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Evaluation of Personal Learning Accounts

Final Report

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

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Table of contents

List of tables.....	2
List of figures.....	3
Glossary.....	5
1. Introduction/Background	6
2. Context.....	13
3. PLA Design and Implementation	25
4. Findings – Engagement and Service Delivery.....	50
5. Findings – The Learner/Employer Experience	80
6. Outcomes and Impacts of the Programme.....	87
7. Summary of Findings and Recommendations.....	104
Reference Section	118
Annexe 1: Programme Theory of Change	120
Annexe 2: Discussion Guides	124
Annexe 3: Privacy Notices	157

List of tables

Table 3.1: PLA funding allocations by FE college	33
Table 4.1: Course enrolments by college.....	54
Table 4.2: Profile of PLA learners by gender	56
Table 4.3: Profile of ELA learners by gender	57
Table 5.1: Mode of learning by gender	80
Table 5.2: When learners typically access the course by gender	82
Table 6.1: Learner situation	88
Table 6.2: Learner status by ethnic origin	92
Table 6.3: Net salary benefit per learner cost	100

List of figures

Figure 4.1: Enrolments per calendar year by gender	52
Figure 4.2: Proportion of PLA and ELA enrolments by total enrolment each year	52
Figure 4.3: Course enrolments over time	53
Figure 4.4: Number of learner-led PLA learners	55
Figure 4.5: Highest qualification amongst PLA learners and the economically active population in Wales	58
Figure 4.6: Industrial sector of PLA learners at point of enrolment by gender	60
Figure 4.7: Employment status at point of enrolment in PLA by gender	61
Figure 4.8: Occupational breakdown of PLA and ELA learners compared to all employees in Wales	63
Figure 4.9: Occupational breakdown of PLA learners by gender	64
Figure 4.10: Annual salary bands amongst learners at the point of enrolment by gender ...	65
Figure 4.11: Routes into the PLA programme.....	67
Figure 4.12: How did you first hear about the programme?	68
Figure 4.13: What were you hoping to get out of the training? (by gender)	69
Figure 4.14: Course enrolments by sector subject area (PLA and ELA).....	76
Figure 4.15: Female representation on courses by sector subject area – PLA and all post-16 learning provision in Wales	77
Figure 4.16: Perceived equivalent qualification of PLA courses	78
Figure 4.17: What would learners have done in the absence of PLA?.....	79
Figure 5.1: When learners typically access the course	82
Figure 5.2: How would you have liked the course to be delivered? (by gender)	84
Figure 5.3: How many hours of learning and teaching did you receive in total? (n=311).....	85
Figure 6.1: Learner status by FE college	89
Figure 6.2: Why did you leave the course early? (by gender).....	90
Figure 6.3: To what extent has the training that you received through PLA led to ...? (completers only; n=382).....	93
Figure 6.4: Proportion of survey respondents who had changed careers since enrolling in PLA learning by sector (base=18)	96
Figure 6.5: As a result of the course, have any of the following changes occurred? (by gender).....	98

Figure 6.6: To what extent did the participation of your employees in the training lead to the following?	102
Figure A1: An example of a linear theory of change	120
Figure A2: Central logic of the PLA theory of change	121
Figure A3: Theory of change – PLA learner-led strand.....	122
Figure A4: Theory of change – ELA strand.....	123

Glossary

Abbreviation	Definition
CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
EAL	Excellence Achievement & Learning Ltd.
ELA	Employer Learning Accounts
FE	Further Education
FSP	Flexible Skills Programme
GLLM	Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
ILA	Individual Learning Accounts
LLWR	Lifelong Learning Wales Record
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
PAC	Public Accounts Committee
PLA	Personal Learning Accounts
SDF	Skills Development Fund
UKCES	UK Commission for Employment and Skills

1. Introduction/Background

1.1 In March 2021 the Welsh Government commissioned Wavehill to undertake an evaluation of the Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) programme. A commitment in the Welsh Government's [Employability Plan](#), PLA launched with the aim of providing funding for vocational retraining of employed people (earning less than £26,000 per year) in industrial sectors in which there is a demonstrable skill shortage. Moreover, the programme launched with the aim of supporting employed people to gain higher-level skills and qualifications, thereby providing opportunities for people to switch careers.

1.2 The PLA programme commenced in September 2019 as a pilot (initially for two years) led by Coleg Gwent in South East Wales and Grwp Llandrillo Menai (GLLM) in North Wales. However, as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Welsh Government made the decision to accelerate the rollout of the PLA programme across Wales prior to the completion of the pilot phase. Ultimately, the pilot ran for six months until March 2020, and then underwent a period of transition in response to the pandemic between March and August 2020 before the full programme commenced in October 2020. During that transitional period, the programme became available to all furloughed workers throughout Wales, regardless of salary, and, as part of the expansion, the programme became eligible for employers. The employer strand of the programme is subsequently referred to as the Employer Learning Accounts (ELA) strand of support.

The evaluation

1.3 The evaluation has been commissioned with the aim of providing the Welsh Government with robust information on the pilot and programme implementation that provides an understanding of the initial effect of PLA, and to identify lessons as to how the scheme could be improved. More specifically, the aims of the evaluation are to:

- Undertake a process and outcome evaluation of the Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) pilot as it ran from 16th September 2019 to 31st July 2020.

- Investigate the effects of the ‘transitional period’ (March 2020 to July 2020), and the decisions made therein, on the PLA programme.
- Undertake an evaluation of the PLA programme as it has run from August 2020 onwards to assess its effectiveness, efficiency, value for money, and initial impact.
- Explore the extent to which gender is a factor in the development and delivery of the pilot and programme.
- Provide the Welsh Government with a framework for undertaking a cost–benefit analysis and an impact evaluation.

Methodological approach

1.4 The evaluation has been delivered over two phases:

- A scoping phase that drew on initial consultations and desk research to develop a theory of change, evaluation framework, and full work plan for the next phase of the evaluation; and
- A final phase focused on the process and outcome evaluation, with key findings and areas standing out from each stage of the research, alongside actionable recommendations.

1.5 Across the two phases, the following approaches have been applied:

- Scoping interviews with 30 key representatives from the Welsh Government, delivery partners (FE colleges and Careers Wales), and representatives from the Learning & Work Institute to explore the pilot/programme design and implementation as well as policy links and objectives.
- Reviews of management information (MI)/data held by the Welsh Government, primarily captured through the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR) to assess its completeness against the requirements set out within the programme guidance. The initial review during the scoping phase sought to ensure that data are effectively utilised as part of the evaluation to avoid duplication and maximise added value from the research. Moreover, the review informed the updating of the theory of change (see Annexe 1). Furthermore, the review of MI has identified what is currently feasible in terms of the impact evaluation framework and what

enhancements to the MI would be necessary to increase the robustness of that framework. The MI has been revisited in the final phase of the evaluation as part of the assessment of the progress and impact of PLA.

- Additional management information was also sought from FE colleges that was not captured in the LLWR to provide an insight into its comprehensiveness and the potential role that it might play in the development of an impact framework for the programme. Course costing sheets were also reviewed and analysed to inform an initial assessment of the value for money of the programme.
- Key policy and programme-related documentation has been reviewed for the project. In addition, a wider literature review has been undertaken to review the experience of previous PLA-type programmes and how these have informed the design of this programme, as well as a review of the conception, approach, and good practice associated with gender budgeting.
- Desk-based research has also involved a review of marketing materials and promotional activity on social media at each FE college, reflecting on how they challenge (or support) gender stereotypes in certain sectors.
- A theory of change development workshop was undertaken with key representatives within the Welsh Government to test and refine the logic behind the programme and its logic model and inform the evolving evaluation framework.
- Throughout May and June 2022, a telephone survey of 391 (311 of whom had completed their course and 80 were still on their course) PLA learners gathered feedback on their journeys and specifically their motivations for enrolling in PLA, as well as their experience in accessing and undertaking the learning, and to identify what has happened since completing their learning. PLA participants who had enrolled and commenced their learning between 1st January 2020 and 15th December 2021 were identified as the eligible population for the survey. The eligible population were then stratified by FE college, and quotas were set to ensure that sufficient learners (at least 15) were engaged through the survey from each FE college. The survey has engaged learners from the pilot, transition and rollout phases.

- Alongside the fieldwork with learners, a telephone survey of 112 PLA learners who were recorded in the MI as early leavers was performed to explore and compare their journeys and experience with those who had completed their courses. Early leavers were randomly sampled from all FE colleges.
- A telephone survey of 75 employers who enrolled their employees in the ELA strand of PLA during May and June 2022 sought to capture employer perspectives on PLA. Contact details for employers were provided by FE colleges and randomly sampled.
- Stakeholders with an informed, strategic perspective on the programme were identified by the Welsh Government and shared with Wavehill. Nineteen interviews were undertaken with strategic stakeholders via either telephone or videoconference during September 2022.

Methodological limitations

- 1.6 Obtaining management information for the PLA programme has proven to be problematic and led to delays in the progress of the evaluation. Guidance has been provided to FE colleges on the nature of management information that is necessary for the PLA programme; however, this is captured and held by each college in various formats. Core evidence collected via the LLWR is gathered by FE colleges and uploaded centrally to a Welsh Government portal. The data are typically comprehensive, but there are key gaps in the evidence as well as concerns surrounding the accuracy of some elements.
- 1.7 Other 'non-LLWR' management information is gathered inconsistently, is incomplete, and remains held within FE colleges in varying forms (electronic and hard-copy). Identifying a suitable route for the evaluators to obtain and review this information has proven to be challenging. Ultimately, a hybrid approach was adopted in gathering management information, wherein all data captured through the LLWR were shared with the evaluators via the Welsh Government, whilst non-LLWR data, where available, have been gathered from FE colleges.
- 1.8 There are a number of areas within the MI in which gaps were identified:
- For the PLA element of the programme there is no information in the MI on the highest qualification of 87 per cent of participants prior to enrolment. This would

be a key indicator with which to inform the measurement of progress and performance of the 'treatment group' (those in receipt of support) against a control or comparison group (individuals with a similar set of characteristics who had not received the support), as the qualification level is widely recognised as having an influence on earnings potential.

- There are no data held within the Welsh Government on the equivalent academic level of the courses undertaken through the PLA programme. The academic level (alongside prior qualification) of course provision is likely to have an influence on earnings growth. MI data on the course duration for courses offered through PLA are inaccurate. An analysis of start and end dates (recorded within the MI) for the same courses shows huge variation; therefore, they are unreliable as an indicator of course duration. Course duration and hours of teaching are heavily associated with the intensity of support received by a learner in the PLA programme, which, in turn, will have a strong influence on the costs of support that a learner has received and the likely benefit that they may gain.
- Amongst participants of the ELA strand of the programme there is no detail on the name of the participant employer for 86 per cent of participants held centrally by the Welsh Government. The evaluation obtained employer details from FE colleges; however, no secondary data are available to provide comprehensive information on the number of learners that employers had enrolled in the ELA strand of the programme, thereby limiting the ability to evaluate this strand.
- There are some instances in which those in the ELA element of the programme appear to have been misallocated to PLA, and vice versa. These discrepancies appear to be isolated (estimated at around five per cent) but do mean that there is a note of caution associated with the analysis of the management information.
- The 'non-LLWR' data include an applicant's occupation, the sector within which they are employed, and their salary bracket at the point of enrolment in the programme. Furthermore, there is a requirement to capture the same learner information six months after the completion of the course. The information would provide useful insight into the emerging impacts of the PLA programme. However,

where the data are captured, it is done so inconsistently; therefore, they are unusable for a programme-wide impact assessment.

- The LLWR MI also includes a high proportion of courses (34 per cent; 3,011/8,815) that are unassigned to a sector (they are recorded as generic/other). With over one third of course provision coded in this manner, there is a risk to the robustness of learner profile analysis by sector subject area.

- 1.9 The issues regarding the MI have limited the scope and robustness of the impact and value-for-money assessment of the programme. The technical paper outlines an impact framework and value-for-money approach for the programme to strengthen the assessment of PLA in future years.
- 1.10 The population of early leavers eligible for the survey was insufficient to enable a similar sampling approach to that adopted for learners who had completed their course or who were continuing their learning. With a small population from which to sample, a random sampling approach was adopted. However, the distribution of early leavers amongst FE colleges did not mirror the distribution of completers, as some colleges relied more heavily on remote provision (which tends to have a higher rate of dropout) than did other FE colleges.
- 1.11 The PLA programme was developed before the inclusion and adoption of the gender budgeting approach. There are some limitations in the evaluation's assessment of how gender has been considered within the programme design and delivery.
- 1.12 The methodological approach did not include fieldwork targeted at ELA learners due to resource limitations. Engagement with this group may have helped to determine the extent to which engagement had been employer- or learner-led, as it is likely that this is not a simple binary (either employer or learner) decision, with varying degrees of employer influence being likely amongst this group and the PLA group of learners.
- 1.13 The remainder of the report is structured as follows:
- Section 2 provides an overview of the origins of PLA-type programmes as well as the lessons learnt from their delivery, and also considers the policy context in

Wales within which PLA sits and the origin of gender budgeting and its desired role within the PLA programme.

- Section 3 reflects on the design and implementation of the PLA programme through the pilot, transition and rollout phases of the programme.
- Section 4 analyses feedback on the process of enrolment in the PLA programme, analysing MI to identify patterns in the progress of course delivery and in the profile of those learners engaged.
- Section 5 explores the experience of learning, primarily from the perspective of learners and employers.
- Section 6 analyses the outcomes and impacts arising from the programme to date.
- Section 7 summarises the findings from the research and provides a series of recommendations for the PLA programme.

2. Context

Summary

- Personal Learning Accounts were originally introduced in the UK in 2000. Levels of demand surpassed expectations, but evidence emerged of practice that did not reflect the ethos of the programme, leading to its suspension in October 2001.
- Subsequent iterations of PLA schemes with varying success were undertaken in Wales until 2007.
- The desire for the reintroduction of Personal Learning Accounts in recent years reflected a long-term trend of decreasing participation (and funding) in adult learning, with there being a 38 per cent reduction in adult learning in Wales between 2013/14 and 2019/20.
- The PLA programme is closely aligned with Welsh Government policy and particularly that associated with the goal of achieving A Prosperous Wales. The Employability Plan, published in 2018, set out the commitment to piloting a PLA programme, whilst the latest Plan for Employability and Skills (published in March 2022) proposed an expansion of the PLA programme.
- The Welsh Government perceived the PLA programme to be a good opportunity for trialling gender budgeting. PLA was perceived to have wider relevance to the gender budgeting approach due to its focus on supporting employed adults into higher-paid and higher-skilled employment in priority sectors with known gender effects.
- As PLA is the first Welsh Government programme to embed a gender budgeting approach, perceptions of what gender budgeting is have developed over time.

Introduction and rationale behind intervention

- 2.1 This section explores the rationale and policy context that led to the launch of the PLA programme. Additionally, it reflects on previous iterations of PLA initiatives in the UK.

Individual Learning Accounts

- 2.2 Personal Learning Accounts were originally introduced in the UK (as Individual Learning Accounts (ILA)) in September 2000. The original programme offered universal provision to everyone aged 19 or above, with the individual being able to

choose how they spend their ILA (essentially a voucher) on training. This could amount to a governmental subsidy of up to £200 for courses priced up to £250. The UK Government set one target for the programme, namely 1 million ILA by March 2002. However, the millionth account was announced in May 2001 and by the time of the scheme's suspension in October 2001 there were 2.5 million accounts logged.

- 2.3 The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) at the time identified that the “light-touch, non-bureaucratic nature of the programme designed to reach non-traditional learners was successful [...] but regrettably, this also enabled a minority of unscrupulous learning providers to act against the ethos of the programme”. The reference concerning unscrupulous operators related to situations in which, for example:

[...] a customer would have to pay £50 up front and might receive training that was worth [for example], £150, costing the provider £100 more than the £50 he received from the customer. The provider could claim £200 from the Government, in addition to the £50 from the customer. So, the customer would have received training worth three times what he paid, and the provider could claim twice what it cost him to provide the training. There was no check or audit which would have uncovered such systematic abuse of the scheme. There was no check on the provider to give good value for money, and no incentive for the customer to complain.¹

- 2.4 A further issue identified for ILA related to the different levels of subsidies and the sheer volume of course applications that were submitted. Some providers were obtaining subsidies for ineligible courses due to the initial confusion surrounding eligibility, whilst the application process and the central system for assessing eligibility failed to pick up the inappropriate use of the 80 per cent discount.²

¹ [Public Accounts Committee \(2002\) Third Report – Individual Learning Accounts, select committee, third report](#)

² Ibid.

2.5 The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) expanded further on some of the issues encountered within a subsequent report identifying a number of issues, including³:

- Poor planning and piloting: The implementation of the scheme was rushed. Challenges identified in the pilot led to changes, but the new model was developed and launched without being tested.
- A belief that the market would drive up standards and lead to inefficient and ineffective providers being driven out (which was described as being naive).
- Incentives for providers to recruit learners led to many providers responding with aggressive marketing strategies.

2.6 A subsequent ILA programme (led by the then-Welsh Assembly Government) operated within Wales from 2003. Initially, levels of support were offered in relation to an individual's circumstances (from 100 per cent of eligible costs for those on Jobseeker's Allowance or Pension Credit through to 50 per cent of eligible costs for those not in receipt of welfare benefits). Changes in eligibility rules were then established in July 2005, which led to the introduction of a maximum threshold contribution to training and education per annum (£200 per annum for those in receipt of benefits and £100 per annum for those who were not) to undertake learning up to National Qualification Level 3 (equivalent to two A Levels).

2.7 The revisions to the programme related to the desire to secure a "tighter focus on disadvantaged learner groups to increase the "additionality" of funding and a tighter administrative system",⁴ although the evidence suggests mixed success in achieving this. When the programme initially commenced in 2003, almost two thirds of learners (63 per cent) were employed or self-employed; however, this figure decreased to 45 per cent in 2006–07 following the tightening of eligibility. Conversely, the proportion who were unemployed upon enrolment increased from 26.5 per cent of learners to 40.8 per cent over that timeframe. However, those enrolled in 2006–2007 were more likely to have undertaken previous learning in the last 12 months and were less likely to hold qualifications below CQFW Level 2 than were those enrolled in 2003–2004. In terms of gender breakdown, the programme

³ [Public Accounts Committee \(2003\) Individual Learning Accounts, select committee, tenth report.](#)

⁴ Ibid.

was dominated by females, who represented around two thirds of those enrolled in the first two years of the programme.

2.8 Amongst participants, 75 per cent reported feeling more confident about finding a new/better job; furthermore, half of learners reported that they were unlikely to or definitely would not have undertaken any learning without the funding. This additionality was particularly concentrated amongst learners who:

- Were in their 50s
- Were out of work at the time of applying for their ILA Wales
- Had not previously undertaken any learning for at least five years
- Held an NVQ Level 1 as their highest qualification or had no qualifications at all at the time of application.⁵

2.9 ILA Wales was therefore considered to be “an excellent means by which hard to reach groups can be engaged – enabling those who would otherwise not have learnt, to undertake learning”.⁶ However, the programme ceased operation in 2007.

2.10 In 2010, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) published a paper⁷ on proposals for a workable PLA initiative that built on lessons from ILA in the UK. The paper identified the following:

- PLA-type schemes can be successful in encouraging individuals to take up learning opportunities that they might not otherwise have done through providing a direct financial incentive for the individual.
- Universal subsidies tend to favour those who have relatively high skills already and do not provide sufficient incentive for low-skilled, low-income individuals or otherwise underrepresented groups to participate.
- A voucher system or credit/loan scheme (with repayments being contingent on income) will prove to be more effective in attracting underrepresented

⁵ [Welsh Government \(2007\) Individual Learning Accounts Wales: Fourth Main Evaluation Report, Welsh Assembly Government, Cardiff.](#)

⁶ [Individual Learning Accounts, Cedefop Panorama Series; 163 Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009.](#)

⁷ Consulting in Place (2010) Personal Learning Accounts: Building on Lessons Learnt, UK Commission for Employment and Skills.

groups; however, targeted programmes bring dangers of complexity and excessive bureaucracy, which can be counterproductive.

- Balancing the need to maximise the benefits of individual choice and the availability of provision with the need to ensure that subsidised learning is of an acceptable quality and/or relevance to labour market needs is a huge challenge.

2.11 Following the review, the paper sets out a series of broad features for the practical implementation of a PLA programme, including:

- Universal entitlement at varying levels according to personal circumstances, skill type and level, and other relevant factors.
- A mixture of grants and loans, with a ceiling on the aggregate value of a state subsidy.
- Targeting to ensure the participation of socioeconomic groups that have a low propensity to take up learning.
- Signposting to high-quality information, advice and guidance, tailored to the individual.
- Modest state contributions initially, with a built-in option to incorporate a broader range of state funding for learning, including apprenticeships, and potentially funding for higher education.
- Working within existing systems for assuring the quality of learning delivery.

2.12 The desire for the reintroduction of PLA or ILA reflects a long-term trend of decreasing participation (and funding) in adult learning. Evidence from a [Social Market Foundation](#)⁸ report shows that participation in adult education decreased from 29 per cent in 2004 to 15 per cent in 2020. Since 2010, those with the lowest educational attainment (NQF Levels 0–2) have witnessed the biggest decline in participation (in percentage terms). In addition, the [WCPP](#)⁹ recently reported that

⁸ [Bhattacharya, A., Coffee, S., Norman, A. \(2020\) \[Adult\] education, education, education, Social Market Foundation.](#)

⁹ [Pember, S., et al. \(2021\) Supporting the Welsh Lifelong Learning System, Wales Centre for Public Policy](#)

the number of adult learners in some form of FE provision in Wales decreased from more than 177,000 in 2013/14 to 109,000 in 2019/20: a 38 per cent reduction.

- 2.13 A reduction in revenue grant funding for the FE sector combined with a shift in resource allocation to full-time FE provision (away from part-time adult learning)¹⁰ may have influenced that reduction in adult learning. The 2010 National (UK) Adult Learner Survey¹¹ also identified influences on that reduction in participation:
- Cost (58 per cent of respondents).
 - A lack of time (42 per cent of respondents but more prevalent amongst males (46 per cent) than females (39 per cent)).
 - The inability to fit learning around a job (29 per cent of respondents but more prevalent amongst males (35 per cent) than females (16 per cent)).
 - Family life (25 per cent of respondents, increasing to 33 per cent of female respondents).
- 2.14 Within the 2016 Adult Education Survey,¹² whilst the order in prevalence of barriers remained the same, the barriers were more widespread amongst respondents, with over half (54 per cent) of respondents citing a lack of time, 42 per cent citing costs, and 34 per cent citing family/caring responsibilities.¹³
- 2.15 Where adults are participating in learning, participation is unevenly distributed. Adults in higher socioeconomic groups are twice as likely to participate in learning as those in lower socioeconomic groups. Those who left full-time education aged 21 or above are significantly more likely to participate in learning than are those who left education at or below the age of 16.¹⁴
- 2.16 Furthermore, evidence shows that almost half of adults from the lowest socioeconomic groups have not received any training since they left full-time

¹⁰ For further details, see: Auditor General for Wales (2017) 'Welsh Government oversight of further education colleges' finances and delivery', Wales Audit Officer.

¹¹ [2010 National \(UK\) Adult Learner Survey](#).

¹² It should be noted that the 2016 survey involved fieldwork in England only and the question was asked using minor changes to the wording.

¹³ DoE (2018) Adult Education Survey 2016: Research Report, Office for National Statistics.

¹⁴ Ibid.

education, and 12 per cent of adults with no qualifications thought that they would be very likely to receive job-related learning/training in the next two to three years.¹⁵

Policy context

2.17 The Welsh Government response to these issues in recent years has initially been led through [Prosperity for All: the national strategy taking Wales forward](#) (published in 2017).¹⁶ The strategy established four key themes that would contribute to prosperity for all and enhance the well-being of the people of Wales. One theme is particularly aligned with the PLA programme — Ambitious and Learning — with the aim to “instil in everyone a passion to learn throughout their lives” with three underpinning well-being objectives:

- Support young people to make the most of their potential
- Build ambition and encourage learning for life
- Equip everyone with the right skills for a changing world.

The prominence of these well-being objectives serves to ensure a common purpose between the objectives of the Plan and the [Well-being of Future Generations Act](#) (2015), particularly the goal associated with A Prosperous Wales: “to develop a skilled and well-educated population in an economy that generates wealth and provides employment opportunities, allowing people to take advantage of the wealth generated through securing decent work”.¹⁷

2.18 The strategy also set out a series of actions that underpin the Ambitious and Learning theme, including the “development of a new employability plan for Wales focusing on the diverse needs of individuals, and responsive to the particular skills needs of each part of the country”.¹⁸

2.19 Prior to the publication of the Employability Plan, the Welsh Government published the [Economic Action Plan](#), which included, as one of its key pillars, the desire to

¹⁵ Centenary Commission on Adult Education (2021) in WCPP (2021) Supporting the Welsh Lifelong Learning System, WCPP.

¹⁶ Welsh Government (2020) Prosperity for All: the national strategy, Cardiff, Welsh Government.

