undertake an audit of subjects studied in FE mapped against financial outcomes, controlling for subject variation, could reveal if earning differences in FE are related to subject choices. This could potentially expand the evidence base around the gendered nature of subject choices and the resulting impact on earning potential.

Disability: In order to better understand the particular ways disabled learners may be impacted by funding cuts, Welsh Government should explore the experiences of disabled part-time learners in Wales examining the interaction between their health and education, as well as the barriers experienced in accessing and completing FE.

LGBT+: Welsh Government should commission in-depth qualitative research to investigate whether there are any issues in terms of access and participation for the LGBT+ population who attend FE and the effect FE cuts might have had on these groups.

FEIs should ensure the presence of ethnic minority communities' role models and cover cultural and integration issues in staff training in their institution to facilitate feelings of inclusion for ethnic minority communities/religious people in FE.

Welsh Government should commission in-depth research to investigate the breakdown in enrolment in part-time versus full-time courses for those from ethnic minority communities to understand whether the cuts to part-time courses have disproportionately affected particular ethnic minority groups and the potential reasoning behind this.

Welsh Government should synthesise existing available data or commission a survey on mature learners in Wales with breakdowns by formal study, including mode of study (part-time and full-time).

Signposting to alternative pathways for funding should be explored for

supporting FEI given the cuts and removal of ESF in Wales to ensure inequalities are not maintained or widened for the minority groups that would not otherwise access education with changes to the flexibility of studying.

The effect of multiple protected characteristics and socio-economic status and how they intersect to influence an individual learners' experience should be further explored with qualitative data.

Contact details

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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