¹⁷ Learning and Work Institute (2016) Power to the People – The Case for Personal Learning Accounts, Learning and Work Institute, Leicester.

¹⁸ Welsh Government (2020) Prosperity for All: the national strategy, Cardiff, Welsh Government.

“build ambition and encourage learning for life” and, in doing so, enable people in Wales to gain as much as they can from learning and work. The Action Plan also outlines the ambition to “equip everyone with the right skills for a changing world”, and again references the forthcoming (at the time) Employability Plan.

- 2.20 The [Employability Plan](#) was ultimately published in March 2018¹⁹ and outlines some of the challenges that the adult population of Wales face, describing how, at the time, 40 per cent of people in Wales living in poverty were in employment.²⁰ The Employability Plan describes the role and potential of lifelong learning and skill development in career progression and higher earnings. The Plan also cites the role that upskilling the workforce can play in increasing the rates of productivity, the role and responsibility of employers to upskill their workers, the importance of responding to current and projected skills gaps and preparing for a radical shift in the world of work, and also the need for individuals to access skill development and lifelong learning opportunities whilst working.
- 2.21 There is also recognition in the Plan of the need to shift away from a skill system driven by macro supply and demand factors, which tend to limit the flexibility and responsiveness of skill provision in responding to the requirements of individuals and the wider economy.
- 2.22 In response to these issues, the Employability Plan set out the commitment to piloting a Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) programme for workers to fund personal vocational retraining in sectors in which there are skill shortages.
- 2.23 On 20th December 2018 an updated agreement (to what was described as ‘a progressive agreement’ in 2016) between the First Minister and the Minister for Education²¹ reaffirmed the desire to address this issue through committing to exploring how the Welsh Government can deliver a new Welsh right to lifelong learning — investing in skills, which people need throughout their lives, for individual, societal and economic benefit.

¹⁹ [Employability Plan 2018](#).

²⁰ ONS (2015) Annual Population Survey 2015 Quarter 2 data, Office for National Statistics.

²¹ [FM Agreement with Education Minister](#).

2.24 Following the launch of the PLA programme, Welsh Government policy has retained its commitment to the programme with the expansion of PLA set out within the latest [Programme for Government](#), published in December 2021. Furthermore, in March 2022 the updated [Plan for Employability and Skills](#) set out the “nurturing a learning for life culture” as one of its five key priorities, with the expansion of PLA being reiterated within that Plan. It explicitly stated that the Welsh Government will:

“Expand Personal Learning Accounts to support workers to upskill or reskill to access a wider range of job opportunities with higher pay, respond to key challenges for Wales including strengthening resources in health and social care and equipping individuals to take advantage of new opportunities in sectors such as digital, green construction and renewable energy. Continue to explore with Further Education Institutions and Regional Skills Partnerships how to maximise provision and generate greatest benefit in response to evolving economic demand.”²²

Gender budgeting

2.25 The Welsh Government perceived the PLA programme to be a good opportunity to trial gender budgeting within its programme interventions. The gender budgeting approach was first used as part of an Australian gender budgeting initiative in 1984. This initiative mandated that governmental departments analyse the impact of their annual budget and public expenditure on women and girls to ensure a better and more nuanced understanding of the gendered impact of policy decisions.²³ This initiative was followed by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, wherein the Beijing Platform for Action emphasised the need to consider a gender perspective and females’ needs in budgetary policies and programmes.²⁴ As a result of this, the gender budgeting approach increased in momentum and was adopted by the United Nations and more than 80 countries, most commonly in Europe. However, as noted by O’Hagan (2018), whilst this has created a ‘normative

²² [Plan for Employability and Skills 2022](#).

²³ Stotsky, J. (2016) [IMF Working Paper, Gender Budgeting: Fiscal Context and Current Outcomes, July 2016](#).

²⁴ For greater detail on this, please refer to: [UN Fourth World Conference on Women](#).

framework’, gender budgeting has been implemented in a variety of ways and, in some cases, weakly implemented.²⁵

2.26 The Council of Europe set out a now-well-established definition of gender budgeting in 2009. This sees gender budgeting as “a gender-based assessment of budgets, incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process and restructuring revenues and expenditures to promote gender equality”.²⁶ Similarly, the 2016 OECD survey of countries using gender budgeting describes the gender budgeting approach, otherwise referred to as gender mainstreaming, as a process of “designing all public policies, and using policy instruments, with the promotion of gender equality in mind”.²⁷ As explored in the OECD study, this approach is intended to be not only multidimensional but also a central tenet of modern public governance. From the OECD perspective, there are three ‘categories’ of gender budgeting:

- Gender-informed resource allocation: Individual policy decisions and/or funding allocations take into account the impact of the decision on gender equality.
- Gender-assessed budgets: The impact of the budget as a whole is subject to some degree of gender analysis.
- Needs-based gender budgeting: Budget decisions are underpinned by a prior assessment of gender needs. This provides an opportunity to build on knowledge of where gender inequalities exist, and highlights the policy areas in which gender inequalities are most prominent.²⁸

2.27 In Phase One of the Welsh Government’s Gender Equality Review, reforming budgetary processes was highlighted as a key element of required change to ensure that an equality perspective, and gender mainstreaming, is central to governmental decisions and policy. In June 2019, the Welsh Government’s Gender

²⁵ [O’Hagan, A., Klatzer, E. \(eds.\) Gender Budgeting in Europe, 2018.](#)

²⁶ Council of Europe. Gender budgeting: practical implementation, Handbook, Council of Europe, Directorate General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs, 2009.

²⁷ Downes, R., Lisa von Trapp and Scherie Nicol (2016) ‘Gender budgeting in OECD countries’. OECD Journal on Budgeting – Volume 2016/3.

²⁸ As explored in section 2.23, these definitions of gender budgeting are well established and recognised in policy and academic contexts, hence why they are being used in this research.

Equality Review²⁹ posed a series of recommendations for the Welsh Treasury to further this aim. The review recommended that the Treasury should act as a leader “in developing and implementing gender budgeting and that this should be defined and communicated widely within government and dedicated capacity for gender budgeting should be in place within the Treasury”.³⁰

- 2.28 To respond to said recommendations, the Welsh Treasury reviewed planned pilot projects to assess which would be a good opportunity to trial the gender budgeting approach. Whilst the PLA pilot had already been designed, stakeholders stated that because the pilot had not formally launched, it seemed like a good opportunity to become involved in a programme from an early stage. Following this, it is understood that the Welsh Treasury and the Welsh Government are continuing to assess how a gender budgeting approach can assist the identification and potential of different impacts to support learning on how to effectively prioritise and allocate resources to advance equality of gender.
- 2.29 The PLA pilot was chosen to trial the gender budgeting approach because the timing of the pilot felt appropriate. The scheme was perceived to have wider relevance to the gender budgeting approach due to its focus on supporting employed adults into higher-paid and higher-skilled employment in priority sectors with known gender effects. In interviews, stakeholders described how in the initial instance the gender budgeting pilot was understood to be an educational piece with which to inform later policy by exploring how the approach could inform delivery and the impacts (both intended and unintended) that it produces.
- 2.30 The PLA programme was developed before the inclusion and adoption of the gender budgeting approach. There will therefore be some limitations in the evaluation’s assessment of how gender has been considered within the programme design and delivery. For example, the traditional gender budgeting approach requires an intervention to utilise a gendered and intersectional lens from the initial project design period to ensure that the design and aims of a project directly relate and respond to gender inequality. As this was not undertaken at the beginning of

²⁹ Undertaken by Chwarae Teg. [Deeds not Words Summary Report](#).

³⁰ [Chwarae Teg, Deeds not Words Summary Report, Review of Gender Equality in Wales \(Phase Two\), June 2019](#).

the PLA pilot design period, the evaluation will have to consider to what extent the gender budgeting approach was successfully embedded within delivery and in the design of the transition phase and rollout phase of the PLA programme.

- 2.31 The aims of the PLA pilot and its inclusion of a gender budgeting approach most closely align with the needs-based gender approach outlined above. However, it is important to note that because PLA is the first Welsh Government programme to embed this approach, perceptions of what gender budgeting is have developed over time. Stakeholders reported that developing this approach has been iterative, with key lessons being learnt as to how to apply gender budgeting in practical delivery. One stakeholder stated:

“Welsh Government had a clear view of what gender budgeting was because we were very early on in the journey — the theory is very easy to understand, but how we apply it to a Welsh Government context is a very different thing.” (Welsh Government Stakeholder)

- 2.32 The Welsh Government’s Gender Equality Review outlined that the gender budgeting approach used by the Welsh Government needed to be robust based on data and “a common understanding of concepts and purpose”.³¹ Moreover, it was acknowledged that this approach would take considerable time to develop because it would require clear and shared aims and objectives. Stakeholders have suggested that whilst the PLA gender budgeting approach has positively introduced the concept to Welsh Government programmes, there is still substantial time and resources needed to ensure that a unified approach and vision for gender budgeting in Wales are possible.

³¹ Ibid.

3. PLA Design and Implementation

Summary

- Two FE colleges, namely GLLM and Coleg Gwent, were awarded the pilot programme to test PLA in two distinct geographical areas.
- The programme initially targeted three priority sectors, but these were expanded to five to respond to skill shortage issues and an inherent gender bias within the original target sectors.
- Eligibility criteria for PLA were widened from mid-May 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with employers becoming eligible to access the programme.
- The rate of expansion was particularly rapid, increasing from a £2m programme in the pilot year to £17.4m in 2021–22. Additional funding of £10m was also secured in 2021–22, bringing the total programme to £27.4m. The core budget for 2022–23 is £17.9m.
- The number of personnel managing the programme in the Welsh Government did not increase and, consequently, the team has struggled with certain aspects of governing the programme, including analysing the progress and success of PLA.
- The loss of WG staff as the programme was rolling out to the wider cohort of FE colleges resulted in a loss of knowledge regarding the gender budgeting approach, and it was not perceived to be fully embedded within programme delivery.
- Following the rollout the flexibility of learning provision led to a high number of course approvals, making it challenging to appraise the courses and course costs.
- Competitive bidding rounds for national priorities were widely welcomed and viewed as being particularly successful.

Introduction

- 3.1 This section explores the theory behind the design of the PLA programme as well as the experience of its initial implementation and its evolution over time, particularly its rapid transition and scale-up from the pilot through to the full rollout.

PLA design

- 3.2 Alongside reflections on the learning of previous iterations of PLA programmes, the design of PLA was also informed by research and practice elsewhere, including

from comparator models in France and Singapore.³² The Learning and Work Institute undertook a detailed review, which included fieldwork with groups of people³³ in Bangor and Newport.³⁴ The review identified that there appeared to be limited provision available for those in employment who may be seeking to switch careers. Other key findings included:

- Strong demand for programmes to support adults in work to train in order to move careers or improve their earnings capacity in their existing sector.
- The need for adult learners engaging with PLA to be assured that an investment of time and the opportunity cost of time spent learning will lead to meaningful job opportunities within the local labour market.
- The importance of flexible provision (delivered on the weekends/evenings, online and through distance learning) to help learners to balance the demands of existing jobs or of family/caring responsibilities and to avoid participation in provision impacting on their current employment.
- The need for employer engagement at every stage of the programme to ensure that the offer is meaningful and leads to good employment outcomes — illustrating the importance of strong market intelligence on salaries, employment opportunities, and potential progression routes for individuals.

From employers a number of key messages were raised:

- At the time, employers were tending not to look for new staff to grow their business, but instead focused on recruiting experienced staff to meet short-term capacity problems (rather than recruiting career switchers who may not have the necessary experience).
- Within some sectors and some parts of Wales, employment opportunities above the salary threshold may be limited.

³² OECD (2019) Individual Learning Accounts: Panacea or Pandora's Box, OECD.

³³ The report notes that all attendees at focus groups were in work, with annual salaries less than the median average and where diversity was reportedly ensured across a number of protected characteristics, including age, gender and ethnicity.

³⁴ Hagendyk, D. and Lees, C. (2019) Personal Learning Accounts Pilot, Learning and Work Institute.

- The importance (from an employer perspective) of the programme being flexible, with the list of eligible courses being regularly updated to reflect labour market demand.

PLA options

- 3.3 Stakeholders reported that various options were considered in the design of the PLA programme, including a procurement exercise for learning providers to bid into, a loan scheme for adults (although there were concerns surrounding what impact this may have on the demand for learning), and the provision of vouchers (although concerns remained regarding fraudulent activity and quality-assuring learning provision).
- 3.4 Reflection on the various research and the experience of previous PLA-type programmes led to the conclusion that resources would be better invested via institutions (FE colleges), rather than directly to individuals. It was felt that individuals instead would be better served through encouragement (through a marketing campaign) and direction, e.g. through Working Wales and in the use of individual learning plans.

Programme implementation

Piloting PLA

- 3.5 Two FE colleges were chosen to pilot PLA with the intention of testing the programme in two geographical locations. Awarding the pilot programme to GLLM and Coleg Gwent provided the opportunity to test the programme in rural areas of North Wales as well as urban areas of South East Wales, thereby providing a useful spectrum across which to test programme effectiveness. Furthermore, it enabled testing of the programme in two different organisations, with Coleg Gwent being one institution with multiple campuses and schools, and GLLM being an umbrella organisation of three member colleges.
- 3.6 The programme was initially targeted at three priority sectors (engineering, construction and digital) in which skill shortage vacancies and career opportunities with strong salary potential and, therefore, higher added value to the economy were

considered to be most acute. These sectors were subsequently expanded to encompass the additional priority sectors of health and financial services.

Gender budgeting

- 3.7 Within the PLA pilot, representatives from the Welsh Treasury attended steering group meetings to inform delivery partners of the approach to gender budgeting. Stakeholders described this element as a key aspect of programme implementation, as it allowed the FE colleges and stakeholders to discuss the importance of inclusivity within the programme. FE colleges and stakeholders also explored the difficulties that they anticipated facing with regard to the gender budgeting approach, particularly highlighting the male-dominated priority sectors focused upon within PLA. Within this, FE colleges and stakeholders explored the importance of the skill development aspect of the programme and how they could promote opportunities to a wide range of participants to avoid the skill development side of the programme appearing to be ‘male-centric’.
- 3.8 Stakeholders reported that delivering vocational courses to upskill individuals in a way that was linked to RSP priorities and through an intersectional gendered lens required a considerable cultural change on behalf of colleges. Therefore, engaging with FE colleges at the beginning of PLA implementation was perceived by stakeholders to be vital to ensuring ‘buy-in’ to the programme and the gender budgeting approach.
- 3.9 The original priority sectors of the programme (construction, engineering and ICT) are traditionally male-dominated. This, as stakeholders acknowledged, did result in a range of external criticism, as this appeared to be misaligned with the aims of a gender budgeting approach in which a gendered and intersectional lens is used from the beginning to ensure that the design and aims of a project directly relate and respond to gender inequality. An expansion in priority sectors took place:
- “[We included] the health [sector — this] is traditionally more female-orientated. If we did it again, we would make sure there was more of a balance, but that has been somewhat rectified. There is hospitality and finance now as well to make sure there is a broad mix, and also the key

thing was that the sectors there were the priority sectors.” (Stakeholder Interview)

- 3.10 Health and hospitality are traditionally lower-paid sectors than are engineering and ICT. Therefore, whilst there was a greater range of priority sectors included within the programme, progression and success in different sectors could vary.

PLA transition and rollout

- 3.11 In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a widening of eligibility criteria for PLA was implemented (from mid-May 2020), leading to the PLA programme being open to any furloughed workers, regardless of salary. In June 2020, PLA was described by the Welsh Government as “progressing well, with over 1,250 applications (as at the end of June 2020) between the two [pilot] colleges, with courses and qualifications being delivered ranging from vendor³⁵ qualifications to level 4 qualifications”.³⁶
- 3.12 Then, from August 2020, the PLA programme was rolled out in 13 FE colleges across Wales and made available to individuals who live in Wales and are either:
- Employed people earning below the median income (£26,000),³⁷ or
 - Furloughed workers, or
 - Workers on zero-hour contracts, or
 - Agency staff, or
 - At risk of being made redundant, or
 - Employed individuals who have been negatively impacted by the economy, e.g. within the hospitality sectors or within the foundational economy.
- 3.13 Other options regarding the widening of eligibility were also considered, including the unemployed, removal of the salary threshold, and full-time carers. However, there were concerns surrounding the ability of the programme to respond to the level of demand that this would generate.

³⁵ Vendor qualifications are typically qualifications linked to a particular employer or commercial system.

³⁶ Welsh Government Ministerial Advice.

³⁷ The threshold was subsequently increased to £29,534 in 2021.

- 3.14 It is understood that the revisions to eligibility “resulted in an extremely positive increase in the number of enquiries and applications for the courses/qualifications”.³⁸ Indeed, stakeholders noted a relatively sluggish start to the programme in the pilot phase; however, the pandemic and the expansion of eligibility led to a rapid increase in applications — applications to Coleg Gwent, for example, reportedly increased from 20 per week to 300 per day.
- 3.15 The upturn in participation in learning in the PLA programme following the outbreak of COVID-19 in the UK reflects a more general increase in adult participation in learning provision. This is most recently evidenced through a survey of adult participation in learning which engaged with around 5,000 adults from across the UK (fieldwork conducted in October 2021).³⁹ The 2021 survey shows the highest (current and recent) participation rate in learning in 20 years. The report describes how this may relate to the COVID-19 pandemic, with people reflecting on their work and career goals and/or developing new interests.⁴⁰

Gender budgeting

- 3.16 Whilst the fast rollout of provision was necessary and well received, considering the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholders reported that gender budgeting became less prominent. Over half of FE college staff interviewed in the final phase of this evaluation reported that they were provided with little information on the gender budgeting approach and/or were not sure as to how it applied practically to their delivery. In a minority of cases, staff stated that they had recently become more aware of the gender budgeting approach because of Welsh Government staff providing additional presentations on the subject in the latter stages of the programme. It is possible that in the rollout of PLA post-pilot, the gender budgeting approach was not sufficiently explained or explored with FE colleges, resulting in a limited understanding of how to practically make use of the method.

³⁸ PLA Ministerial Advisory Papers (unpublished).

³⁹ Hall, S., Jones, E. and Evans, S. (2021) Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2021, Learning and Work Institute.

⁴⁰ However, it should be noted that the survey involved a shift in the mode of delivery (from telephone to online), meaning that caution should be exercised in interpreting changes from previous years.

3.17 Stakeholders suggested that due to staff turnover, the wider rollout of the PLA programme and the development of the ELA strand of support and guidance regarding gender budgeting never translated from theoretical and general descriptions into practical advice and clear expectations. As outlined in the Welsh Government's Gender Equality Review, a gender budgeting approach takes considerable time to develop, as it requires clear and shared aims and objectives. Where a gender budgeting approach is adopted in future programme pilots, clear aims and objectives, tied to the approach and beyond theoretical knowledge, should be determined prior to programme implementation.

Employer engagement and ELA

3.18 From September 2020, employers that had been adversely affected by the pandemic and the subsequent restrictions became eligible for the programme via the ELA strand. The ELA strand sought to enable employers to upskill/reskill their workforce to meet the challenges of new operating requirements during and after COVID-19. It was therefore expected that much of the provision would be linked to equipping employees (and therefore employers) with the skills and expertise associated with digital and remote working practices.

3.19 To resource the rollout and expansion of PLA, the Welsh Government drew on resources previously assigned to the Skills Development Fund (SDF). Introduced in 2018/19, the SDF enabled the FE sector to develop provision that sought to address job-specific skills gaps at a regional level, as identified by RSPs. The SDF sought to deliver flexible, responsive provision and supported employed and unemployed individuals who could undertake the learning on a full-time or part-time basis. The learning included general FE provision, vendor qualifications, and NVQs in the workplace. There were clear similarities therefore between the programmes, thereby providing the scope to align the PLA and SDF as one programme. To help facilitate a smooth transition of the programme to PLA, some SDF courses were preapproved for usage in the PLA programme, which is one of the factors behind the rapid increase in the number of eligible courses through PLA, whilst existing learners were able to continue their learning through the PLA programme.

- 3.20 ELA was initially approved for the first year of programme delivery (from September 2020) only and retained for the 2021/22 academic year in recognition of “the ongoing challenges posed by Covid-19 and opportunities arising from the UK’s decision to leave the European Union”. The ELA strand of the programme has not been taken forward into the 2022/23 academic year.
- 3.21 Several stakeholders raised concerns associated with the ELA strand of the programme in relation to the extent to which the provision overlapped and, therefore, competed with existing provision and particularly that associated with upskilling employees through the European Social Fund (ESF). Stakeholders described the value of the programme post-European funding, when the pre-existing interventions are no longer in operation; however, the cessation of the ELA strand broadly coincides with the closure of the majority of ESF interventions of this nature (with interventions typically closing during the next six months).

Funding

- 3.22 The pilot phase of the PLA programme was worth £4m, equally split between the two FE colleges over the two-year period. The early rollout of the programme (and therefore the termination of the pilot) meant that only £2m of the funding for the pilot had been allocated.
- 3.23 Following the programme rollout, the annual allocation of £2m to the pilot FE colleges was supplemented by the transition of £10m from the Skills Development Fund (SDF) to create a £12m programme. There are two elements to the SDF allocation: the core allocation was a legacy of the SDF programme and reflected a carry-over of allocations from that programme to PLA, while the additional allocation was based on a similar formula to that of the allocation for part-time FE provision, linked to learner numbers at each college and local populations.
- 3.24 Additional money became available during the 2020/21 academic year to target national priority sectors for PLA. The additional funds (worth £3.05m per annum in 2020/21 and 2021/22) were allocated to FE colleges by means of a similar funding allocation. Table 3.1 below presents the annual distribution of core and additional funds by FE college in the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years.

Table 3.1: PLA funding allocations by FE college

College	Initial Annual Allocation 20/21 & 21/22 (£)	Additional Annual Allocation 20/21 & 21/22 (£)	Total Annual Allocation 20/21 & 21/22 (£)	Percentage of Budget
Bridgend College	1,085,268.72	156,183.55	1,241,452.27	8.2%
Cardiff & the Vale College	2,347,857.14	444,932.16	2,792,789.30	18.6%
Coleg Cambria	1,071,467.22	367,289.28	1,438,756.50	9.6%
Coleg Gwent	1,372,430.72	394,659.79	1,767,090.51	11.7%
Coleg Sir Gâr	551,279.93	165,141.73	716,421.66	4.8%
Coleg y Cymoedd	646,577.20	258,369.70	904,946.90	6.0%
Gower College Swansea	815,530.45	192,026.37	1,007,556.82	6.7%
Grwp Llandrillo Menai	2,072,444.80	319,083.77	2,391,528.57	15.9%
Grwp NPTC Group	1,136,488.65	254,423.20	1,390,911.85	9.2%
Merthyr Tydfil College	258,446.50	46,015.00	304,461.50	2.0%
Pembrokeshire College	330,767.96	93,829.96	424,597.92	2.8%
Adult Learning Wales	311,440.71	258,045.51	569,486.22	3.8%
St David's College		100,000.00	100,000.00	0.7%
Total	12,000,000	3,050,000	15,050,000	100.0%

3.25 The total available budget for 2021/22 was £17.39m. The Welsh Government retained £2.34m for targeted priorities, marketing and evaluation, whilst £1.97m of the total budget was made available to target national sectors of priority. The funding was targeted at green/net-zero sectors and was allocated via a competitive bidding process, with funding being awarded based on the courses, qualifications, costs, and target number of learners that FE colleges had proposed delivering. Gower College secured over one third (38 per cent) of that funding, whilst Coleg Sir Gar (31 per cent) and Cardiff and the Vale College (19 per cent) were also successful in securing a considerable portion of the available resources.

3.26 A subsequent allocation of £9.9m was made available in December 2021 for colleges to bid for in response to sectoral needs within:

- Green construction and renewable energy

- Logistics (particularly heavy goods vehicle (HGV) and long goods vehicle (LGV) driving)
- Hospitality
- Advanced materials and manufacturing
- Health and social care sectors.

Coleg Sir Gar secured almost one third of this budget (33 per cent), whilst Grwp NPTC Group secured 21 per cent and Gower College Swansea 15 per cent.

3.27 Collectively, the supplementary allocations of funding led to a rapid expansion in the PLA programme from a £2m annual budget in 2019/20 to a £27m programme in the 2021/22 academic year and reflected the need to rapidly respond to the challenges and opportunities faced by the Welsh economy.

Case study: Improving skills for the new green economy

John was a qualified electrician who was seeking to progress in his existing role and develop skills in the growing industry of electric vehicle charger installation. He was encouraged and supported by his employer but was also positive about the potential benefits to his own career prospects in the future. He applied to take the EAL (Excellence Achievement & Learning Ltd) Level 3 Award in the Requirements for the Installation of Electric Vehicle Charging Points (which was delivered through an external training provider). “The PLA funded course was very beneficial to both me and the company and it was a fantastic opportunity.”

He needed the certificate to advance his career and was able to access the course within two weeks of applying for it. He could complete the course during the daytime and in the week because he was being supported by his employer to take the course, which meant that he was not taking on any additional hours.

John stated that when he completed the course, he received positive recognition from both his manager and his peers. Now that he has finished the course, he has become a specialist in his workplace, which would support his career progression. John was incredibly positive about the opportunity that this course offers to the construction industry, and stated that it gave him clearer aspirations for his career.

Governance

- 3.28 To assist with the development of the PLA pilot, a project group was set up. This group met up regularly to discuss the best way in which to develop the pilot. It comprised FE colleges, the Learning and Work Institute, Working Wales, and Welsh Government officials. Towards the end of the pilot phase, an implementation group was established, which operated throughout the transition phase and then through the initial months following the programme rollout (up until December 2020). The group included representatives from all FE colleges, the RSPs, and Working Wales along with the Welsh Government. Stakeholders widely commended this approach, with colleges describing it as a useful route through which to field opinions and shape the programme design and to help explore customer journeys through the programme.
- 3.29 A change in personnel within the Welsh Government team alongside the rapid scaling of the programme led to something of a hiatus in these meetings. These were subsequently re-established in spring 2021 — with a shift to regional meetings between the PLA programme team from the Welsh Government, FE colleges, and the respective RSP to discuss issues and risks and share priorities or gaps in provision that needed to be addressed.
- 3.30 A further influence on the ability to sustain the governance model related to the quota of staff involved in the management of the PLA programme within the Welsh Government. The team initially included a policy lead for the programme; however, there was a six-month gap in that role at the start of 2021 before a replacement was secured. The role was subsequently filled until July 2022. Alongside that role, there has been a PLA Senior Manager consistently throughout the programme as well as administrative support.
- 3.31 The team has not secured any meaningful expansion from that assigned to the programme during the pilot phase. An influential factor in the lack of expansion in personnel has been a recruitment freeze at the Welsh Government, restricting the ability to expand the number of staff associated with the programme, and the reassignment of staff to respond to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19

pandemic. It is understood, however, that a programme manager has recently been appointed (October 2022).

3.32 The level of resources assigned to manage the programme as it increased from £2m to a core programme of £17.9m per annum (with an additional £9.9m of funding being made available in 2021–22) has impacted the governance of the programme in a number of ways:

- It has stretched the ability of the team to appraise applications for new courses in a prompt, responsive manner.
- It has limited the ability of the team to collate, analyse and run management and monitoring reports on the relative progress and success of the programme and, therefore, to share that information with key partners.
- It has restricted the ability to communicate regularly with FE college partners.
- It has limited the ability of the team to reflect on and refine programme guidance shared annually with FE colleges.

3.33 The additional staffing resources secured recently will help to address some of these challenges; however, there remains a risk as to whether the programme can operate effectively in the responsive, flexible manner desired with the staffing quota.

Management information systems

3.34 Guidance has been provided annually to FE colleges with regard to the nature of information to be captured for the PLA programme. However, the rapid rollout and implementation of PLA have necessitated some ‘in-flight’ (in-year) adjustments to the nature of data captured. Whilst much information is captured through the LLWR, for most colleges it has also necessitated the development of bespoke MI systems to capture ‘non-LLWR’ data. This has commonly led to a backlog in information captured or to information gaps.

3.35 Whilst there is a clear rationale behind the capture of non-LLWR data from a monitoring and evaluation perspective, this is not evident within the guidance. The guidance on the capture of non-LLWR monitoring information also lacks clarity and

is open to interpretation. This would appear to have influenced the level of inconsistency evident in data being captured.

- 3.36 The guidance also describes how FE colleges are subject to termly monitoring arrangements in which there is a freeze of data at the end of each term as well as a review by the Welsh Government at the start of the following term. The reviews are described in the guidance as helping the Welsh Government to identify delivery partners and whether any redistribution of resources between colleges is necessary to facilitate as close to full spend as possible, as there is to be no rollover of resources into the following academic year.

Gender budgeting – design

- 3.37 Stakeholders reported that the loss of Welsh Government staff as the programme was rolling out to the wider cohort of FE colleges also resulted in the loss of knowledge regarding the gender budgeting approach. When PLA was rolled out to other colleges, the gender budgeting approach was not perceived to be fully embedded within programme delivery. The combination of the urgent COVID-19 response, new delivery partners, and a lack of retained programme and staff knowledge of gender budgeting resulted in the approach being perceived to be a lesser priority.
- 3.38 Reflecting on monitoring data captured for PLA, stakeholders and FE college staff stated that the programme would benefit from supporting and empowering delivery partners to interrogate their own monitoring information through an intersectional lens to further their gender budgeting approaches. This would include delivery partners regularly and critically reflecting on their course engagement by demographic characteristic and exploring if and how additional support and engagement activities could support individuals to participate. By initially supporting delivery partners to create this feedback loop, the programme would empower FE colleges and training providers to take ownership of gender budgeting and facilitate longer-term behavioural change.

Securing new courses

- 3.39 FE colleges identify new courses for the PLA programme in several ways. At least four of the colleges have access to labour market intelligence tools (most commonly EMSI⁴¹) and this is typically supplemented by feedback from employer forums or advisory boards and via the RSPs (specifically the respective Employment and Skills Plan of each RSP). The accuracy of labour market intelligence in understanding where skill shortages currently exist and where job growth will likely arise in the near future is key to fulfilling the objectives of the PLA programme. However, predicting growth sectors is particularly challenging; for example, the green economy has been identified as a national priority sector for PLA funds since early 2021. However, recent [ONS data](#) show no significant change in employment or turnover within the low-carbon and renewable energy economy between 2014 and 2020, whilst an analysis of green job adverts suggests that the number of green jobs advertised in Wales has more than doubled in a year.⁴² The mixed messages on the labour market and priority sectors illustrate some of the difficulties faced.
- 3.40 Until recently (winter 2021/22), there was a three-stage process associated with securing approval of new courses in the PLA programme. The first stage involves the FE college completing an application form. The application is reviewed by the RSP, whose remit is to determine the extent to which the course meets the needs of the economy in its region. The RSP's recommendation as to whether the course should be approved or not is then shared with the Welsh Government (along with the supporting reasons). Initially, courses were required to align with priority sectors identified by RSPs and FE colleges in each region. However, there has been a shift away from the regional priority sectors to secure greater uniformity across Wales (rather than operating with three distinct course lists⁴³). Furthermore, there has been a renewed focus as the PLA programme has progressed in supporting

⁴¹ Labour market intelligence tools typically provide the most recent data on publicly available labour market information (industrial, occupational, educational and demographic data), online job postings, and wage levels for occupations (including job postings). They are designed to inform training providers, individuals, and businesses about decisions on training, careers and investment.

⁴² [PWC press release: Wales Sees Green Jobs Surge](#).

⁴³ It should be noted that a fourth RSP (for Mid Wales) was established during the PLA programme.

individuals to earn above the salary threshold, which has now been given greater prioritisation than pursuing course provision within priority sectors.

- 3.41 Whilst there are set criteria for colleges to structure new course proposals around, RSPs mentioned that the quality and depth of information shared by FE colleges for new courses can vary. Furthermore, there were higher volumes of new course proposals than anticipated. Each region has on offer several hundred courses (with a degree of duplication between each region), collectively equating to around 1,000 approved courses. An analysis of MI suggests learner participation in around 977 unique courses (this is likely to be an overestimate, as some courses will be misspelt or recorded slightly differently); therefore, most approved courses appear to have secured learner enrolment.
- 3.42 The volume of course approvals made it challenging, given the available resources for the WG to provide a supplementary review of those courses. The approach to course review adopted in that first year was described by the Welsh Government in their guidance as “flexible and permissive”. From September 2021, however, the Welsh Government requested evidence (although guidance is unclear as to the specific nature of the evidence) that any new qualifications would lead to people being paid above Welsh median earnings before they are added to the approved list.
- 3.43 Subsequently, the Welsh Government introduced a more structured approach to course approval in which course requests are sent by FE colleges to the Welsh Government and reviewed by a Welsh Government-led fortnightly panel. In the lead-up to the panel review the course request is shared with the RSP, which provides a view to the panel which is taken into consideration as part of the panel approval process.
- 3.44 Several FE colleges expressed concerns surrounding course approval. These included:
- The sequence of steps necessary (particularly where course identification is learner-led) to obtain sufficient evidence from employers of the demand for the course.

- The time taken to secure course approvals, particularly in instances in which there may be a seasonal or time-critical focus associated with a skill need.
- The lack of a list of approved courses that could be shared with FE colleges so that colleges are aware of all courses that have been approved, and not simply those courses that the college had secured or for which the college had transferred across from the previous SDF programme.

- 3.45 A further challenge within this process is the endorsement of new courses, which would require individuals with expertise in the subject matter and these are not currently included in the process of appraisal. Providing an objective, informed judgement as to the quality of a course across such a wide array of subject areas would warrant the inclusion of specialists to be called upon as part of that appraisal process. This is likely to lengthen the time taken to approve a course.
- 3.46 The programme anticipated courses predominantly from Level 3 (A Level-equivalent) through to Level 5 (Higher National Diploma or the second year of a degree); however, the guidance stipulates that Level 2 courses might be necessary in sectors associated with the foundational economy. Furthermore, stakeholders reported a stronger emphasis on likely salary increments derived from courses than on course levels for the 2021–22 academic year of the programme.
- 3.47 The process through which new courses were approved was described by a minority of stakeholders as a “missed opportunity” to embed gender budgeting. Whilst decisions on new courses were made in consideration of skill and sector priorities, stakeholders reported that this process typically did not consider varying course engagement rates across gender, ethnicity, age and disability. Limited engagement with RSPs with regard to the approach in the early stages of programme implementation and delivery was thought to hinder efforts to embed gender budgeting. In the latter stages of programme delivery, however, it is understood that Welsh Government staff have sought to engage RSPs with this agenda. This is a positive step because it ensures that skill priorities can be viewed at this level through an intersectional and gendered lens.

Course funding

- 3.48 The approach to the funding of courses represents a considerable shift from traditional approaches to funding adult (part-time) learning provision in colleges. Budgets were previously awarded on a blanket, pro rata basis with limited obligation as to the nature of the course studied. The traditional model was built around funding per learner (rather than funding per course). For the PLA programme, by awarding funding on a course-by-course basis, the Welsh Government are attempting to 'de-risk' new course provision for FE colleges without compromising the experience of learners (essentially funding course costs regardless of uptake). It is understood that course costs can be wide-ranging (FE colleges suggest that costs range between £120 and £5,000). Developmental costs are also considered to be eligible within the funding allocation, thereby allowing FE colleges to innovate and trial the delivery of new provision.
- 3.49 There is a risk, however, with this model that an expensive course will secure funding approval but that few individuals will turn up. From a (narrow) cost-efficiency (cost per output) perspective, this would represent poor value for money.
- 3.50 Whilst this approach may de-risk the implementation of new courses by FE colleges, one college noted the challenges of transitioning to this approach, highlighting the resource demands associated with the costing process, difficulties in tracking costs, and the potential variability regarding the estimations.
- 3.51 There is a course costing template used widely across colleges which applies a consistent approach to the formulation of costs. FE colleges can also include equipment costs and other associated developmental costs, about which several were particularly positive. However, three colleges also raised concerns surrounding the degree to which the course costing template allows for variation in approach to course costing and, therefore, the costs applied for, particularly in relation to building in equipment and software costs, with a desire for boundaries to address some of the perceived differentiation in course costing methods:

“This is the one area which needs to be vastly improved with PLA. If you took out part-time funding, you have funding values that the WG will associate to each course. If you are [involved in] digital technology, you know the funding value per

hour — you can do that costing and you know that base to work on. Where PLA differs there is no guidance — you have a costing form but it is up to each individual college [...]. You are trying to make sure you are pricing appropriately. If there was more guidance from the WG, it could be just a boundary; for example, if you are running an AAT course, your costing [should be] between x and x — but in the form, institutions can add equipment and software. There is room for a lot of this to be added in.” (FE College Respondent)

- 3.52 To help address the variation in course costs, the Welsh Government is commissioning research to establish bandings for different courses with the expectation that course provision will be assigned to a cost band.
- 3.53 The approach to the completion of the course costing template also varies considerably. The template includes a target number of learners and an actual number of learners. Across the course costing templates for some courses, colleges record both the target number and the actual number of learners. For some courses, however, only the target number is included. Moreover, for some courses, neither figure is recorded. Currently there is no consistent analysis of the actual number of learners per course, undermining the ability to determine the financial efficiency of course delivery across the programme.
- 3.54 Following the calculation of course costs, the Welsh Government in return meets all actual costs incurred in delivering provision through PLA programme funding, including course development costs, overheads, and costs of securing expert or external tutors. Furthermore, there is funding available from the Welsh Government to support each college’s costs in delivering the programme, including (for example) funding the salary of a role dedicated to managing the programme (up to 10 per cent of each college’s allocation, up to a maximum of £200,000).
- 3.55 A further shift in the PLA model from traditional course provision is the ability to offer vendor qualifications through the programme. These are qualifications typically provided by industrial bodies or companies that often have greater perceived relevance and value in the labour market, in comparison to a traditional qualification, but which governments have historically not funded (a computing course by Microsoft, for example). The reluctance to fund courses of this nature in

the past has related to the challenge of quality-assuring the teachers/trainers or the qualification. To counter this issue, the Welsh Government felt that capturing outcomes from participants in this type of course would be a more suitable way of judging their quality and effectiveness.

Third party delivery

- 3.56 As outlined previously within this section, each region has approved several hundred courses for delivery through the PLA programme. This rate of new course provision is likely to be reflective of the context within which PLA operates. As a programme it is seeking to respond to emerging skill needs and opportunities and, therefore, by necessity, will need to adapt quickly in an economic and policy landscape which is rapidly changing. To respond to these issues, in addition to establishing, costing and securing approval for a new course, there is also a need to identify trainers/tutors with the expertise with which to deliver that course. This need has led to FE colleges having to subcontract course delivery to other organisations or consultants. The extent to which FE colleges do subcontract varies widely, with some colleges delivering all provision themselves, whilst one FE college describes subcontracting around 90 per cent of PLA provision.
- 3.57 The theory of change (Annexe 1) considered the potential that subcontracting may provide opportunities for capacity building for Wales-based FE colleges as part of this process (through course shadowing, for example). Whilst this may be happening in a minority of instances, the subcontracting relationships vary widely, with some offering limited scope for this to take place.

Learner-led provision and flexible delivery

- 3.58 The programme also sought to achieve a substantial shift in operational approach for colleges by being learner-led. Accessibility to learning provision was set as an overarching priority for the programme with an expectation that courses would be offered online and at evenings and weekends.
- 3.59 Colleges are expected to adjust provision to accommodate applicants' requirements, e.g. through provision when they want to learn, on days when they are available, and on a campus most suitable to them, and to accommodate

additional learner needs. The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to remote learning provided a popular route to learner-led provision; however, colleges felt that they already operated in that manner:

“It’s not something we added for PLA. [This is] business as usual anyway. Access arrangements regardless of whether you do an hour or a month, you are [an FE college] learner and you are open to any of the support mechanisms we have. ALN support, digital poverty, etc., but also advice and guidance — we have a huge careers and ideas programme and [funding] to help with other costs, e.g. childcare. It’s all about breaking those barriers. The way we plan everything, we are inclusive all the time.” (FE College Respondent)

“By its very nature, [the college] is used to making those adaptations to meet the needs of learners with all sorts of barriers to learning, whether they be financial time, family commitment, learning difficulties, disability. So what we’ve been able to do through PLA is to do exactly the same thing as we would do across the college [...] using support mechanisms like assistive technologies where it’s needed or to create blended learning so that people can access learning and still fulfil their other commitments [...] this is the sort of bread and butter of what we do across the course. There’s many support mechanisms, technology strategies, outside agencies that we can use to make sure that we can overcome any barriers.” (FE College Respondent)

3.60 Meanwhile, some adaptations are evident:

“We have definitely implemented different delivery modes: online, learn at your own pace [alongside] face-to-face at the college [for longer courses]. We have adapted more learning support — but for the shorter courses we haven’t had that need. We are also doing evening courses — delivered [virtually] in the evening that they attend via Zoom or Teams.” (FE College Respondent)

3.61 Individuals are expected to apply for one course at a time; however, there is recognition in the programme guidance that personal circumstances may change, leading to participants no longer being able to continue the course. Where an individual withdraws from a course and subsequently applies for another PLA course, they remain eligible for the programme (subject to meeting the eligibility

criteria); however, if they were to drop out of a course more than once, the Welsh Government would advise that they should not be entitled to future funding through PLA.⁴⁴

- 3.62 There is also an expectation that colleges engage with employers as part of the programme to help facilitate the linkage of PLA learner opportunities in specific sectors aligned with their training plan. Some colleges reported that this approach is new to them and they were unsure as to how they engage employers or how performance might be measured. However, there was recognition of the importance of strengthening employer engagement and the role that the PLA programme can play in encouraging this.

Marketing and promotion

- 3.63 A national campaign associated with the launch of the rollout phase of PLA ran from December 2020 to March 2021 (supplemented by localised promotional activity from each of the colleges) to help boost numbers engaging with the programme. The campaign was multi-streamed in nature, using traditional media (TV and radio) alongside social media and online promotion.
- 3.64 The success of promotional activity was assessed through an omnibus survey conducted in June 2021. The survey found unprompted awareness of PLA amongst 17 per cent of the population (with the highest (25 per cent) amongst those aged 16–24 and those (23 per cent) in full-time employment) with key messaging (“improve your skills” and “help if you qualify/earn under/£26k/on a low income”). The appeal and propensity to consider participating in PLA in the future were high, with one third of those surveyed having seen an advert promoting PLA, believing that it is more likely that they would consider participating in PLA in the future.⁴⁵
- 3.65 Six of the FE colleges felt that the national campaign had a limited impact on raising awareness of and demand for the programme. Several colleges felt that its impact may have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown at the time. However, several FE colleges felt the impact of the national campaign

⁴⁴ Welsh Government (2021) Personal Learning Accounts 2021–22 – Guidance.

⁴⁵ Golley Slater (2001) Working Wales: Personal Learning Accounts – Omnibus Results – June 2021.

to be considerable, with the demand for PLA having only decreased in recent months.

- 3.66 It is understood that a second marketing campaign took place 12 months after the first, and two colleges mentioned how they felt comparatively: the second campaign had been more impactful (in terms of boosting levels of demand) than the first. All FE colleges have supplemented the national campaigns with their own promotional activities, primarily through online and social media channels. One FE college described how they had promoted PLA as a part-time course (as opposed to free provision) in a bid to secure genuine interest and to try mitigating the perceived risk of higher dropout rates associated with free provision.

Gender budgeting – implementation

- 3.67 Half of all interviewed FE college staff in the final stage of the evaluation described the gender budgeting approach as being “embedded” to some extent in their delivery. In most cases, FE college staff stated that this was evident in the “inclusive approach” that they take and that this was already embedded in their existing provision pre-PLA. However, staff also suggested that whilst gender budgeting was apparent in their delivery, they “struggled” to know how to fully adopt a gender budgeting approach. One FE college staff member stated:

“[With] gender budgeting, I think we’re all grappling with it and trying to learn what we mean by it. As a college, our first thing to do is be inclusive and that’s made up into how we plan for provision. We serve hugely diverse communities and that’s at the forefront of the college. [We are] mindful of start times of courses and how they might clash with childcare provision. It’s ingrained in what we do. Whilst Welsh Government provided guidance and briefings on [gender budgeting], I think we have struggled to put it into practice.” (FE College Respondent)

- 3.68 The use of the gender budgeting approach was frequently described by FE college staff as being similar to promoting equal opportunities, as required by the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO) in recent operations funded through the European Social Fund (ESF). In some cases, staff also stated that this approach

aligned with equal opportunity agendas and/or widening participation in FE colleges.

One staff member stated:

“It’s just a general college approach. It was a massive thing we’ve done in ESF. We’ve encouraged young women to come through engineering.” (FE College Respondent)

- 3.69 Perceiving a gender budgeting approach to be the same as promoting equal opportunities for ESF programmes demonstrates an implicit understanding that provision should cater to all learners. However, a gender budgeting approach requires an explicit exploration and understanding of the impacts and barriers for different groups of learners, e.g. female learners, disabled learners, and learners from ethnically diverse backgrounds, from the outset of delivery design. This explicit understanding informs the direction of resources to maximise positive impacts and results in encouraging and enabling participation for all. This approach should be understood as going further than promoting equal opportunities and as underpinning all programme delivery in a conscious fashion. Where a gender budgeting approach is used in future programmes, delivery partners will need to be reminded that the promotion of equal opportunities and gender budgeting are not synonymous, as well as being given practical guidance to demonstrate how this approach can be taken.
- 3.70 In a review of marketing and publicity, there is strong evidence, including imagery that challenges traditional employment roles, of gender stereotypes existing across many of the colleges. This is particularly prominent in the promotion of female roles within the construction sector.
- 3.71 However, most delivery partners were unable to detail how the gender budgeting approach had been embedded within their delivery. Stakeholders and FE college staff commonly suggested that whilst the theory associated with gender budgeting had been outlined in initial guidance, few practical examples of how the Welsh Government expected this to be undertaken were shared with delivery partners. One FE college staff member stated:

“We do have female lecturers and engineers, which is a barrier already broken down subconsciously. But for the PLA programme, I think [that

the approach is] added in as an annexe. It's not pushed or questioned and we weren't given worked-through examples. It would have been useful to understand what they thought was good practice or bad practice — it felt like a bit of an afterthought.” (FE College Respondent)

- 3.72 Limited dissemination of practical examples and requirements meant that FE colleges were unclear as to the Welsh Government's expectation of them and how best to illustrate their undertaking of a gender budgeting approach. It is important to note that stakeholders and delivery partners reported more explanations and practical examples being shared in more recent regional governance sessions.
- 3.73 Future programmes should seek to include practical guidance and examples with regard to embedding a gender budgeting approach in early guidance given to delivery partners. This should also be consistently and frequently discussed within update meetings to ensure that a gender budgeting approach is visible and seen to be integral to delivery (rather than supplementary).

Competitive bidding for national priority sectors

- 3.74 The competitive bidding rounds for the funding of provision towards certain priority sectors were widely welcomed by FE colleges, with many viewing the rounds as being highly successful. There were some concerns aired with regard to the timeframes for responding to the opportunities, but FE colleges acknowledged that for the most part they were able to cope with these.

“I think it's been quite effective in terms of resourcing some of the training to meet particular needs [...]. That commissioning way of working around particular items has been really successful and allowed us to really concentrate and focus on particular areas.” (FE College Respondent)

“I thought that it was pretty slick. The timescales were obviously short, [but] it wasn't too onerous.” (FE College Respondent)

“Timescale was a challenge [...] the demand for those areas, [particularly] HGV for us, where the demand certainly exceeded

expectation by far, and (obviously) digital was important, and [the] green sector.” (FE College Respondent)

Case study: Support to become an HGV driver after threat of redundancy

Gethin was working in the construction industry and was at risk of redundancy due to the impact of COVID-19 and Brexit on the construction sector. He had been with the same employer for 20 years and was faced with having to find a new employer or career. He was also on furlough, which gave him additional time and headspace with which to contemplate what to do next.

He chose to undertake a course to be an HGV driver because he was aware of the shortage of drivers and thought that there would be a high likelihood of securing a new job quickly after the course. Due to his redundancy, he would not have been able to afford the course without the PLA funding.

“The only thing I would say is that it’s going too slowly and only now, in May 2022, am I getting onto practical side and that is since November 21! [...] But [I am] very grateful that I was given this opportunity and looking forward to completing and becoming an HGV driver.” The course was delivered through an external provider, where the theory was delivered online and the practical was delivered in person at the external provider’s centre. Whilst Gethin was generally positive about the course and the opportunity, he noted that the time between the theory and practical was high due to the high volume of learners subscribed to the course.

3.75 Were there to be future competitive bidding rounds, several colleges referenced a desire for greater transparency, particularly regarding eligibility to bid for the funds. There was understood to be some confusion as to whether only those who were hitting programme targets and fulfilling their allocation were eligible. Furthermore, a lack of clarity between FE colleges with regard to where they were in fulfilling their allocation only added to the perceived lack of transparency, nor were colleges made aware of the level of funding awarded to each college.

4. Findings – Engagement and Service Delivery

Summary

- By 31st August 2022, there had been more than 22,000 enrolments and more than 16,000 unique learners in the PLA programme.
- The balance between PLA learners and learners in the ELA strand varies widely across FE colleges, with some colleges enrolling nobody through ELA, whilst for others, over 40 per cent of enrolments were via the ELA strand.
- There are uneven geographical patterns of enrolment in PLA, and adults in Carmarthenshire are 33 times more likely to enrol in PLA than are those in Flintshire.
- Learner-led learners in PLA are more ethnically diverse, more likely to be female, and younger than those learners enrolled in the employer-led ELA strand of the programme.
- Females are more prevalent in learning provision in most sector subject areas through the PLA programme than they are in adult learning generally.
- Almost one quarter of PLA learners (and one third of all female learners) were employed in the health sector at the point of enrolment in the PLA programme.
- Almost 40 per cent of PLA learners (and two thirds of all female learners) described themselves as being employed in care, leisure, administrative or secretarial occupations. These occupational sectors account for less than 20 per cent of all employees across Wales.
- Almost three in 10 learners in the PLA programme found out about the programme via their line manager/supervisor.
- In the absence of PLA, almost half of survey respondents (46 per cent; 231/499) would not have undertaken any training. Females and those in less secure employment were more likely to not pursue other training in the absence of the programme.

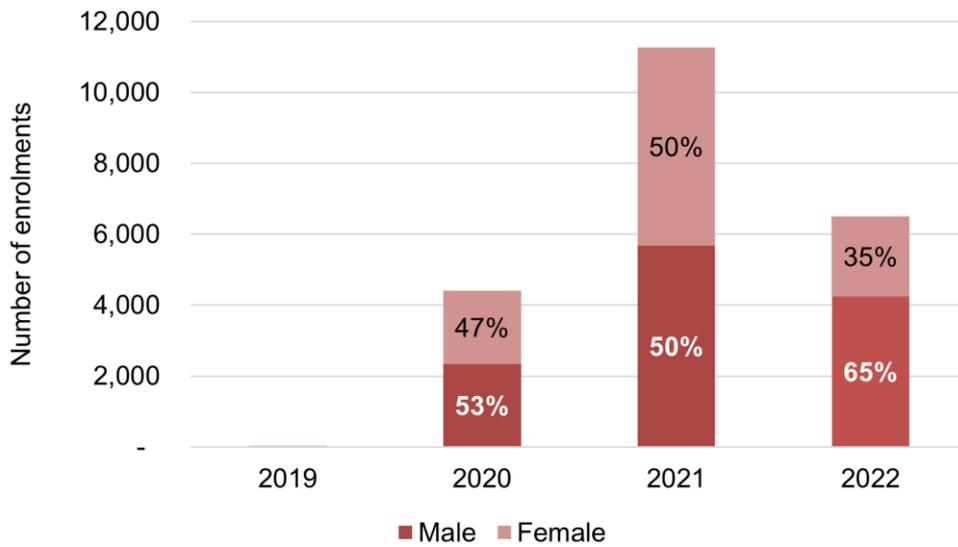
Introduction

- 4.1 This section analyses patterns of performance and progress in the PLA programme. It explores the journeys and experience of participants in the programme as well as the profile of learners and the courses delivered.

Performance and progress

- 4.2 There are no programme-wide targets for the core funding through the PLA programme beyond the expenditure of the funding allocation by each FE college. To assess the progress of the programme, an analysis of management information (primarily LLWR and available non-LLWR) data has been undertaken.
- 4.3 The analysis of MI data up to 31st August 2022 identifies the following:
- There are a total of 22,229 learner records (which include duplicates, where a learner has enrolled in more than one course). Three quarters of these (16,733) are learner enrolments in the PLA programme, with the remainder being recorded as enrolments in the ELA strand of the programme.
 - There are 16,241 unique learners, 12,015 of whom are in the PLA individual learner element of the programme, whilst 4,457 are in the ELA strand of the programme (231 learners appear in both PLA and ELA, which suggests that a minority of individuals have participated in both strands of the programme).
 - Just over seven per cent of all learners (1,194) and nine per cent of all enrolments (1,983) took place in the pilot stage of the programme.
- 4.4 Figure 4.1 below shows the breakdown of unique PLA programme enrolments by gender, by calendar year. It gives a sense of the scale of the increase in enrolments in PLA over time. The chart shows the equivalent of one fifth of all attendees (4,437) enrolled in 2019 or 2020, whilst there were 11,285 unique enrolments during 2021 (equivalent to almost 51 per cent of total enrolments). Whilst 2022 is not a full year of enrolments, it is noticeable that in that year, female enrolments had decreased to the lowest proportion of all enrolments since the programme commenced (35 per cent or 2,244 enrolments of the 6,496 recorded for that year).

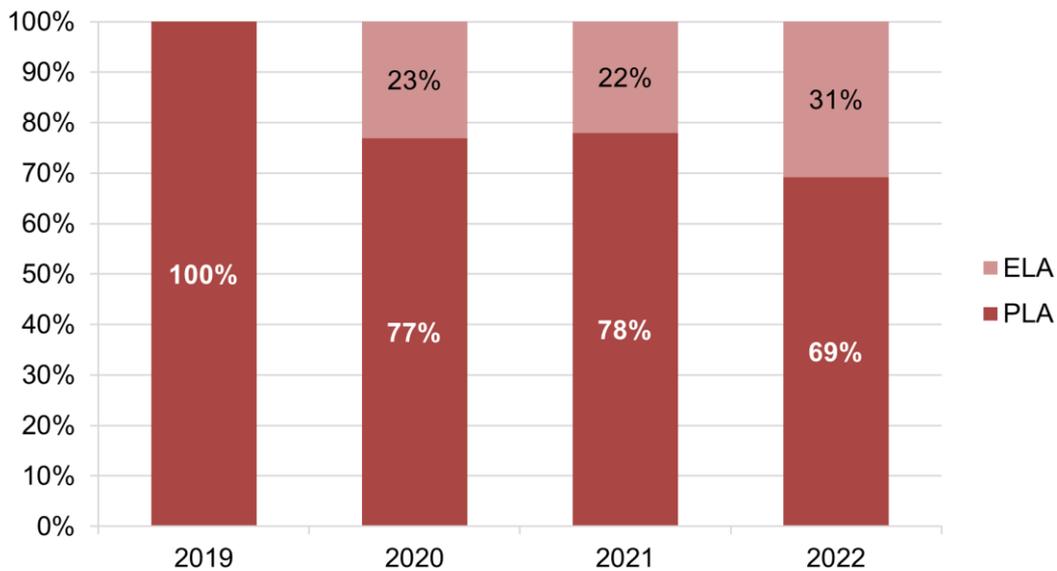
Figure 4.1: Enrolments per calendar year by gender



Source: PLA Management Information.

4.5 Figure 4.2 below shows the breakdown of enrolments by learner-led (PLA) and employer-led (ELA) strand. It shows that in 2022, ELA enrolments constituted almost one third of total programme enrolments.

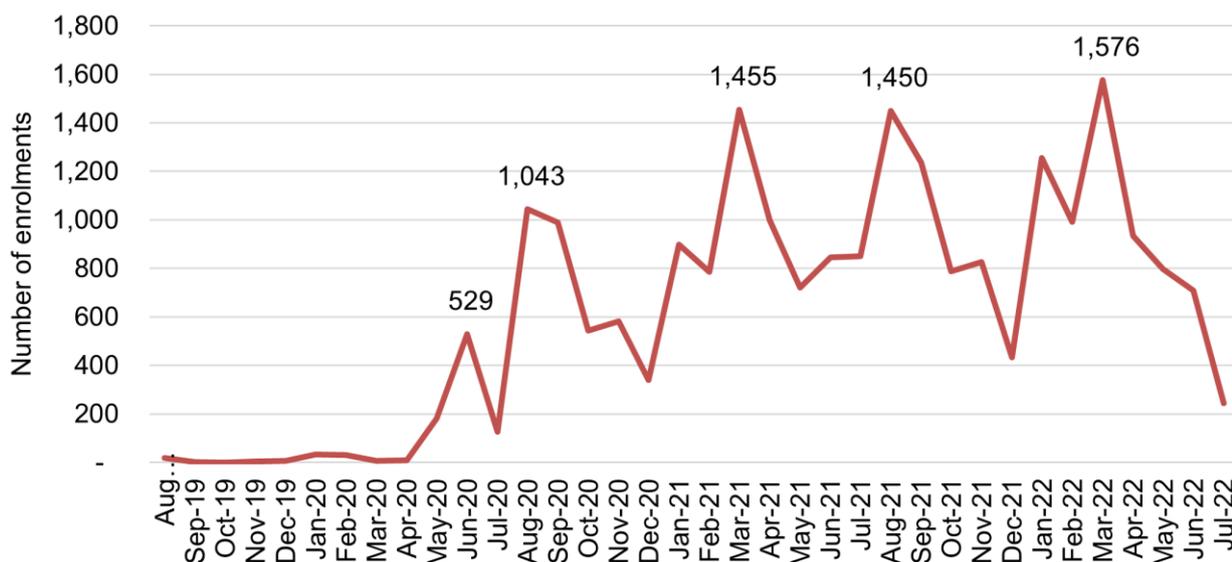
Figure 4.2: Proportion of PLA and ELA enrolments by total enrolment each year



Source: PLA Management Information.

4.6 An annualised analysis of enrolments masks in-year fluctuations. Figure 4.3 below presents monthly course enrolments and illustrates the extent of variation, with clear spikes in March and August of each year. The spikes in August are likely to be associated with the traditional start of the academic year, whilst the spikes in March are presumed to be influenced by the national priority funding which is associated with the fiscal (April–March) year. These patterns suggest a degree of continued alignment of programme delivery with academic terms, although it is acknowledged that this could be influenced by learner expectations as well as FE college delivery parameters.

Figure 4.3: Course enrolments over time



Source: PLA Management Information.

4.7 When exploring course enrolments by FE college, there is a high degree of variation in total enrolments and in the proportional breakdown of enrolments between learner-led PLA and the ELA strand. Coleg Gwent, for example, has delivered almost one fifth of all PLA attendances but has delivered no provision through the ELA strand. Grwp NPTC Group has delivered 16 per cent of all course enrolments; however, these have primarily been delivered through the ELA strand, for which the college has delivered 41 per cent of all ELA enrolments across Wales.

Table 4.1: Course enrolments by college

	Unique Attendances (n=22,229)	PLA (n=16,733)	ELA (n=5,496)
Cardiff & the Vale College	24%	19%	37%
Coleg Gwent	19%	25%	0%
Coleg Sir Gâr	17%	20%	8%
Grwp NPTC Group	16%	8%	41%
Grwp Llandrillo Menai	7%	7%	4%
Coleg y Cymoedd	6%	8%	2%
Gower College Swansea	6%	7%	4%
Pembrokeshire College	2%	1%	4%
Coleg Cambria	2%	3%	0%
Bridgend College	1%	1%	0%
Merthyr Tydfil College	0%	0%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: PLA Management Information.

Learner location

4.8 There appear to be geographical clusters of learners in the PLA programme. Figure 4.4 below shows the number of learner-led PLA learners per 1,000 of the resident adult population in each local authority area. The map shows concentrations in Carmarthenshire, Cardiff, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, and Newport. In Carmarthenshire there has been particularly high engagement, with employed adults resident in the county being over 33 times more likely to have engaged in a PLA course than those residing in Flintshire.

Learner profile

- 4.10 The tables below provide analyses of the profile of unique learners in the learner-led PLA strand of the programme (Table 4.2) and in the employer-led ELA strand of the programme (Table 4.3). They indicate that those learner-led participants in the core PLA strand of the programme are more ethnically diverse, more likely to be female, and younger than those in the employer-led ELA strand of the programme. The inability to influence whom an employer enrolls in the ELA strand illustrates the challenges of applying a gender budgeting approach to this particular strand of the PLA programme.
- 4.11 The difference in gender profile between PLA and ELA is particularly stark, with males representing almost two thirds of ELA participants but just over half of PLA participants.

Table 4.2: Profile of PLA learners by gender

	All PLA	Male	Female
Ethnicity			
White	92.4%	91.8%	93.0%
Asian / Asian British	2.8%	3.1%	2.5%
Black / Black British	2.1%	2.5%	1.6%
Mixed / Multiple Ethnic	2.0%	1.9%	2.0%
Other Ethnic Background	0.8%	0.8%	0.8%
Age			
16 to 24	15.3%	15.2%	15.4%
25 to 34	36.8%	37.4%	36.2%
35 to 44	25.3%	25.6%	25.0%
45 to 54	15.4%	14.5%	16.3%
55 to 64	6.6%	6.8%	6.4%
Disability or WLHC			
Yes	5.2%	4.9%	5.3%
No	81.8%	82.5%	81.1%

Source: PLA Management Information.

Table 4.3: Profile of ELA learners by gender

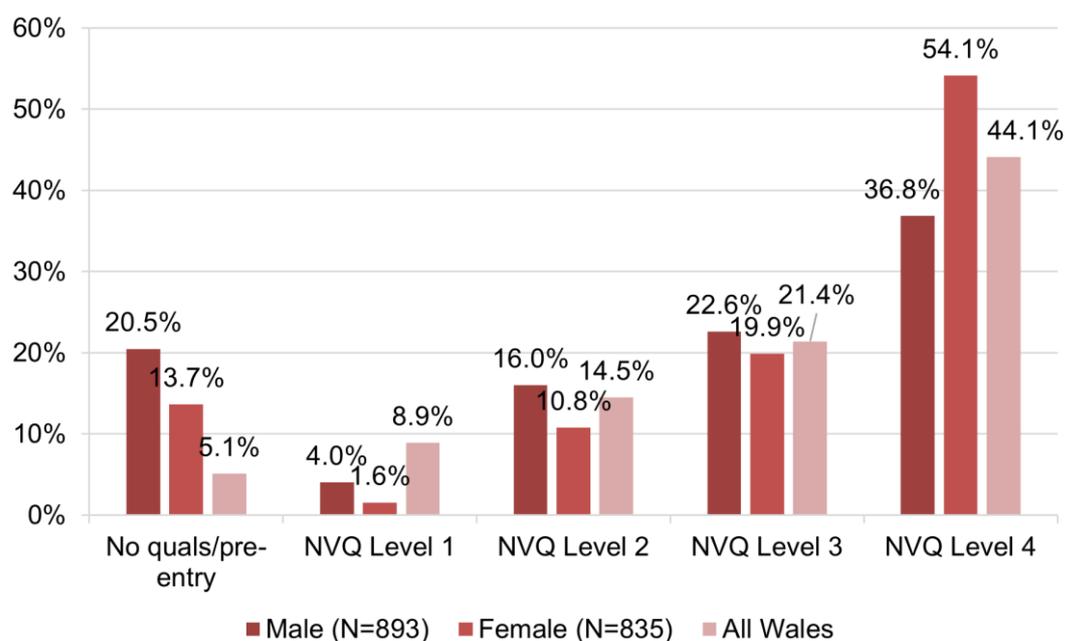
	All PLA	Male	Female
Ethnicity			
White	94.6%	95.4%	93.0%
Asian / Asian British	2.6%	2.0%	3.7%
Black / Black British	1.6%	1.3%	2.2%
Mixed / Multiple Ethnic	0.9%	1.0%	0.7%
Other Ethnic Background	0.4%	0.3%	0.5%
Age			
16 to 24	14.3%	15.1%	12.8%
25 to 34	28.4%	28.1%	29.0%
35 to 44	24.3%	24.0%	24.8%
45 to 54	20.4%	20.0%	20.9%
55 to 64	11.8%	11.8%	11.7%
Disability or WLHC			
Yes	3.0%	3.1%	2.7%
No	96.8%	96.7%	97.1%

Source: PLA Management Information.

- 4.12 Nine per cent of learners described themselves as Welsh speakers (four per cent fluent), with females being marginally more likely to be Welsh speakers (10 per cent) than males (nine per cent). Whilst equal proportions of those enrolled in the learner-led PLA programme described themselves as Welsh speakers (4.4 per cent males and 4.4 per cent females), there was a much greater discrepancy amongst employer-led learners in the ELA strand. Amongst ELA learners, 4.6 per cent of females described themselves as Welsh speakers in comparison to 2.6 per cent of males.
- 4.13 Just under five per cent of learners in the programme declared some form of disability or work-limiting health condition, with females being marginally (five per cent) more likely to declare some form of disability than males (four per cent). Amongst learner-led PLA participants, the proportion declaring some form of disability increased to 5.2 per cent, whilst for employer-led ELA learners it decreased to three per cent.
- 4.14 Amongst all learners, one in ten unique participants have their highest qualification prior to enrolment recorded in the LLWR. Where these have been recorded the data

have been benchmarked against the distribution of qualification levels across the entire economically active population in Wales (in Figure 4.5 below). The figure shows a high proportion of learners recording no qualifications or pre-entry qualifications, whilst qualifications at NVQ Level 2 and NVQ Level 3 are broadly comparable with those for the economically active workforce across Wales. When analysed by gender, the chart shows that females are typically more highly qualified than males, particularly at NVQ Level 4 or above. Considerable caution should be exercised in the interpretation of these data, however, as they are captured through the LLWR by two FE colleges only: Coleg Gwent and Gower College Swansea.

Figure 4.5: Highest qualification amongst PLA learners and the economically active population in Wales



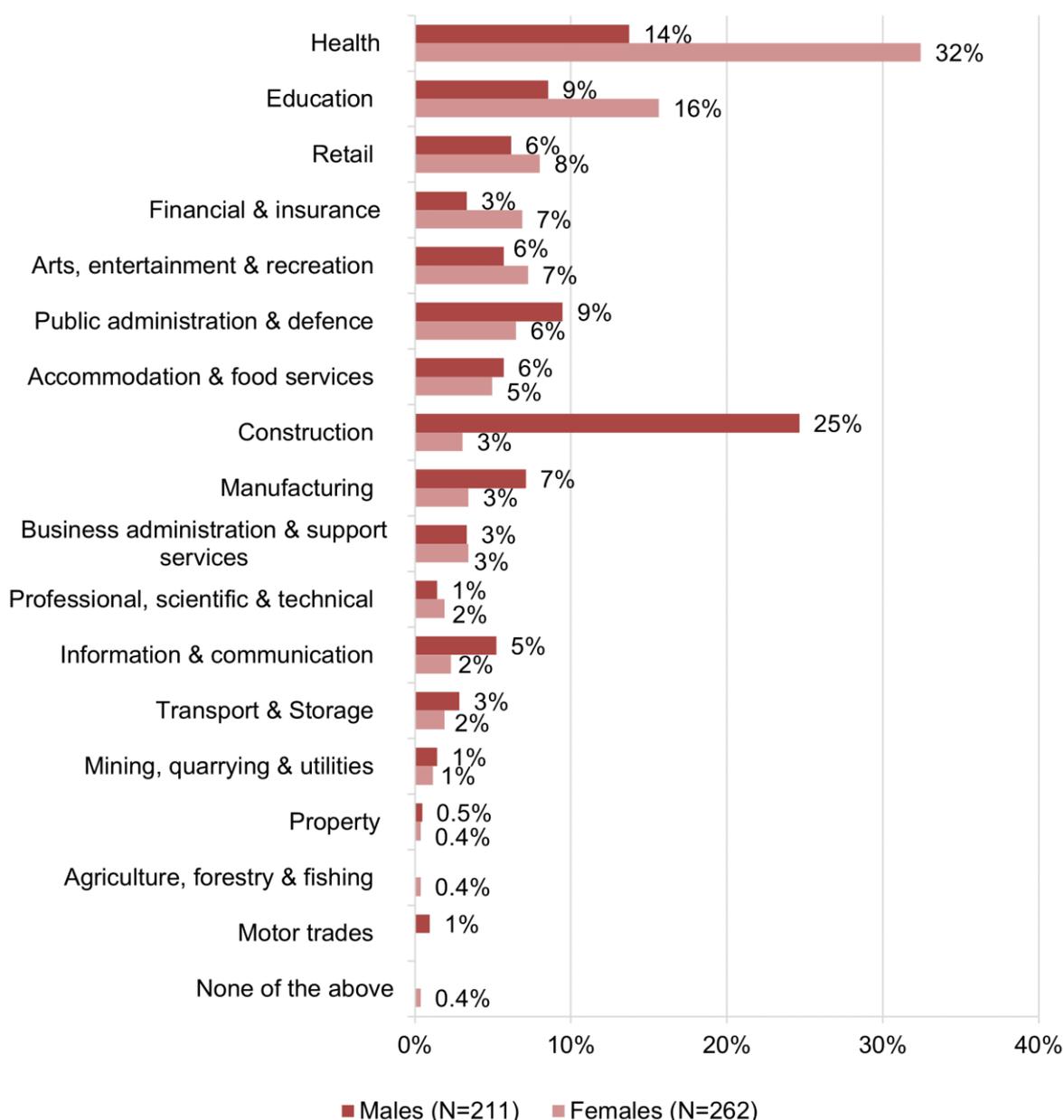
Source: PLA Management Information and Annual Population Survey (January–December 2021).

4.15 Comprehensive management information on the industrial sector in which learners were employed upon enrolment in the programme or their occupation is unavailable. These topic areas were requested of FE colleges in the PLA guidance, but this information has been captured in an inconsistent manner. It was also asked of PLA participants through the learner survey, thereby giving an indication of the sectoral profile of PLA learners. Figure 4.6 below shows that almost one third of

females who responded to the PLA survey (and one quarter of learners overall) were employed in the health sector. Furthermore, one quarter of males surveyed were employed in the construction sector at the point of enrolment in the programme.

- 4.16 The relative prominence of those from the health sector might be considered a cause for concern; one of the unintended consequences of PLA may be the ability to facilitate the transfer of individuals from a sector which currently suffers from skill shortages. This is explored further in section 6, wherein the analysis of career changes by sector is reviewed.

Figure 4.6: Industrial sector of PLA learners at point of enrolment by gender



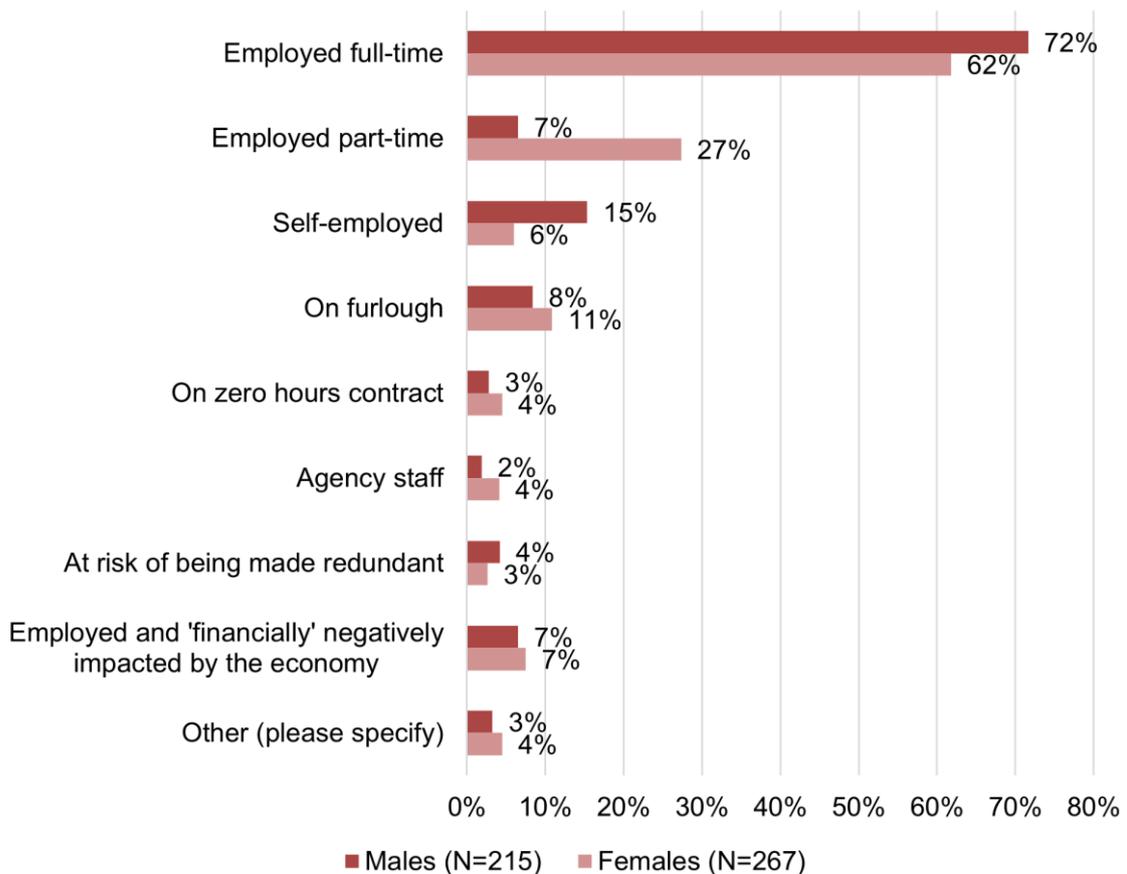
Source: PLA Learner Survey.

4.17 Amongst PLA learners, two thirds (333/503) were in full-time employment, 18 per cent (91/503) were in part-time employment, and 10 per cent (52/503) described themselves as being self-employed. Female learners were much more likely to be employed on a part-time basis upon enrolment, whilst males were much more likely to be self-employed (see Figure 4.7 below).

4.18 Eleven per cent of female learners described how they were on furlough at the point of enrolment, whilst 10 per cent of all learners (11 per cent of women and nine per

cent of men) described themselves as either on a zero-hour contract, agency staff, or at risk of being made redundant. The relative dominance of full-time employees enrolled in the programme suggests that the programme has been successful in providing the flexibility of learning provision to enable them to engage whilst also working in a full-time role.

Figure 4.7: Employment status at point of enrolment in PLA by gender



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

Case study: From threat of redundancy to new career in weeks

Laura applied for a course through the PLA programme because she was about to be made redundant from her current role in management. She was referred to the programme by Working Wales, which she approached for support due to her upcoming redundancy. At the time, she was on furlough and, therefore, had additional time with which to consider what she should study, as well as to complete the course. As well as support from Working Wales, she received guidance from an advisor at the college who created a training plan for

her, who she stated was really helpful in giving advice and guidance and pointing her in the right direction.

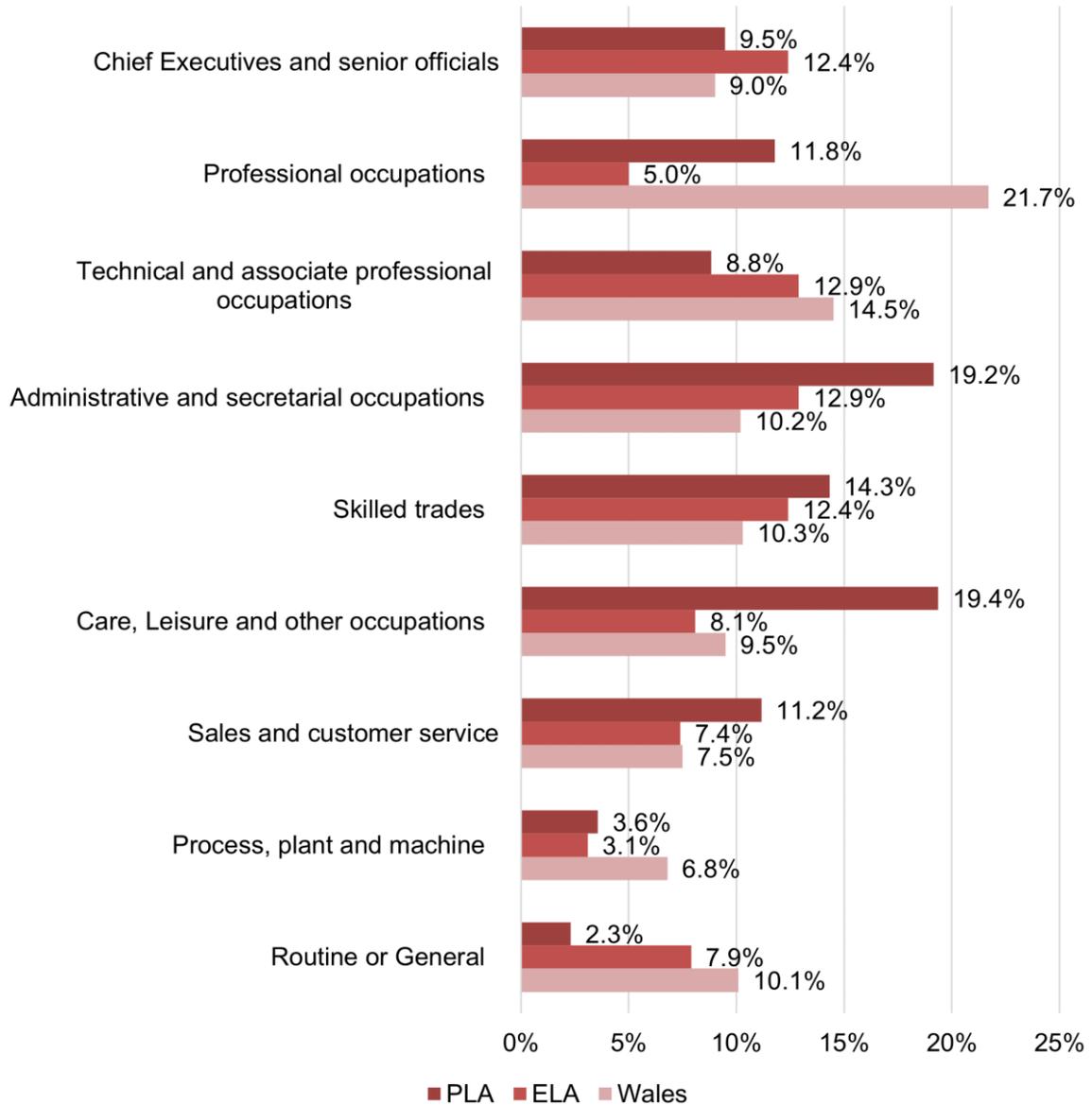
Whilst Laura had experience in her current role, she did not have the formal qualification necessary to find new employment following the redundancy. She applied for PRINCE2 Agile Foundation & Practitioner Certification and was able to complete it online during her furlough period.

“It was a really good experience and I appreciate the funding, as it made a big difference at the time, and have since recommended it to friends.”

Since completing the course, she now has a new career in the health and social care sector in management, which involves supporting a wider team and enabling others. She attributed this new career to the learning that they undertook through PLA, which enabled her to enter employment within weeks of the end of the PRINCE2 course.

- 4.19 On average, learners at the point of enrolment in their course had been with their current employer for just over five years. Surveyed learners were asked which of the standard occupational categories best reflected their role at the time of their enrolment in the PLA programme. Figure 4.8 below compares the occupational profile of PLA learners with the occupational profile of all employees in Wales. The chart illustrates that staff enrolled in the ELA strand of the programme were more likely to be chief executives or senior officials than were those in the PLA programme, whilst almost two fifths of PLA learner-led learners identified as being in either administrative and secretarial occupations or in care and leisure-related occupations. Collectively, these learner-led roles are almost twice as prevalent amongst PLA learners as they are across the employed population of Wales. The prevalence of these occupations is likely to be reflective of the fact that they typically draw earnings of a lower scale than the national average, thereby increasing the likelihood of eligibility for the PLA programme.

Figure 4.8: Occupational breakdown of PLA and ELA learners compared to all employees in Wales



Source: PLA Learner Survey. N=475 (those who responded 'none of the above' excluded).

4.20 Figure 4.9 below shows the self-declared occupational categories of learners by gender. The chart shows how male learners are dominated by those in skilled trade occupations, whereas females are commonly employed in administrative, secretarial, care or leisure occupations upon enrolment in the PLA programme.

Figure 4.9: Occupational breakdown of PLA learners by gender



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

4.21 Survey respondents were also asked about their earnings at the point of enrolment. Whilst over three quarters of learner-led PLA participants reported earning less than £25,000 per annum, nine per cent of respondents stated that they earned over £30,000 per annum upon enrolment, which would suggest that they were ineligible for the learner-led strand of the programme. Whilst there is typically a small ‘error’ rate with regard to ineligibility, nine per cent is at the higher level of that rate. This could relate to the fact that restrictions on salary were removed for those who were on furlough or in insecure employment⁴⁶ at the time of enrolment. It may also be that some of the participants of the ELA strand of the programme, wherein there were no salary restrictions, have been mistakenly recorded as learner-led PLA participants.

⁴⁶ Defined as being on furlough, on zero hours, in agency employment, at risk of redundancy, or employed and financially negatively impacted by the economy.

4.22 A comparison of earnings at the point of enrolment by gender, in Figure 4.10 below, shows that over half of females earned less than £20,000 at the point of enrolment in the programme; this is likely to be at least partly linked to the fact that females were much more likely to be in part-time employment than were males.

Figure 4.10: Annual salary bands amongst learners at the point of enrolment by gender



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

4.23 The programme is also designed to engage non-traditional learners by providing support to overcome barriers to learning. Amongst those surveyed, just over one third (37 per cent; 155/418) had previously undertaken some form of learning within the 12 months prior to enrolling in the PLA programme, and almost two thirds within the last three years. These figures suggest more active participation in learning amongst PLA learners than is the case across the UK, where (on average) 44 per cent of adults had taken part in learning in the last three years.⁴⁷

4.24 Despite the relatively active learners amongst the PLA population, 35 per cent (147/418) of learners had last engaged in some form of training provision at least three years prior to enrolment in the PLA programme. The programme has

⁴⁷ [Learning and Work Institute \(2021\) Adult participation in learning survey 2021.](#)

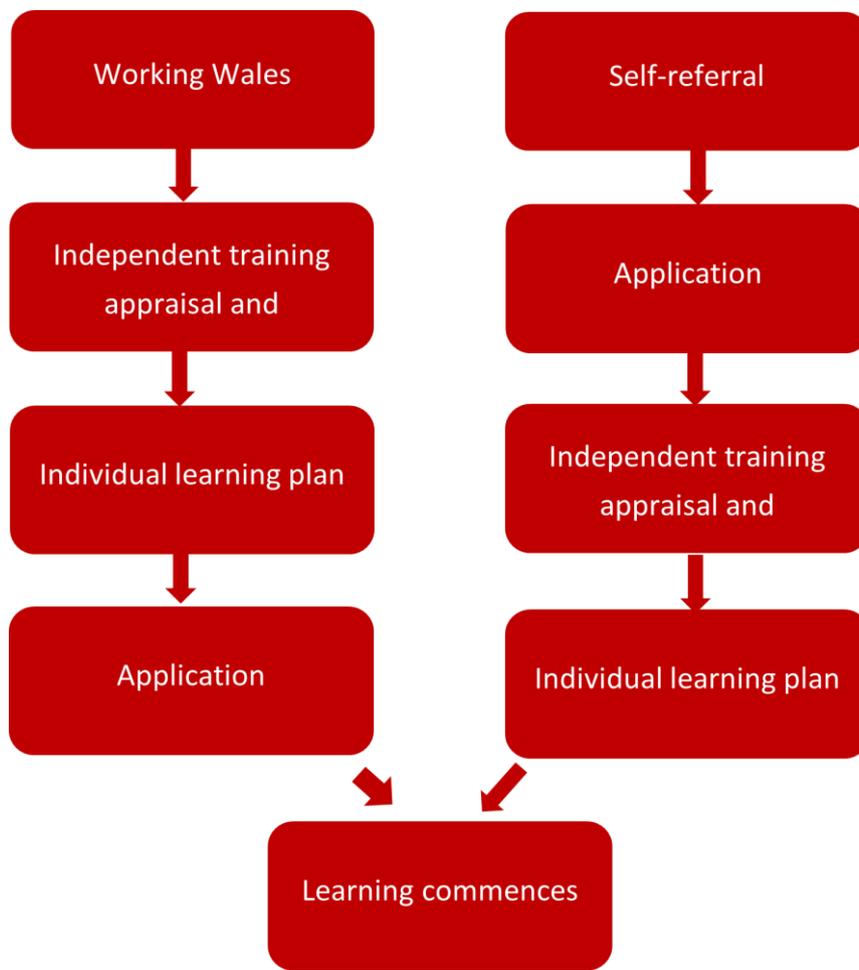
therefore engaged a range of participants, both those who regularly engage in training and those who do not.

Learner journeys

Programme engagement

- 4.25 As shown in Figure 4.11, there are understood to be two primary routes into the PLA programme for individual learners: they can apply directly via one of the 13 participant FE colleges or they may be referred through Working Wales. The Working Wales programme provides an all-Wales entry point to employability support. It enables individuals to talk to trained advisors about employment and skills, their aims and aspirations, and any challenges that they face in obtaining and maintaining work, education or training. Advice and guidance are provided on a face-to-face basis at Careers Wales offices, local Jobcentres, and other community outreach locations, as well as via the telephone and online. As part of the Working Wales service, advisors may conduct a training appraisal and assessment of an individual, which would inform the design of an individual learning plan (which is shared with the individual). It is expected that the plan would provide the underpinning rationale behind the choice of funded learning provision that an individual wishes to pursue through the PLA programme.
- 4.26 Where an individual applies directly to a participating FE college, it is the role of the college, through the enrolment process, to undertake an independent assessment prior to learning to ensure that an individual enrolls in a course that will support employment progression in their chosen sector.

Figure 4.11: Routes into the PLA programme

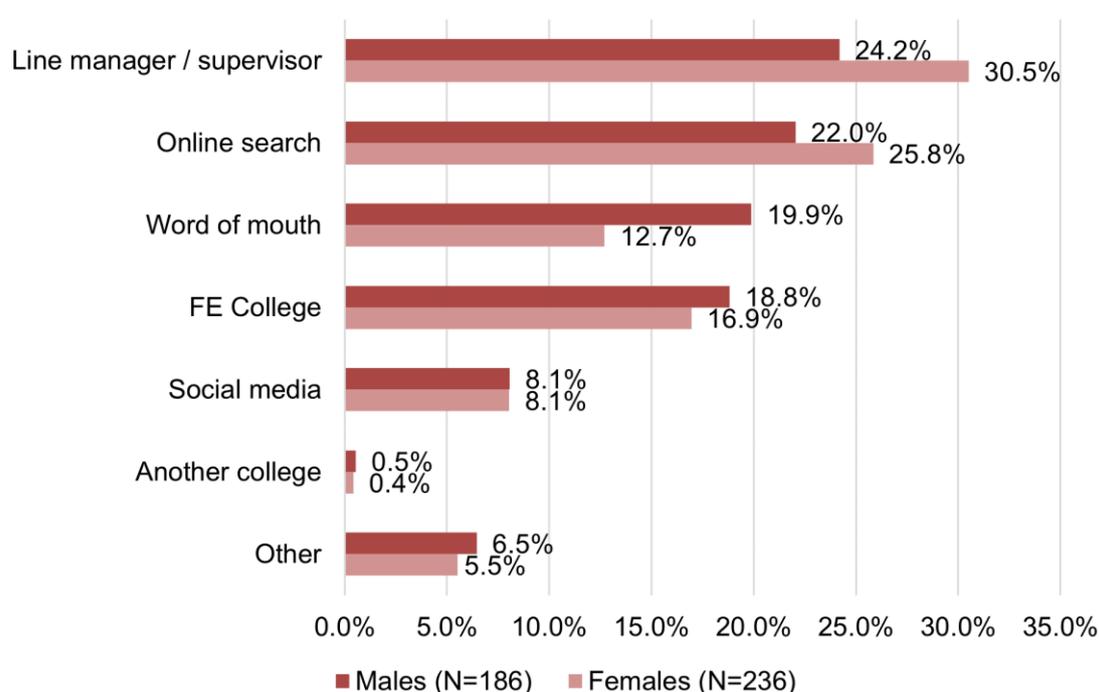


Programme engagement

- 4.27 When asked how they became aware of PLA and, in particular, whether they had been referred by Working Wales, 10 per cent of respondents (52/502) confirmed that they had been, whilst a further five per cent (29/502) could not recall how they became aware. This is a higher proportion of Working Wales referrals than typically reported by FE colleges (which estimated that no more than five per cent of enquiries are known to be referrals from Working Wales), thus possibly reflecting the, at times, informal nature of this referral route.
- 4.28 Those who were not referred by Working Wales were asked how they first heard about the programme. Figure 4.12 below illustrates that the most popular route was via their line manager or supervisor, particularly so amongst females. The prominence of the employer in raising awareness of PLA is somewhat surprising.

However, it may illustrate the potential role of the employer in guiding an individual in their career (20 per cent of learners (79/407) stated that the ultimate decision that the course was suitable to them was made by their employer or jointly with their employer), with employers exerting greater influence on learner-led PLA provision than had been envisaged. Males typically reported a greater level of diversity in the routes through which they are gaining awareness of the programme, with, for example, one fifth of males reported hearing of the programme via word of mouth.

Figure 4.12: How did you first hear about the programme?



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

- 4.29 A supplementary question was asked of learners to understand, after becoming aware of the programme, what had been the motivation for enrolling in PLA. For two thirds of learners (337/502), gaining a qualification or career progression was described as the primary motivator.
- 4.30 Amongst 13 per cent (64/502) of respondents, however, they described being mandated to participate in the learning by their employer or line manager, thereby suggested that for them at least, the PLA programme had not been learner-led.
- 4.31 Learners were asked what they hoped to gain from participating in the training. Almost three quarters referred to a desire for the specific qualification associated

with the course, whilst almost half (47 per cent) referred to progressing in their existing career, and four in 10 to support their move into a new career. Through a targeted analysis of responses associated with career progression, almost three quarters of respondents (74 per cent; 370/503) reported either progressing in their existing career or moving into a new career as a key goal of participating in the programme. Figure 4.13 illustrates a high degree of similarity when responses are analysed by gender, aside from learning associated with mental health (either learning about it or undertaking learning to tackle it), where females were more than twice as likely as males to refer to it as an aspiration related to the training.

Figure 4.13: What were you hoping to get out of the training? (by gender)



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

4.32 All colleges undertake an eligibility check as part of the application process for the PLA programme. Whilst the specific approach varies from one college to the next,

there is typically a conversation (either online, via telephone or face-to-face) to discuss their aspirations and training needs. Only one college referred to the development of individual learning plans and these were typically tutor-led and delivered in the early stages of a course and largely confined to course provision delivered over multiple months:

“There’s a conversation with the individual, asking where they want to be in the next year, what job do they do now, do they want to progress in that job or move jobs. A formalised, full-on training plan? No, that doesn’t happen, but those discussions happen. We do a training need analysis, which is a plan for the rest of their life.” (FE College Respondent)

- 4.33 Most FE colleges referred to the enrolment process for PLA as being long-winded and bureaucratic, placing considerable burden on their staffing resources. Several colleges raised concerns that the paperwork may be off-putting to prospective learners. One concern related to the consistent enrolment approach regardless of course length/intensity, with those applying to a one-day course being required to undergo the same process as that of an applicant to a two-year course.
- 4.34 Whilst there was concern amongst colleges with regard to the length of the enrolment process for PLA, when learners were asked how straightforward they found the process to be, almost three quarters (73 per cent; 363/500) described it as being ‘very straightforward’ and a further 23 per cent (117/500) as ‘relatively straightforward’.
- 4.35 Just under one fifth of surveyed learners recalled working with an advisor to develop an individual learning plan. Where they recalled developing an individual learning plan, survey respondents were asked to rate its usefulness out of 5 (with 5 being ‘very useful’), resulting in an average of 4.5 out of 5. Furthermore, amongst two thirds (62/93) of learners, the plan influenced the course in which they chose to participate, doing so to a great extent amongst 32 per cent (30/93).
- 4.36 Whilst the majority (78 per cent; 316/407) of learners described how they ultimately decided whether the course would be most suitable for them, 12 per cent (48/407) reported that their employer determined the suitability of the course, whilst a further eight per cent (31/407) described how it was a joint decision between themselves

and their employer. The prominence of their employer in determining the course in which an individual enrolled provides further evidence of employer influence on learner participation. It may also illustrate inaccurate recording of learner participants in PLA, when they may instead have been more accurately associated with the ELA strand of the programme.

Course suitability

- 4.37 Despite the extensive enrolment processes, there remained concerns amongst some FE colleges as to the suitability of some participants for courses. Colleges noted eligibility criteria, but in terms of suitability, the steps set out in Figure 4.11 previously within this section were advisory only; ultimately, an individual could choose to participate in whichever course they pleased to do so.
- 4.38 The pilot FE colleges described how the rapid escalation in interest and engagement in the programme led to an acceleration in the enrolment process, limiting the extent to which they were able to determine specific applicant needs. Initially, applicants were reviewed by a coordinator to ensure that their support was personalised, but with the escalation in applicants, this was no longer possible, increasing the risk of participants choosing an unsuitable course.
- 4.39 Amongst learners who left their courses early, about 10 per cent (11/112) referred to the course as not being right for them, whilst seven per cent (8/112) stated that it was too advanced for them. This suggests that issues surrounding course suitability may not have been as prevalent as first feared.
- 4.40 The concerns surrounding course suitability, however, were perhaps compounded by associated concerns regarding the lack of any financial implications for learners who are early dropouts. Upon enrolment, the provision is free to an individual, with learner costs only being incurred in terms of time, travel, and learning materials (primarily once the course has started). Concerns were raised by colleges as to the perceived value of free courses, although the subsequent introduction of restrictions on the number of schemes for which an individual can apply was welcomed. Furthermore, the administrative burden on determining whether a learner has left a course was described as being considerable.

Employer engagement in the ELA strand

- 4.41 To enrol staff in the ELA element of the programme, employers are required to engage directly with FE colleges to discuss their requirements and determine whether the programme is the most suitable for meeting their needs. If the provision required was not available, the course approval process outlined within the previous section would be necessary.
- 4.42 All FE colleges spoke of the importance of existing relationships in attracting and engaging employers with respect to the ELA strand of the programme (with most colleges stating that employers with which relationships already existed constituted the majority of employers with which they had engaged). Colleges did, however, highlight how PLA had helped to cement and extend those existing relationships in addition to extending from those networks to build a larger network of new/additional clients.
- 4.43 The importance of pre-existing relationships was reflected in feedback from employers. Indeed, over two thirds of surveyed employers (68 per cent; 44/75) became aware of the programme via an FE college (59 per cent) or a training provider (nine per cent). Three quarters of employers (54/72) had previously participated in training with the FE college with which they engaged through the programme, with 39 of these (72 per cent) doing so on several occasions.
- 4.44 When asked what attracted employers to enquire as to the programme, almost half (33/72), unprompted, referred to the free training that was on offer:
- “I’m a small business and being fully funded has helped us — especially during [COVID-19] with completing courses we normally do — for refreshers/updates or new skills.” (Employer)
- “Honestly, because it was fully funded. We would not have been able to put so many engineers on the course — there wasn’t the budget to do so.” (Employer)
- 4.45 Just over one third of employers (26/72) referenced the need for training or to upskill their employees:

“It gave us the opportunity to do a number of courses that we couldn’t do internally. It gave the staff external qualifications and opportunities to progress within the organisation.” (Employer)

- 4.46 As part of that enrolment process, it is expected that colleges discuss the potential impact of qualifications delivered through ELA to eligible businesses to determine the added value of the support, particularly in relation to the creation of new or better jobs and whether these might be filled by existing or new individuals.
- 4.47 The application requests information on:
- Employer performance and growth plans in the next 12 months in relation to jobs created.
 - The role that PLA might play in supporting the creation of job opportunities.
 - The employer’s goals/aspirations associated with applying for PLA.
 - The number of employees whom they wish to train (and what proportion of these would be new or existing employees).
- 4.48 FE colleges again flagged the length of the process for course approval combined with the employer pro forma and the course costings as being collectively complex, time-consuming, and burdensome. Amongst employers, however, only five per cent (3/74) made unprompted references to the administrative demands and/or delays in the approval of courses (when asked about improvements). To place this in context, one fifth of employers (17/74) had required the college to secure approval for the course that they wished their employees to undertake; it would have been in these situations that the time delays would have been most lengthy.
- 4.49 When asked what approaches they used to determine organisational training requirements, three out of 10 employers referenced the use of their own skill reviews, plans, or a training matrix to determine skill needs. A further seven employers referred to guidance from the FE colleges or training providers. One quarter of the respondent employers, however, were more reactive in determining the course that they would undertake, reviewing what courses were available before deciding which to enrol employees in.

4.50 A further six employers referred to the legal requirement to undertake certain formal qualifications as the key influence on determining organisational training requirements. There were initial concerns reported by the programme team as to instances in which employers may have been using the ELA strand of PLA for legally required qualifications. This led to a tightening of guidance for the 2021/22 programme, which stipulated that, “for example, in the construction sector PLAs should not be used to provide training for legally required qualifications in health and safety; but may be used for enhanced qualifications such as NEBOSH that will improve an individual’s career and earnings prospects”.⁴⁸

4.51 The role of the FE college in determining training needs was explored further with employers. Over one third (27/73) described the college as having no or a minimal role in this process; however, this was primarily due to the employer feeling that they already knew exactly what training they wanted: “we knew what courses were available and chose immediately” (employer). Over half (42/73), though, identified a close working relationship forged, exploring training needs and employer goals and determining the suitability of courses:

“Working with the college, we are creating a bespoke ILM programme for leadership and management and selecting the right modules tailored for our industry so that what we want with regard to our internal sessions and outside speakers dovetails with the college course, and the college is being extremely helpful and our relationship is working very well.” (Employer)

“The college listened to what we wanted in terms of training the staff in the new software. They adapted one of their current courses to cover what we specifically wanted. They also offered drop-in sessions to help members of staff with poor IT skills.” (Employer)

4.52 Two thirds of employers (45/75) described how they hoped that the training would improve the skill level in the workforce, strengthening the organisation’s offer and enabling staff to progress. Almost one third described how the training would ensure that they comply with health and safety regulations or industry standards:

⁴⁸ Welsh Government (2020) Personal Learning Accounts 2020–21 Guidance V1.1 Final.

“I wanted to show what the new director was all about — development; to show individuals that we are willing to develop the team; to plug the skill gaps; to give inspiration as to doing things differently.” (Employer)

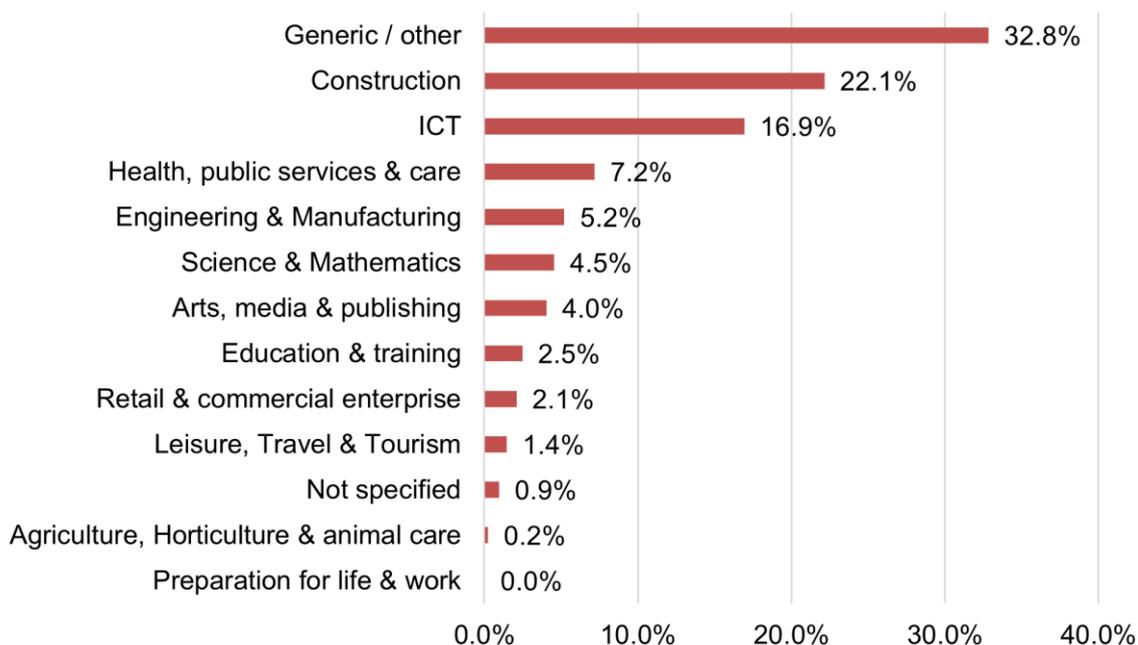
“Investing and valuing our engineers is important and increasing their skills means we can take on more contracts covering our full range of services.”
(Employer)

- 4.53 In terms of eligibility for the employer strand, the median wage threshold does not apply, but its overriding focus remains on raising the salaries of those who participate.
- 4.54 Public sector employers are also eligible for the programme. From September 2021, however, the Welsh Government requested that all proposed upskilling for public sector employers be submitted for approval before delivering to assess the risk that the proposed activity overlaps with other policy interventions.
- 4.55 The challenges, however, associated with appraising course applications were present across both the learner-led and employer-led strands of the programme. Considering the volume of courses and applications, the scale of programme staff resources, and some evidence of ineligible provision, it is unclear as to how the applications for funding were appraised and/or what proportion of the applications were submitted to the Welsh Government for review.

Course profile

- 4.56 Course provision recorded by the Welsh Government through the LLWR has been mapped against sector subject areas. The distribution of courses by sector subject area is presented in Figure 4.14 below. The chart shows that almost one third of course enrolments are for courses that are designated as being in a generic/other sector. Collectively, almost 40 per cent of courses are within either the construction or the ICT sector.

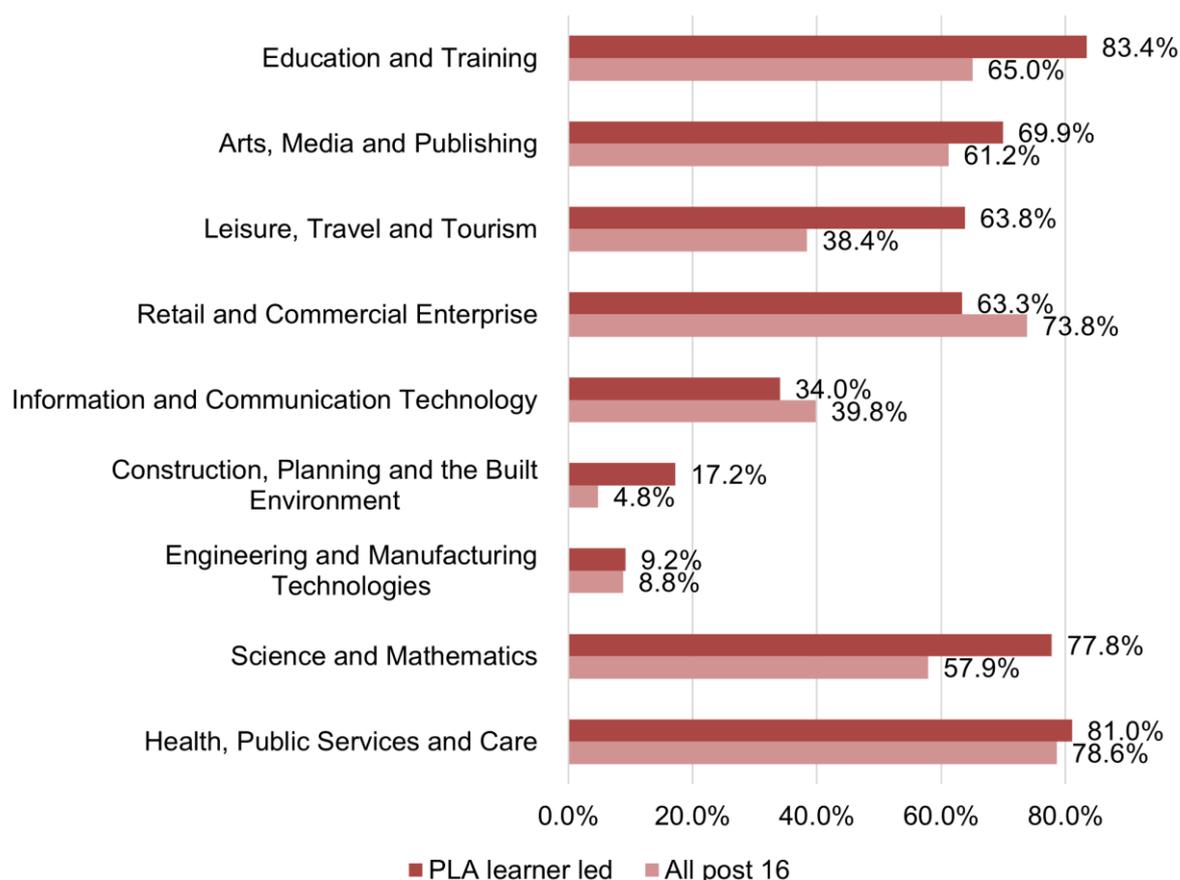
Figure 4.14: Course enrolments by sector subject area (PLA and ELA)



Source: PLA Management Information. N=21,403.

4.57 Figure 4.15 compares personal learner enrolments by sector subject area and gender, benchmarked against the gender profile of learners of all post-16 learning provision across Wales. The chart shows that across most sector subject areas, females are more prevalent on PLA courses than they are in post-16 learning provision generally. This is particularly evident in the construction sector, wherein females are almost four times more likely to be in attendance on a PLA course than they typically are in post-16 learning provision. The data do therefore suggest some progress in female enrolment in several sector subject areas in which males traditionally dominate.

Figure 4.15: Female representation on courses by sector subject area – PLA and all post-16 learning provision in Wales



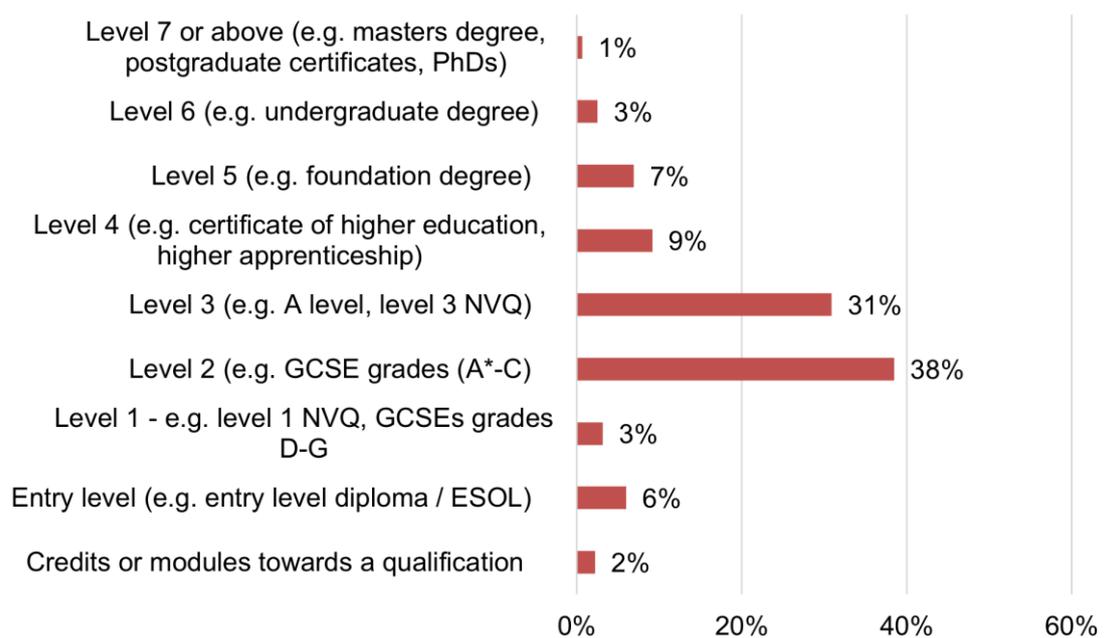
Source: PLA Management Information and Analysis of Lifelong Learning Wales Record, Welsh Government. Base: 100 PLA learners.

4.58 Further analysis of these data at the college level identifies notable successes in female engagement:

- Within the construction sector, female learners at Coleg Gwent and those at Cardiff and the Vale College (CAVC) represented 31 per cent and 27 per cent of the total learners respectively.
- Within the engineering sector, females constituted 13 per cent of all learner enrolments at Grwp NPTC.
- Within the ICT sector, females constituted 73 per cent of all learners at Grwp NPTC and 58 per cent of all learners at Gower College Swansea.

4.59 The management information on the equivalent qualification level of course provision is held in a manner that means that it is not easily analysed at a cross-programme level. However, all surveyed learners were asked whether they knew the level of courses in which they had participated — almost two thirds (63 per cent; 317/501) felt able to respond. Their responses show that the majority (69 per cent) of courses were CQFW Level 2 or Level 3, whilst nine per cent of courses were reported to be entry level or CQFW Level 1 (see Figure 4.16 below).

Figure 4.16: Perceived equivalent qualification of PLA courses



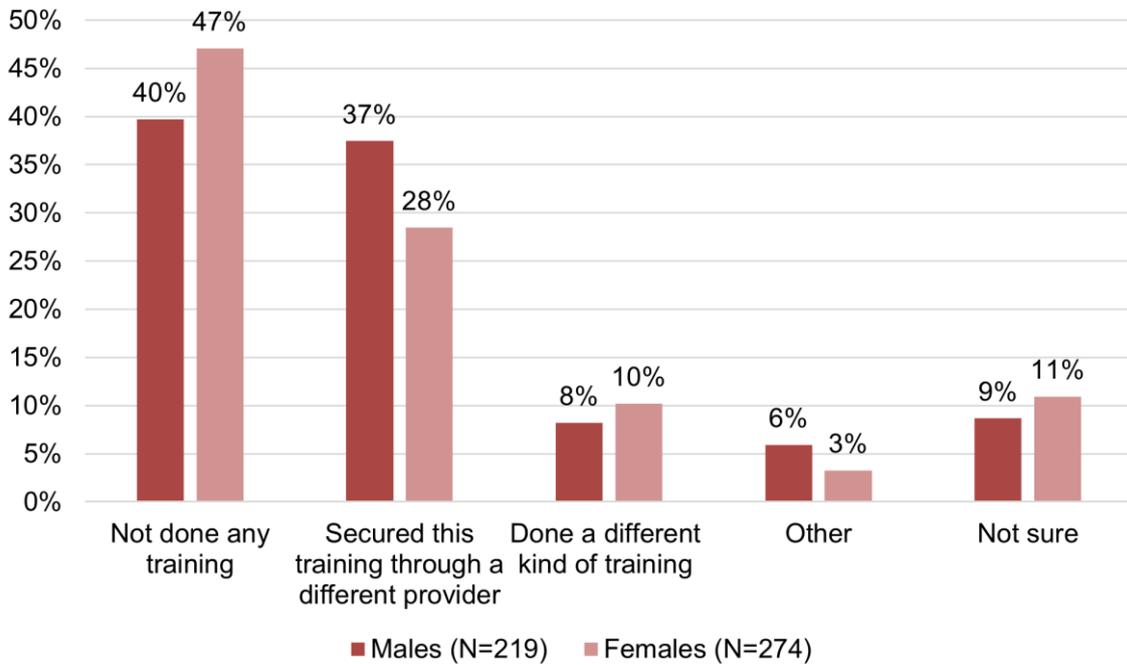
Source: PLA Learner Survey. N=317

4.60 To provide some insight into the added value of the PLA programme in attracting individuals to participate in adult learning, survey respondents were asked to speculate as to what they might have done with regard to their learning in the absence of the PLA programme. Almost half of respondents (46 per cent; 231/499) would not have undertaken any training, whilst one third would have secured the training through a different provider. Those who reported being in less secure employment⁴⁹ were much more likely not to have undertaken any training in the absence of PLA (62 per cent; 50/81). When responses were analysed by gender

⁴⁹ Defined as being on furlough, on zero hours, in agency employment, at risk of redundancy, or employed and financially negatively impacted by the economy.

(see Figure 4.17 below), it is evident that in the absence of the funding, females were more likely not to have undertaken any training than were males.

Figure 4.17: What would learners have done in the absence of PLA?



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

5. Findings – The Learner/Employer Experience

Summary

- Almost three quarters of all learners (72 per cent) and 81 per cent of female learners participated in at least some of their training online.
- Almost one fifth of learners would have liked their training to be delivered in a different manner, and half of these would have preferred delivery in person, something that was restricted by the pandemic.
- Almost all learners (97 per cent) undertook their course in English, 99 per cent of whom were happy learning in that medium.

Introduction

5.1 This section explores the experience of learners and employers who enrolled in the PLA programme. It analyses perspectives on the nature and mode of learning received.

Mode of learning

5.2 Almost three quarters (72 per cent; 361/502) of learners participated in their training online, with a further nine per cent participating in blended learning (a mixture of online and face-to-face), whilst another nine per cent described participating in the learning whilst in the workplace.

Table 5.1: Mode of learning by gender

	Online	At the College	In your Workplace	Both at the College and Online	Somewhere Else
Males (N=239)	59%	23%	10%	6%	3%
Females (N=278)	73%	12%	5%	8%	2%

Source: PLA Learner Survey.

Case study: Flexibility around caring responsibilities

Sara was working full-time in education administration and seeking to change careers. She discovered the PLA programme accidentally when she phoned the college to access a different course, but they advised her that she needed to undertake another course first.

The support from a learning advisor to develop a learning plan was essential, as it put her on the most appropriate pathway to achieve her end goal, which was to work in healthcare.

“I care for my mother, but as the learning was only two hours in the evenings and I could access it at home, I was able to learn and care for my mother simultaneously.”

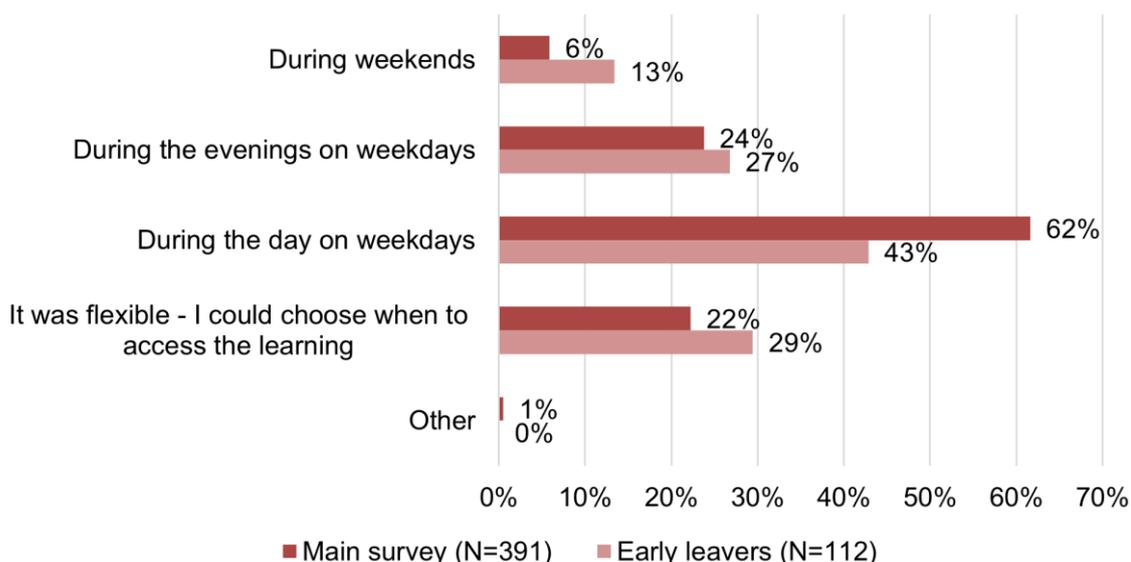
She enrolled in the VTCT Level 3 Certificate in Anatomy, Physiology and Pathology for Complementary Therapies, which was a steppingstone to further education. The course was delivered online, which meant that she could start it within weeks of applying. Sara was incredibly positive about the flexibility of the course delivery due to caring commitments at home with her mother and older children.

“The PLA has made me realise that I was capable of degree-level learning, and I met people who encouraged me to go ahead and seek higher education. The college opened the door and gave me more confidence to say: ‘I can do this.’ It turned my life around and gave me a new lease of life.”

The course has been transformative for Sara and given her the confidence to continue on the pathway to study nursing. She has since left her job role and is entering full-time higher education to study adult nursing as a result of the PLA course. She mentioned that the PLA course was a vital component in this decision to continue learning to degree level as well as her pursuit of a career in healthcare.

5.3 Over half (57 per cent) accessed the training during the day, whilst almost one quarter accessed the learning during weekday evenings. Interestingly, those who completed the learning were much more likely to access it during the day on weekdays than were early leavers, who were more likely to access provision at the weekend. Following the chart (Figure 5.1), Table 5.2 analyses the data by gender, which illustrates marginal variation in responses.

Figure 5.1: When learners typically access the course



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

Table 5.2: When learners typically access the course by gender

	Male (N=244)	Female (N=306)
During the day on weekdays	46%	51%
During the evening on weekdays	21%	23%
It was flexible – I could choose when to access the learning	23%	21%
During weekends	9%	5%
Other	0.4%	0.3%

Source: PLA Learner Survey.

Case study: Flexibility around course duration and external training provider

Jack was working full-time in the health sector and was already highly qualified (possessing a master’s degree). In order to progress to become a project manager, however, he needed a specific qualification. He applied for the PRINCE2 Agile Foundation, which he knew was needed to bridge this gap, and PLA enabled him to do it more quickly and for free. However, Jack was disappointed overall with the course delivery, particularly the external training provider. He commented that he found the course content to be superficial and that it was frustrating that the course was time-limited to three months, and he felt pushed to

complete exams early, so he did not have to pay for the course. Doing it digitally was useful for Jack during COVID-19, as it meant that he could study in his own time alongside the course, but Jack found that there was not enough flexibility given by the training provider in order to complete the course in his own time.

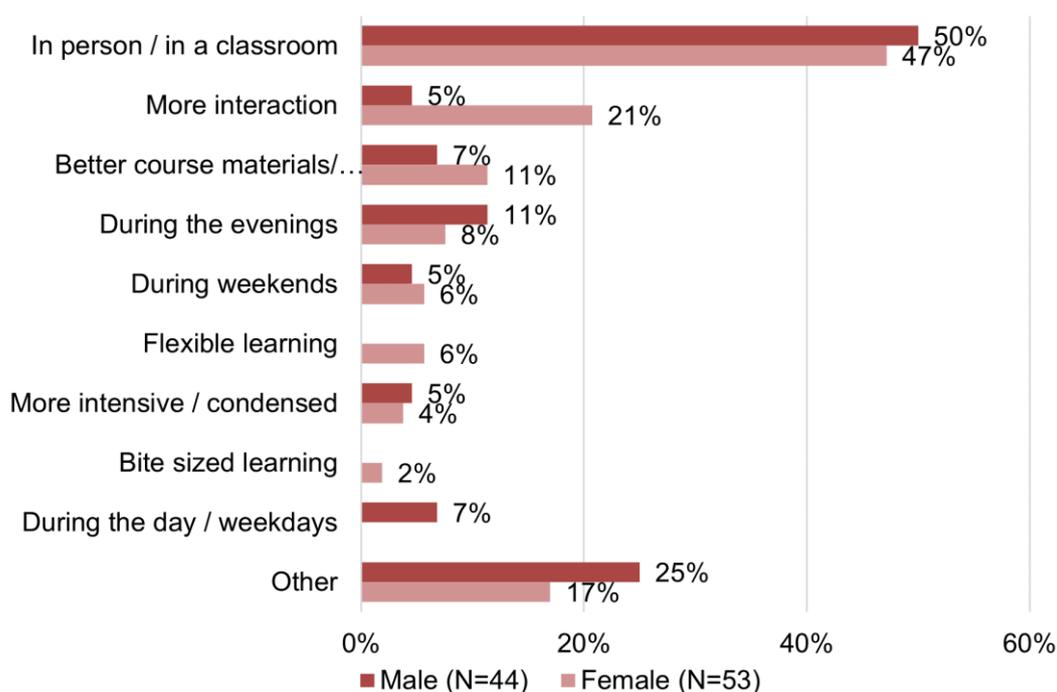
“[The course provider] was extremely pushy. There apparently wasn’t a deadline for completing this course, but they contacted me every week, asking where I’d got to with it. I had two jobs at the time and felt pressured. I didn’t have a lot of spare time, bearing in mind that I worked for the NHS during [COVID-19].”

Jack was positive in general about the free learning provision that he accessed, stating that it has the potential to be really helpful for people who want to progress in their careers.

Following the course, Jack gained a new job in project management — he noted that whilst the PRINCE2 Agile Foundation course was useful for his CV in general, he did not attribute his new job in any way to the course, as it was geared towards general awareness and the conceptual side of management (rather than more practical application).

5.4 When asked whether they would have preferred the course to be delivered differently, almost one fifth (121/503) of respondents stated that they would have, with there being no difference in the rate of response when analysed by gender. Amongst those who left the provision early, this increased to 36 per cent (40/112). Those who described having caring or childcare responsibilities were marginally more likely to have preferred the course to be delivered in a different manner (26 per cent; 46/180). When asked how they might want the course to be delivered differently, respondents most commonly referred to in-person provision or a greater level of interaction — both elements that would have been constrained by the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in Figure 5.2 below, it is notable that females were much more likely to have referred to wanting a greater level of interaction (21 per cent) than were males (five per cent), although caution should be exercised with these figures, given the sample size.

Figure 5.2: How would you have liked the course to be delivered? (by gender)



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

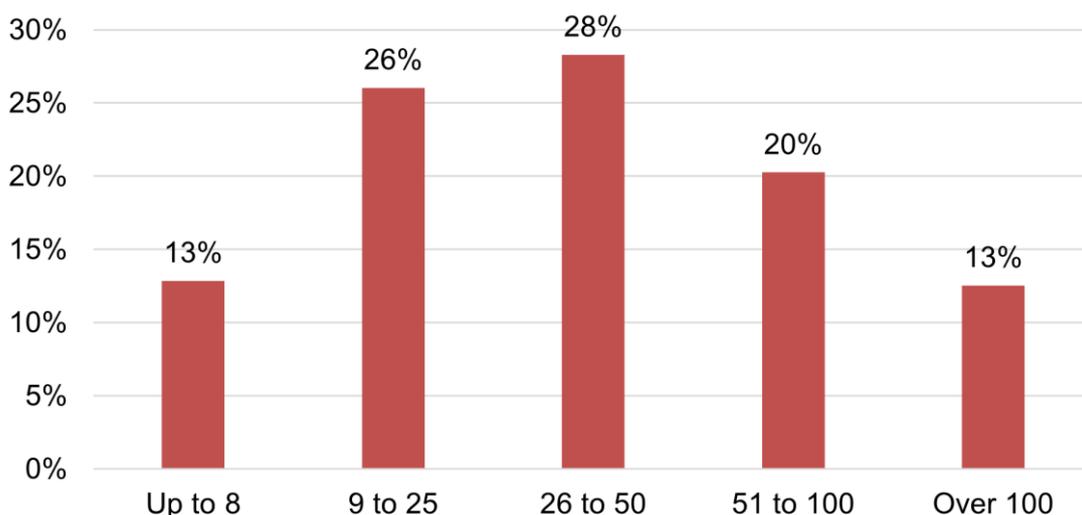
Mode of learning for ELA strand

5.5 Amongst employers, whilst 10 of the 72 respondents received the training provision within the workplace, it was most commonly delivered online (47/72) and/or at the premises of the FE college or training provider (46/72). The numbers of participants that each employer enrolled in the ELA strand of the PLA programme were wide-ranging, from one employee to 150 employees. The mean average number of employees enrolled in the programme was 16, whilst the median was five.

Course duration

5.6 Surveyed learners who had completed their learning were asked to estimate the hours of learning that they had undertaken in order to provide a sense of the length and intensity of support that they had received (Figure 5.3). Most commonly, learners were in receipt of between 26 and 50 hours of teaching; however, one third received more than 50 hours of support.

Figure 5.3: How many hours of learning and teaching did you receive in total? (n=311)



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

Provision in the Welsh language

- 5.7 Within the LLWR dataset, nine per cent of learners (1,510/16,241) described themselves as Welsh speakers, with four per cent (700/16,241) fluent. The LLWR also records the highest Welsh language qualification that a learner holds, with 11 per cent (1,788/16,241) reporting holding a CQFW Level 2 equivalent or above in the Welsh language.
- 5.8 All FE colleges reported offering learning through the PLA programme in the medium of Welsh; however, most colleges reported how there had been limited (five FE colleges) or no (four respondents) uptake of the Welsh language provision. This was reflected in the feedback from learners, where the vast majority (97 per cent; 487/503) reported undertaking their course in English, with the remainder participating in learning provision delivered bilingually. Learners who received the training in English were asked whether they would have preferred the training to be delivered in a different language, with 99 per cent (479/486) confirming that they were happy with the course being delivered in English.
- 5.9 In instances in which Welsh language provision is requested, FE colleges draw on the Welsh speakers amongst their staff to deliver that provision. Furthermore, FE colleges are delivering Welsh language courses (ineligible under PLA), signposting

PLA learners to these opportunities where there is a desire to strengthen these skills as part of their career aspirations. Learners were also asked whether, as part of their application, they were offered any Welsh language training, with eight per cent of learners (40/502) recalling being offered that training.

6. Outcomes and Impacts of the Programme

Summary

- The learner-led PLA programme has a higher rate of early leavers (16 per cent) than that of other adult learning provision (four per cent). The early leaver rate may be higher still, as it is likely that some learners currently recorded as ‘continuing their learning’ have left the provision but are yet to notify the FE college.
- Early leaver rates vary considerably by FE college, with work commitments, personal circumstances, or a change of job role meaning that the learning was no longer relevant being the primary reasons for leaving the course early.
- An increase in self-confidence and self-motivation, clearer career aspirations, being more able to support other colleagues, and being able to work more independently were the most commonly cited outcomes of learner participation in PLA.
- Amongst those who had completed the course or who had completed over half of the course and then left early, 22 per cent are now in a different career, six per cent are in a new job in the same career, and 10 per cent have secured a promotion. Over two thirds attributed their PLA participation to securing that new career at least to some extent.
- Those who enrolled in 2020 are more likely to have a new role or new career than are those enrolled in 2021.
- Those who were working in the retail sector at the point of enrolment were the most likely to have secured a new career and within a different sector.
- Where a learner secured a new career, a promotion or a new job, this led to an average increase in annual earnings of over £10,000.
- The net cumulative cost–benefit ratio of salary benefit to cost of learning for all PLA learners is a £1.16 return for every £1 spent, with the modelling suggesting that females generate a stronger benefit–cost ratio than do male learners.

Introduction

- 6.1 This section analyses the outcomes and impacts arising from PLA learning from learners, employers, and FE colleges. Moreover, it considers the financial return generated by the programme through an outline value-for-money assessment.

Learner situation

- 6.2 Management information captured through the LLWR provides details on the status of the learners in the PLA programme. Table 6.1 below shows a much higher completion rate in the ELA programme than in the learner-led PLA programme. In addition, it shows that early leaver rates are marginally higher for females in both ELA and PLA strands of the programme, primarily because females were more likely to leave the job to which the learning was relevant (18 per cent of females, in comparison to 12 per cent of males, referenced this as a reason behind their leaving early). The completion rates for all adult learning in Wales stand at 96 per cent (with success rates at 90 per cent)⁵⁰ and, therefore, the PLA programme is suffering from a higher rate of early leavers than is typically the case in adult learning.
- 6.3 There are several categories within the LLWR that seek to capture the reasons behind early leavers, which, in turn, provide a sense of what has been influential in that variation in early leaver rates. In the ELA strand, females are one percentage point more likely to be recorded as ‘course failure prior to the end of the learning programme’ and 0.9 percentage points more likely to be recorded as ‘other personal reasons leading to dropping out’. Whilst this difference may seem to be marginal, it is more than double the rate of males. In the PLA learner-led strand, ‘other personal reasons leading to dropping out’ shows a 1.2-percentage-point (equivalent to a 10 per cent increase) increase in comparison to males.

Table 6.1: Learner situation

	PLA (n=16,717)			ELA (n=5,496)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Learning programme continuing	38.4%	38.5%	38.4%	30.3%	33.5%	31.4%
Completion of learning programme	46.1%	44.6%	45.4%	66.0%	60.6%	64.2%
Left learning programme early	15.5%	16.9%	16.2%	3.7%	5.9%	4.4%

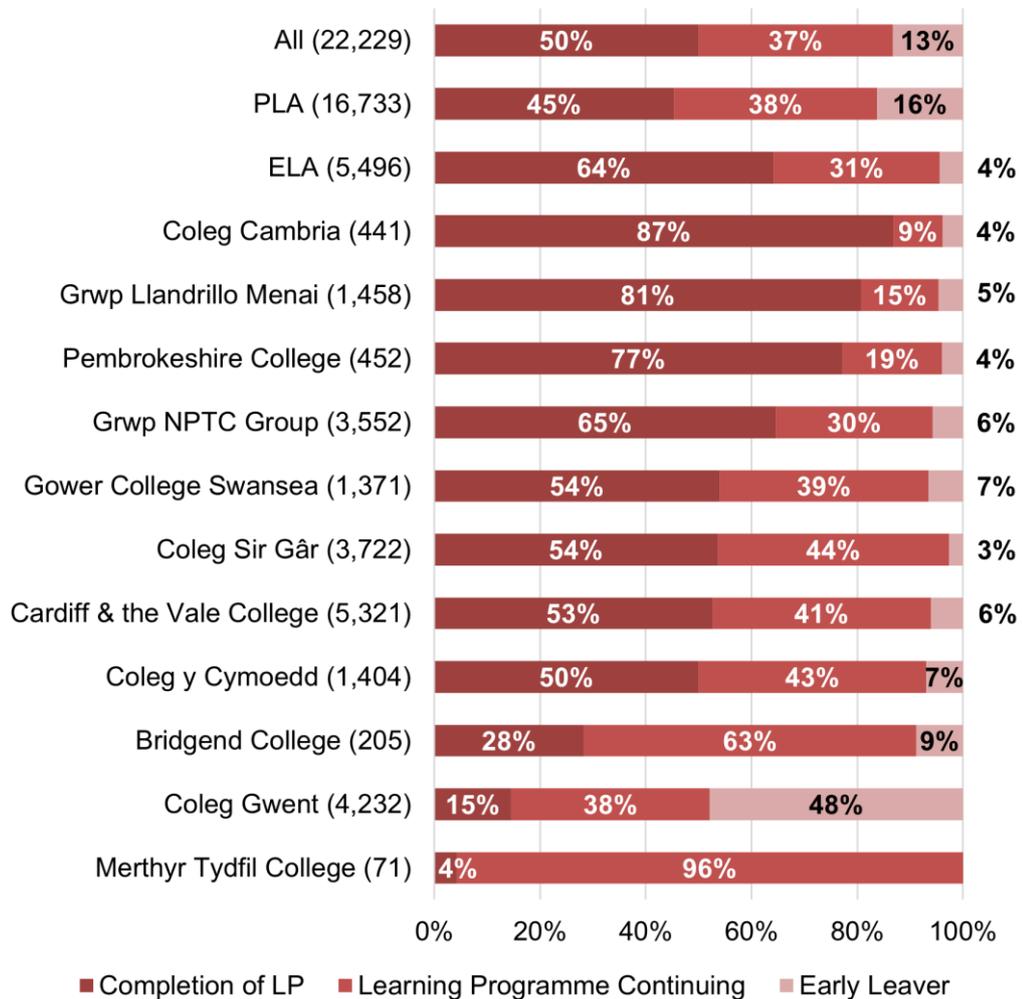
Source: PLA Management Information.

- 6.4 Completion rates have also been analysed by FE college, and Figure 6.1 below shows considerable variation between colleges. Amongst learners enrolled with Coleg Cambria, for example, 87 per cent (383/441) are recorded as completing the

⁵⁰ LLWR data from the 2018/19 academic year – the latest year for which data are available.

learning, whilst four per cent (17/441) are recorded as early leavers. At Coleg Gwent, 15 per cent (617/4,232) are recorded as completing their learning, whilst 48 per cent (2,027/4,232) are recorded as early leavers. Coleg Gwent relied heavily on online provision through a third party provider, i.e. e-Careers, and this is likely to have led to an increase in the rate of early leavers. Other colleges appear to be dominated by learners who remain on their courses. Their rates are likely to have been influenced by those participating in courses remotely and the challenges of securing confirmation that they had completed their courses.

Figure 6.1: Learner status by FE college

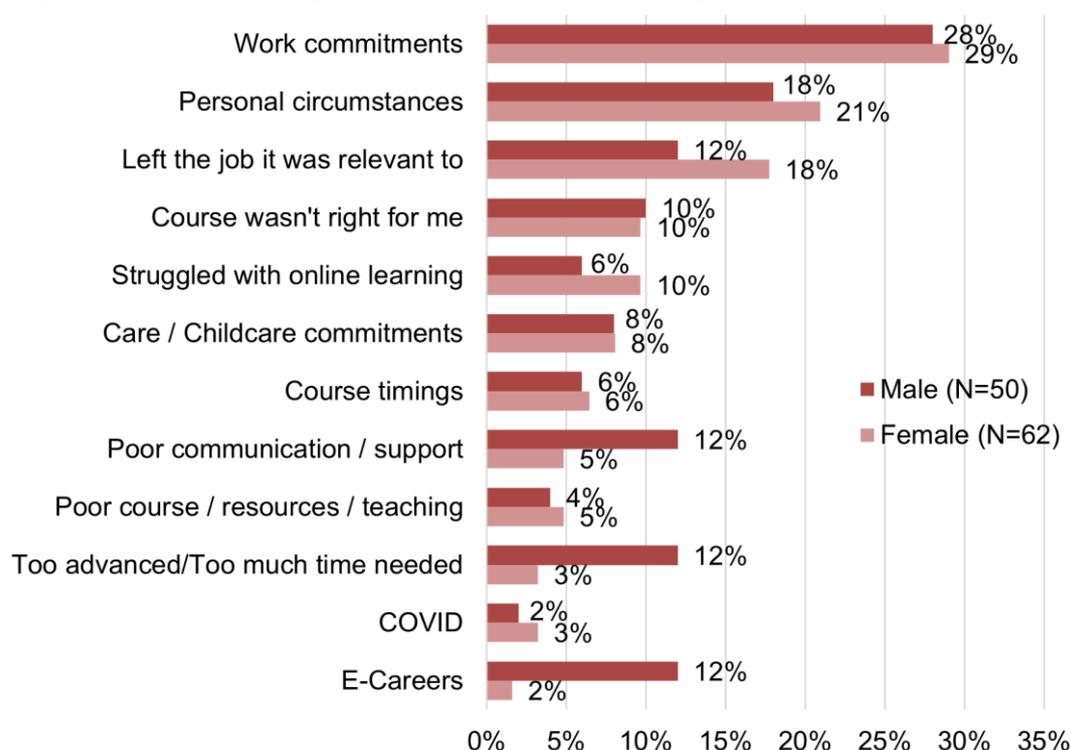


Source: PLA Management Information.

6.5 The learner survey targeted at early leavers sought to capture the reasons behind why they left their course early. Figure 6.2 below suggests that challenges associated with balancing various commitments were a prominent factor in why

individuals left early, with almost 29 per cent referring to working commitments, whilst one fifth referred to personal circumstances.

Figure 6.2: Why did you leave the course early? (by gender)



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

6.6 The survey also sought to ascertain the typical point at which learners were leaving their course by asking learners to estimate the proportion of the course that they had completed. Over three quarters of early leavers (83 per cent; 90/109) had left the course with less than 50 per cent having been completed, whilst almost half (47 per cent; 51/109) had left the course with less than 25 per cent of the course complete.

Case study: Struggled to complete because of balancing caring responsibilities

Hannah had been in her current role for 10 years when she applied to undertake the City & Guilds Level 3 Diploma in Management through the PLA programme. She stated that the application was easy to complete, and had a useful chat with an advisor who gave her all of the information that she needed on the course, what it would entail, and how it would help

her career if she gained the qualification. The course would be essential if she wanted to be promoted to a management role.

“PLA gave me a second chance to access higher education that I normally wouldn’t have been able to take up because of the cost.”

Hannah did not complete the course because she was unable to balance her existing job work and childcare commitments alongside the course. Her workload at work increased and her manager refused to give her any time during work hours to undertake the course.

Moreover, she had increased childcare responsibilities, which meant that she had less time at home to undertake the course in the evenings and at weekends.

“My tutor was very supportive and was willing to be flexible about deadlines, but the combined workload of my job and childcare was too great.”

Hannah also struggled with the online delivery and stated that she would prefer face-to-face delivery, as it is the way in which she is used to learning, and would prefer being able to speak and ask questions to the tutor directly.

6.7 Table 6.2 below explores course completion rates by ethnicity. It shows that there is a higher rate of early leavers amongst those of Asian or Asian British origin than amongst those of other ethnic origins; however, this is primarily driven by the distribution of learners of Asian or Asian British origin in FE colleges that experienced a higher rate of early leavers across their entire cohort. When this is analysed by gender, it is evident that almost three in 10 females (29 per cent; 65/223) of Asian or Asian British origin had left the provision early in comparison to 24 per cent (73/304) of males. Amongst those reported as being of other ethnic background, males are driving the higher rate of early leavers (as described below), with 30 per cent (23/76) of males of other ethnic origin being recorded as early leavers from their learning provision.

Table 6.2: Learner status by ethnic origin

	Completion of Learning Programme	Learning Programme Continuing	Early Leaver	N
Asian / Asian British	33%	41%	26%	527
White	46%	39%	15%	14,688
Other Ethnic Background	44%	34%	22%	144
Mixed / Multiple Ethnic	40%	40%	19%	303
Black / Black British	41%	43%	16%	393
Refused / Not Known	45%	26%	29%	678
PLA Total	45%	38%	16%	16,733

Source: PLA Management Information.

- 6.8 Completion rates were also analysed by whether a learner had a disability or some form of work-limiting health condition. Where data are captured, early leaver rates are higher amongst this group (16 per cent; 139/854) than the wider population (nine per cent; 1,274/12,979), with those with some form of disability or work-limiting health condition being twice as likely (13 per cent) to be recorded as 'other personal reasons leading to dropping out' (increasing to 15 per cent (61/413) amongst females with a disability) as those without a disability (six per cent).
- 6.9 Data are also captured on whether a learner was a refugee or migrant worker and on their household status. This information is only captured for a minority of FE colleges, however, and there are not marked differences in their completion rates in comparison to the general rates of completion for those colleges.

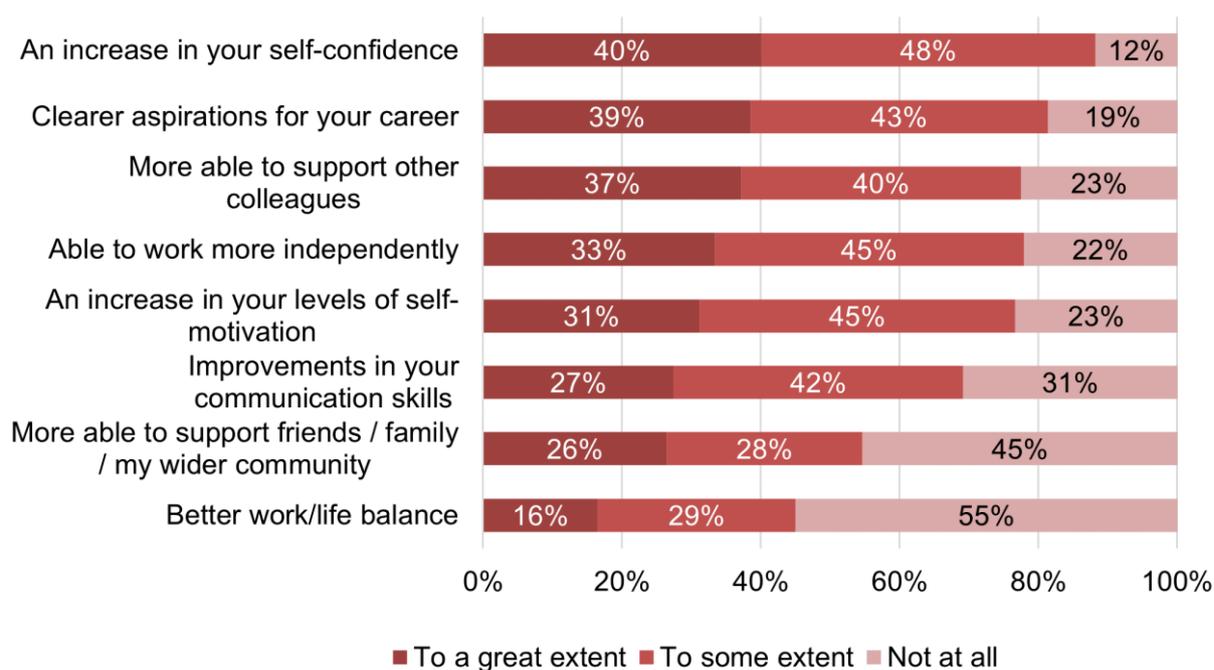
Learner outcomes

- 6.10 Learners were asked on a scale of 1–5 how satisfied they were with the learning that they had received. Those who participated in the main survey provided a mean average score of 4.6, with 75 per cent of learners rating their satisfaction as 5 out of 5. Amongst early leavers the average rating for satisfaction was 3.6, with those rating the learning as 5 out of 5 decreasing to 38 per cent. When mean average rates of satisfaction were analysed by FE college, they ranged from 4.38 to 4.95.
- 6.11 Where participants had undertaken at least 50 per cent of their course (regardless of whether they had left early or were continuing with their learning), they were asked the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements associated with

the potential outcome of their learning. Figure 6.3 shows that almost nine out of 10 learners had felt an increase in their self-confidence and attributed this, at least to some extent, to the training that they had received. Furthermore, over 80 per cent of learners felt that they had clearer aspirations for their career which they attributed to the training.

- 6.12 When analysed by gender, females are more likely to describe an increase in their self-confidence (44 per cent to a great extent and 47 per cent to some extent), whilst males are more likely to make a strong attribution to the training enabling them to work more independently (43 per cent to a great extent).

Figure 6.3: To what extent has the training that you received through PLA led to ...? (completers only; n=382)



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

- 6.13 Half of learners (50 per cent; 163/327) agreed with the statement that they are likely to progress to further learning in the next 12 months, whilst a further quarter of learners (27 per cent; 87/327) had already progressed to further learning. Amongst early leavers, there is less appetite for further learning, with 11 per cent having

already embarked on learning and a further 22 per cent planning to do so within the next 12 months.

Career changes

- 6.14 Amongst those learners who responded to the survey and who either had completed the course or had left early following completion of at least half of the course, 22 per cent of those surveyed (evenly balanced between males and females) are now in a different career from the one that they were in when they first accessed PLA learning. A further six per cent (20/362) had a new job in the same career, whilst a further 10 per cent (37/362) had secured a promotion, with little difference when analysed by gender.
- 6.15 Those who enrolled on the course in 2020 were much more likely to have a new role or new career (29 per cent; 38/108) than were those who enrolled in 2021 (16 per cent; 32/196), with those who enrolled on furlough or in less secure employment being marginally more likely to have now embarked on a new career. The increased likelihood of being in a new career in 2020 provides insight into the typical timeframes following course enrolment that are associated with securing outcomes of this nature.

Case study: Early leaver but still motivated to change careers

Dylan was employed full-time in an industry at risk of negative impact due to COVID-19 and Brexit. He was seeking to change careers from hospitality to accounting to move into a more stable role with higher pay and progression opportunities. For Dylan, PLA funding was vital because otherwise the cost of the course would have been prohibitive. He applied for a Level 3 AAT Course – Advanced Diploma in Accounting.

“The tutor who led the training was amazing. The lectures were interesting and the college was very supportive. I would have completed the course if my employer had been more cooperative.”

Unfortunately, Dylan found that often his existing employer would refuse to release him to be able to attend lectures, which were all clustered on the same day. This meant that Dylan did not complete the course due to pre-existing work commitments. The college was very

supportive in terms of recording lectures and providing him with additional materials; despite this, however, Dylan left the course around three quarters of the way through.

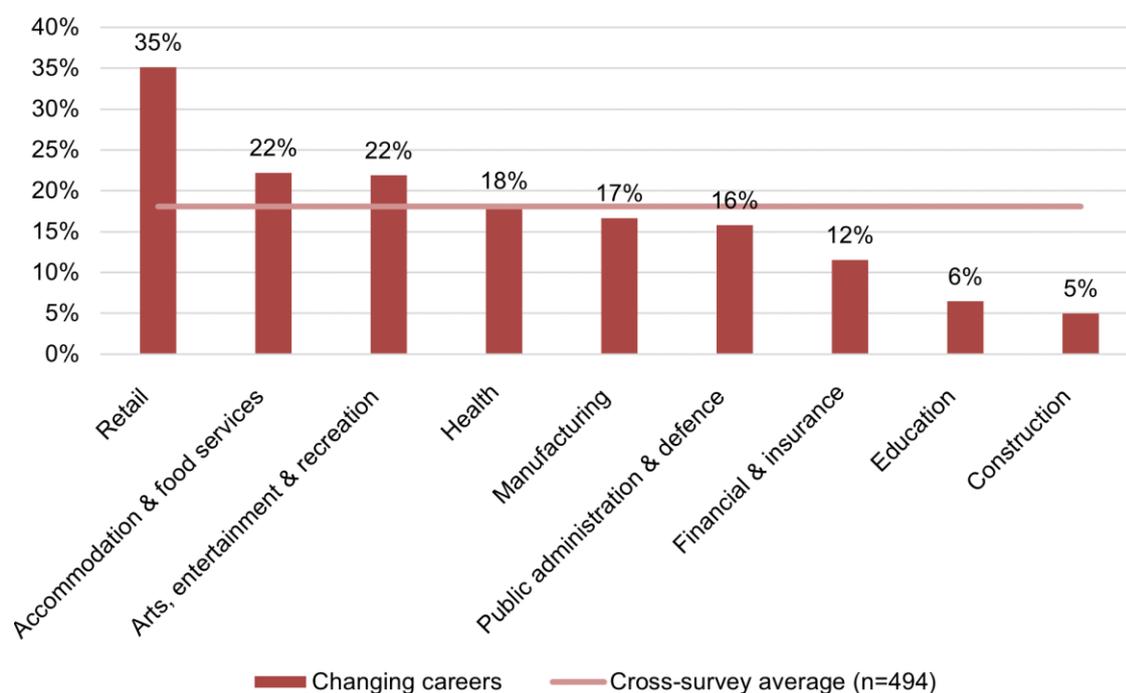
“It has reinforced my wish to change careers. My plan now is to get employment with an accounting company and get the qualification through them, as they have a better understanding of the importance of the qualification [than does my current employer].”

Despite not finishing the course, Dylan was really positive about the experience and stated that it improved his self-confidence and communication skills and had further motivated him to pursue his new career.

6.16 Figure 6.4 shows the distribution of those who have secured a new career by the sector in which they were enrolled. It shows that the highest propensity for career changes was amongst those who were employed in retail at the point of enrolment in the PLA programme, and these figures are particularly high amongst female participants, with 56 per cent (9/16) of those employed in retail at the point of enrolment having changed careers. Conversely, whilst the rate of career changes appears to be lower in the health sector, this rate is driven by males, with 47 per cent (8/17) employed in the health sector upon enrolment having changed careers.

6.17 Those enrolled in the education or construction sector would appear to be more likely to be pursuing progression within their existing career than those enrolled in other sectors. Whilst a change in career is relatively commonplace amongst PLA learners, in only one in seven (14 per cent) instances did that lead to a change in industrial sector for those learners. A change in the sector of operation was particularly prevalent in those sectors in which learners were most likely to report a change in career. One third of those enrolled within the retail sector (9/27) who had changed careers had changed sectors, whilst three in 10 of those in the accommodation sector had done the same.

Figure 6.4: Proportion of survey respondents who had changed careers since enrolling in PLA learning by sector (base=18)



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

Case study: Self-employed professionals progressing to senior roles

Rhys was self-employed and working in the construction industry. He needed to improve his skills and CV within his current position to enable him to progress to a management role. As he is self-employed, he would have had to fund the course himself, as he had no formal CPD funding or time allocation. Due to the cost of the course, he noted that he would not have done the course without the funding. He did not have many qualifications beforehand and had not had training for a few years; therefore, he was not sure what to expect when going into it.

“I do not have a lot of qualifications and this type of course was quite daunting to me, but the instructor made me feel very comfortable on the course.”

He enrolled in an NVQ Certificate in Occupational Health and Safety, which would boost his CV. Particularly as a contractor who frequently has to apply for short- and medium-term contracts, he noted that this would have a direct impact on the types of work for which he

could apply as well as his pay prospects. It will enable him to work more independently and be more able to support other colleagues, since he will be in a more senior position.

“The qualification will improve my CV and make me more attractive for future contracting roles with other construction companies by adding a specific qualification that I lacked.”

Case study: Following career dreams after 20 years

Elena was working in the retail industry and had been with the same employer for over 20 years. She also had not received any training for at least five years when she became involved with a course through the PLA programme. She had always wanted to help people and undertake a course in counselling, and the college recommended a particular course and pathway to become qualified to enable this career change.

“I was stuck in a rut. The PLA course suited me down to the ground, and cost was a big thing, too. It was so easy to access the course itself [...] I haven’t studied for 20 years and I found it really good — I’d highly recommend it.”

Elena stated that through support from a learning advisor, she was able to organise the timing of the course so that it fit around her current employment. The course itself was delivered on site at the college, and Elena was positive about the course content and delivery. She is hoping to progress to the Level 3 course and, ultimately, a higher diploma.

6.18 Where they had secured a new career, learners were asked to what extent they attributed that change in career to the learning that they received. Over two thirds of respondents⁵¹ (68 per cent; 54/80) attributed the support at least to some extent to their securing a new career, and of this group, 32 respondents (40 per cent of those who had secured a new career) reported the support as having contributed to a great extent to their new career:

“The course gave me the basic foundations for IT security and showed that I had a good aptitude and that a career change was possible into IT.” (PLA Participant)

“I’ve really got a fire in my belly now and I’m going to progress into social work.”
(PLA Participant)

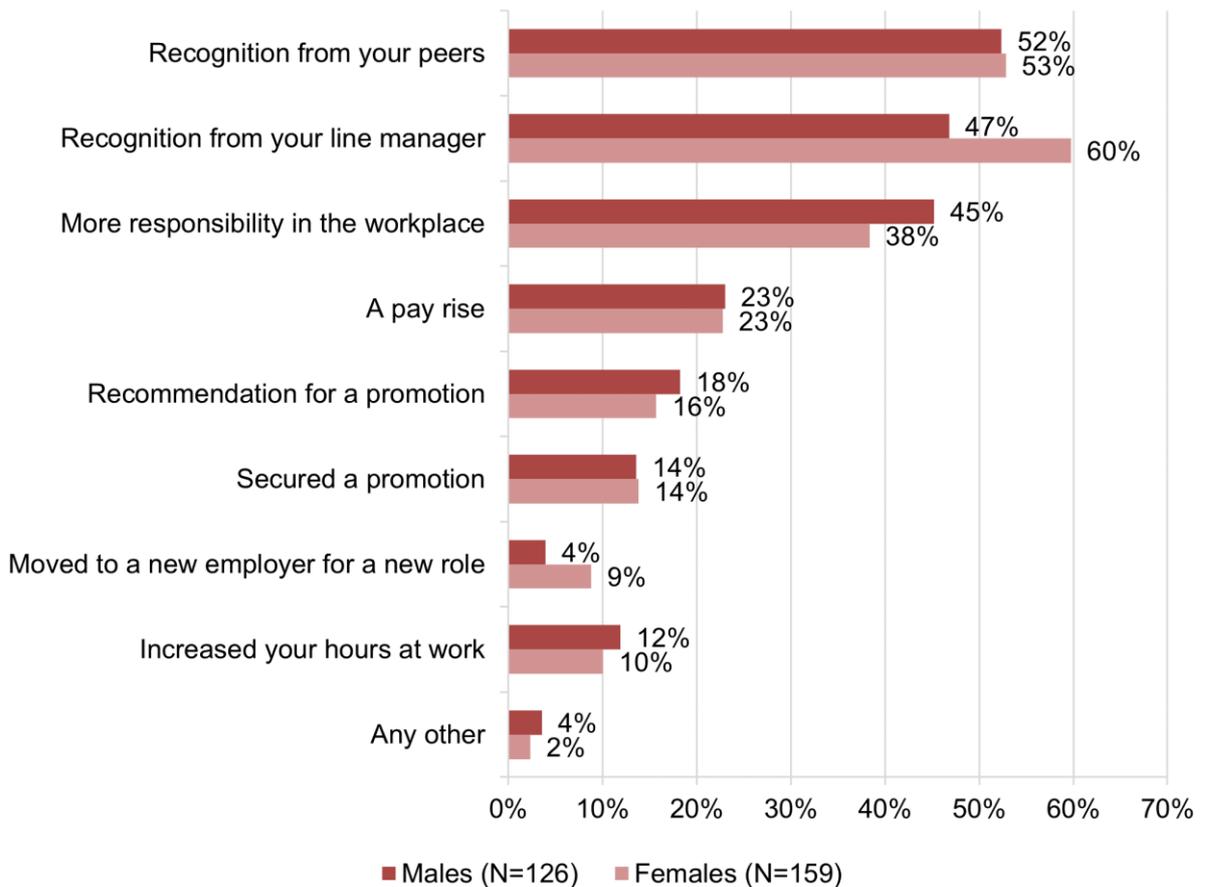
⁵¹ The question was not asked of those who had completed less than 50 per cent of the course before leaving early.

“It’s given me confidence to apply for these things, a certificate that stands highly in this field. It’s given me the confidence to pursue my interest and passion. It’s absolutely fantastic — I owe a lot to the scheme.” (PLA Participant)

“I have a recognised qualification on my CV which was very important to prospective employers, to put myself ahead of other people applying.” (PLA Participant)

6.19 Those who had not secured a new career were asked a series of statements to determine whether any other changes had occurred because of their participation in the PLA programme. Figure 6.5 shows that over half of the respondents referred to recognition from their line manager (particularly amongst females) or their peers, whilst almost one quarter had secured a pay rise. Furthermore, one in six had been recommended for promotion, whilst one in seven had secured a promotion.

Figure 6.5: As a result of the course, have any of the following changes occurred? (by gender)



Source: PLA Learner Survey.

Earnings growth

6.20 Where a learner transitioned to a new career or secured a promotion or a new job, they were asked whether that led to an increase in their salary. Amongst almost three quarters of respondents (73 per cent; 102/139), it did; however, we are unaware as to whether increased hours in that new career may have led to the salary gains reported. These respondents were asked to quantify the scale of increment in salary that they had secured. Where this was supplied (95/102), there was on average a considerable growth in earnings of £10,590 per annum. This level of financial benefit in earnings growth equates to £2,125 per PLA learner, with very little difference between males and females when analysed by gender.

Value for money

- 6.21 Given the absence of various MI, assessing the value for money of PLA is particularly challenging. In recognition of this, a series of recommendations have been made in an associated Technical Paper as to a potential impact framework and value-for-money model for the programme. With the current evidence, however, a relatively narrow assessment of earnings benefit against cost can be conducted.
- 6.22 Course costs were obtained from each FE college in relation to the courses that surveyed learners had undertaken. The data have been matched against surveyed learners; however, inconsistencies with the way in which course titles have been recorded have meant that 156 of the 211 unique courses (74 per cent) amongst the learners surveyed could be matched.⁵² Of those 156 courses, some form of cost-per-learner data was available (based on either the target number or the actual number of learners) for 70 (45 per cent). Those courses related to 144 of the learners surveyed and equated to, on average, a cost per learner of £1,582, with courses undertaken by male learners (£1,762) typically costing more than courses undertaken by female learners (£1,494 on average).
- 6.23 Where learners had reported that the PLA programme influenced their new career to a great extent, the entire salary increment was included in the analysis. Where it was reported to some extent, half of the salary increment was included in the

analysis. Learners were asked specifically whether they had secured a new role as a result of their participation in PLA. Where this led to an increase in earnings, the entire increment was attributed. When the attribution of earnings is assigned to the earnings gained, this equates to an average of £1,757 per learner. See Table 6.3 below.

Table 6.3: Net salary benefit per learner cost

Learners and Courses	Number	Percentage
Learners surveyed	473	
Unique courses	211	
Unique courses matched to course data	156	74%
Courses with course cost data	70	45%
Learners surveyed with course cost data	144	30%
Costs		
Course cost per learner	£1,582	
Total salary increases across learners surveyed	£1,050,000	
Instances of salary increases	95	20%
Average salary increase per reported increase	£10,598	
Gross avg. salary increment per learner (all learners)	£2,127	
Net avg. salary increment – adjusting for attribution per learner (all learners)	£1,757	
Average salary of all learners upon enrolment	£19,566	
Annual private sector wage inflation (May 2021–2022) ⁵³	5.5%	
Average salary increment in absence of learning	£1,076	
Net annual average salary increment – adjusting for deadweight	£681	
Persistence effect of salary increment (est. three years) with 10 per cent decay – cumulative net effect ⁵⁴	£1,845	
Net cumulative salary benefit against cost of learning		£1.16:£1

6.24 This narrow assessment of value for money shows a net annual return on investment of £1.16 for every £1 spent. The value-for-money analysis was also assessed by gender. Whilst earnings gained were very similar, females had on average a lower starting salary and undertook courses that were on average less costly in comparison to males. Collectively, the estimated net cumulative salary benefit was therefore greater for females (£1.30:£1) than males (£0.97:£1).

⁵³ [Office for National Statistics – Monthly Wages and Salaries Survey – private sector regular pay annual inflation \(March–May 2022\)](#).

⁵⁴ For further details on persistence and decay rates associated with skill and workforce development, see: PricewaterhouseCoopers (2008) RDA Impact Evaluation National Report, DBERR.

6.25 The persistence of additional earnings over time has been set to three years in accordance with previous benchmarks; however, it is likely that the additional margin of earnings will be sustained beyond that which an analysis of longer-term impact data would explore. The assessment excludes various factors, however, including well-being benefits of learning as well as benefits for the Exchequer from additional earnings. However, in recognition of the formative nature of the evaluation and of the considerable concerns surrounding the MI, the value of analysing these data in further depth at this stage is limited.

Case study: Qualifications to move from part-time to full-time

Tegan was working part-time in a role involving young people and young adults with a range of physical, emotional and mental additional learning needs. This meant that she needed a range of training and different courses to improve her ability to work with people who had complex and very different needs — she needed to learn different ways of communicating and working with them to be able to support them effectively.

She wanted to undertake the PLA course to improve her skills in her current role. She also thought that undertaking the course would improve her professional development and help her to transition from a part-time to a full-time role. She completed a Level 1 Course in Safeguarding Adults, which she stated will provide the steppingstone to more specific Level 2 and 3 courses.

Tegan discussed her training pathway with an advisor at the college, who she stated was very friendly and gave her much information on the different courses that were available and which ones suited her, what they would entail, and how they would be delivered. This meant that she could more easily select the courses that would fit in with her work schedule but still be worthwhile completing.

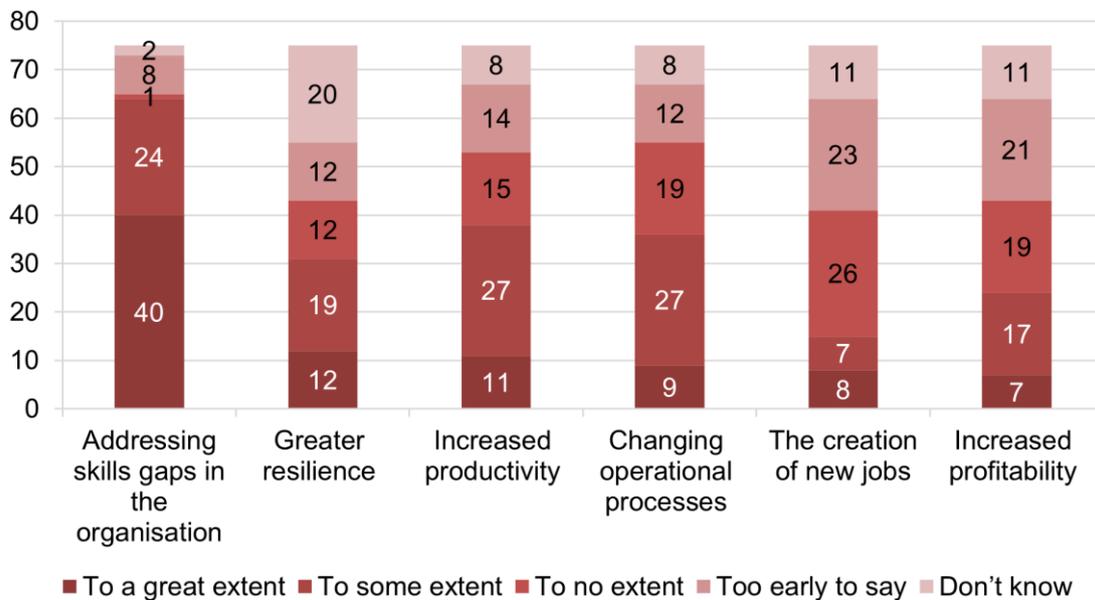
“The PLA funded course was good for my professional development and helped me get my new full-time job (which is better-paid). I liked the fact that my course was completely flexible and allowed me to study while working.”

Without PLA funding she would have looked for other free online courses, but they would not have been as high-quality and in-depth as the course that she undertook through PLA, and the qualification would not have been as useful as a result. Since completing the course, she has already progressed to further learning.

Employer outcomes

6.26 Employers were asked the extent to which the training of their employees through the ELA strand of the PLA programme had led to the achievement of various objectives. Their responses are presented in Figure 6.6 below and show that (commonly) the learning provision had helped to address skills gaps in their organisation. Around half of employers cited increased productivity and changing operational processes. However, a minority reported the creation of new jobs or increased profitability as a result of employee engagement in learning.

Figure 6.6: To what extent did the participation of your employees in the training lead to the following?



Source: PLA Employer Survey. N=75.

FE college outcomes

6.27 FE colleges welcomed both the opportunity and the flexibility that the PLA programme had brought to them. One college spoke of how the programme had “enabled the college to forge relationships with other training providers, expand their offer, and tender for other commercial opportunities”. Other colleges also spoke of additional work with external partners:

“The offer of qualifications — we have been quite restricted in previous programmes, but this has allowed us to meet priority areas and work with external contractors to meet that. The lower administrative burden has helped give us that flexibility. It has met demands: digital, HGV [have] been huge for us. We managed to turn around 150–160 people in a short amount of time. So a lot of programmes wouldn’t give you that quick turnaround, impact and flexibility because of the structure.” (FE College Respondent)

7. Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Overview

- 7.1 The PLA programme was designed to be a learner-led initiative that addresses the gap in support provision available to employed adults in Wales. It sought to target individuals on lower-than-average earnings on the basis that higher earnings would create higher productivity, greater wealth, and improved well-being amongst the economically active population.
- 7.2 Whilst the programme has been branded as ‘Personal Learning Accounts’, there are no personal accounts for individuals to draw down from. This is a reflection on some of the challenges faced by previous PLA initiatives, with the onus being placed on FE colleges and their subcontracted partners to determine and resource appropriate learning provision for individuals.
- 7.3 Commissioning FE colleges to deliver PLA has brought considerable and necessary efficiencies to the setup and implementation of the programme, given the external shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of a rapid rollout from the pilot. Adopting a competitive procurement approach enabling work-based learning and other training providers to bid into the programme would have demanded considerable time and resources by comparison, neither of which was available to the Welsh Government at the time.
- 7.4 The rationale behind funding institutions (rather than individuals) remains somewhat unclear, given that fraudulent activity of the original UK-wide PLA programme related to providers (rather than learners). However, restricting contractual awards to the 13 FE colleges does enable closer scrutiny of activity funded through the programme than would have been the case if a much greater number of providers had been commissioned.
- 7.5 The programme was in the midst of the pilot phase when the COVID-19 pandemic reached the UK. The launch of the furlough scheme in response to the pandemic, alongside widespread concerns surrounding the resilience and the potential structural change in the economy, meant that the PLA programme presented an opportunity for individuals to develop their skills.

- 7.6 Serendipitously, therefore, the programme appeared to be closely aligned with the needs of the economically active population following the socioeconomic shock triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and a rapid, responsive transition and expansion of the PLA programme commenced.
- 7.7 The rapid and considerable scaling-up of the programme in response to the demand triggered by the pandemic should be commended and is an excellent example of the role that government can play in times of crises brought about by external shocks to the economy. The programme grew from £2m in the pilot year in 2019/20 to £27.4m in 2021/22 and from 1,187 enrolments in the 2019/20 academic year to 7,603 in the 2020/21 academic year. This scaling illustrated both the programme's ability and its suitability to respond to the situation presented by the pandemic.
- 7.8 In responding to that demand, and in the midst of a socioeconomic crisis, there were some gaps regarding the processes and performance of the programme. An ongoing shortfall in resources with which to manage the programme and capture and analyse monitoring information has made it difficult to provide a robust judgement as to the programme's efficacy.

Design and implementation

- 7.9 The PLA programme drew on previous experiences of learning account schemes and research to identify a suitable delivery model to fulfil its aim of supporting employed people to gain higher-level skills and qualifications. This led to a number of key elements within its design:
- Targeting employed adults only based on the assumption that sufficient provision already existed for those who were unemployed.
 - Focusing on those earning less than the median average wage, with a clear emphasis on boosting earnings through career progression or transition.
 - Applying a fully funded course model for all eligible adults.
 - Delivering provision through FE colleges, with upfront funding being linked to an expectation of increased flexibility in what, how and when training was provided.

- 7.10 The funding model adopted for the PLA programme is a considerable departure from the traditional approach to FE college funding. Providing funding up front helped to de-risk the trialling of new courses and enabled colleges to allocate funding to course development. Several FE colleges welcomed this approach to trialling new activities; without consistent and thorough appraisal of how this was used in the development of courses, however, it is difficult to determine its success. The funding model also enabled FE colleges to be more responsive to learner demands, as it provides the ability to deliver a course without having to wait for sufficient learners to make it financially viable. This enabled FE colleges to be more innovative and less risk-averse in their operational practice.
- 7.11 One of the challenges brought about by the changes in course funding related to the consistency in how funding calculations have been applied. With limited national oversight of funding approval for PLA courses due to the volume of course applications, widespread concerns amongst FE colleges as to inconsistencies in the level of funding secured for similar courses have emerged. The application of bandings or tight cost parameters has been planned for the programme to ensure that a higher level of consistency in course costing is secured.
- 7.12 There is also a desire amongst FE colleges to tighten the eligibility regarding courses on offer (with one college citing how they felt that certain courses/qualifications were not sufficiently aligned with advancing an individual in their career), with some courses being simply transposed from the SDF programme to PLA to enable the continuation of learning in that provision. The planned review of qualifications in the PLA programme is therefore widely welcomed amongst FE colleges:

“We need clarity, consistency and transparency. We’re supposed to be working as a region, but no one knows what other people are doing. Because it’s not there in black and white, we second-guess a lot.” (FE College Respondent)

Recommendation 1: The sharing of learning numbers enrolled per course by FE college amongst FE colleges and RSPs would provide clarity as to what courses are being delivered and the levels of demand for that provision.

7.13 It was hoped that the implementation of a different funding model would facilitate increased flexibility in the operational practice of FE colleges to deliver learning provision with an expectation of increasing levels of online, evening and weekend courses. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a rapid transformation in the delivery of learning provision into a remote, online offer. Following the pandemic, that model of delivery has been retained for many courses. Beyond the transition to online learning, there has been some flexing in the timing of course delivery, although this has been constrained in some instances by the relative rigidity of staffing contracts, particularly for those working full-time. Furthermore, whilst online learning has become more commonplace amongst some FE colleges, those courses suffer from higher rates of non-completion. Interestingly, those courses delivered at the weekend also suffered from higher rates of non-completion, highlighting that how the delivery model is adjusted is an important factor to consider.

7.14 There also remains amongst some stakeholders a desire for greater private sector engagement in the delivery of training through PLA. FE colleges are drawing on private sector training providers to deliver provision to varying degrees, but amongst those promoting private training providers there is a sense that they offer greater flexibility, particularly for those working part-time or with caring responsibilities. However, the mechanisms through which private training providers could be commissioned are unclear.

7.15 A particular strength of the delivery model, however, has been the widening of eligibility in course provision, specifically the inclusion of vendor qualifications as eligible for programme funding. The allowance of provision of this nature has had a considerable impact on the ability of FE colleges and training providers to adapt learning provision to individual and employer needs, and has led to a substantial increase in the range of training provision put forward for the programme:

“It’s allowed us to develop new things, to change things, to just have a go. PLA has allowed us to see if it worked.” (FE College Respondent)

“The beauty of it is for me that ability to be responsive to market and individual demand, but also to have the opportunity to invest in curriculum, to invest in staff time to be able to recruit staff if you need them, or to gather resources, because

you're not shackled by some of the constraints that you have with other funding streams." (FE College Respondent)

- 7.16 The introduction of competitive bidding rounds for national priority sectors was also widely welcomed amongst FE colleges and other stakeholders. Stakeholders considered the approach to be a highly effective, rapid response to emerging issues associated with the provision of resources for HGV training, and to respond to opportunities in the green and digital sectors. PLA would appear to offer a particularly suitable mechanism for a rapid and targeted response in this manner and it is understood (and welcomed) that further opportunities of this nature are likely to arise in the near future.
- 7.17 The expansion in the programme placed pressure on some processes associated with PLA. For FE colleges the enrolment processes were typically streamlined in response to an increase in demand; however, this appears to have had a minimal impact on the proportion of learners who felt, in hindsight, ill-suited to their course. For the programme team it led to challenges associated with the appraisal and approval of a high volume of courses.
- 7.18 Concerns surrounding the endorsement/validation of new courses remain, particularly in emerging sectors. However, introducing a process of validation will further lengthen approval processes in a programme built on responsiveness and flexibility.

Recommendation 2: Piloting the validation of new courses through the appointment of sector experts who could be used on a drawdown basis, particularly for provision in national priority or emerging sectors, would provide insight into the potential value of this approach.

Recommendation 3: That a gender budgeting approach be adopted for the piloting of new courses to address any existing bias in programme delivery. This will ensure that new courses consider gender, ethnicity and disability from the outset.

Recommendation 4: That the review of qualifications to confirm eligibility and consistency in costings be completed as a matter of urgency to ensure that momentum for the PLA programme is maintained and colleges are not inadvertently offering ineligible provision.

- 7.19 Assessing the likely demand for new courses has also proven to be challenging. Various mechanisms are used to identify labour shortages, but these are inconsistently and sporadically adopted. Some FE colleges have purchased commercial licences to obtain labour market intelligence; however, there would appear to be an opportunity to purchase this at a national level (whilst retaining the ability to gather local intelligence) to bring about economies of scale. Alongside evidence from employer forums and sector groups, this approach might help to bring about greater consistency in determining needs and ensuring that an intersectional focus is embedded within the wider approach.

Recommendation 5: Explore the relative value in pooling resources to acquire a nationwide commercial licence for LMI. Where available, LMI should also be disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and disability to ensure that the gender budgeting approach is embedded from the outset.

Eligibility

- 7.20 Fully funded learning provision in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and during the current cost-of-living crisis for those struggling with their earnings but who are seeking to progress in their career is widely viewed as being a key strength of the programme.
- 7.21 The assignment of an earnings threshold as a key determinant of programme eligibility provides useful clarity to potential applicants for PLA. The salary threshold, however, exists as a boundary between 'all or nothing' funding for PLA provision. In certain sectors in which labour market modelling suggests existing shortages and strong growth prospects, there are opportunities for individuals to reskill who may already be earning above the threshold but who have some of the necessary transferrable skills to respond rapidly to the opportunities presented (plumbers, for instance, who may seek to transition to the green sector). The loss of the funding incentive to retrain due to the salary threshold, whilst clear-cut in nature, appears to

be excessive, and a tapering of contribution in accordance with earnings that reflects on research into the lessons from previous ILA⁵⁵ may offer a more suitable response going forward.

Recommendation 6: Explore options for the application of a tapered funding model for certain sectors or priorities. This process should also consider how a tapered model for certain sectors or priorities could advance guidance specific to gender equality to ensure that the gender budgeting approach is retained and embedded through all aspects of the programme.

- 7.22 There are also concerns surrounding the ineligibility of the unemployed for the PLA programme, with a nervousness that there may be instances in which the unemployed are paying to participate in a course that the employed are able to access for free. It is expected that other programmes such as ReAct Plus are fulfilling this demand; given the funding model adopted in PLA, however, this would risk the course being double-funded. That being said, it is unclear as to whether there have been any such instances arising. One area in which eligibility has been expanded is amongst full-time carers, who will be offered places in the PLA programme where there is capacity on existing courses.

Gender budgeting

- 7.23 The PLA programme was also viewed as being a suitable intervention through which to pilot gender budgeting. Its introduction, following the design of the pilot, restricted its role in shaping the intervention and raised a number of concerns when reflected upon against the priority sectors.
- 7.24 Furthermore, as outlined within the Gender Equality Review,⁵⁶ to be effective, gender budgeting needs to be robust (based on data) and there needs to be a shared collective understanding of its aims and objectives, which was not going to happen over one programme and should be seen as a longer process.

⁵⁵ Consulting in Place (2010) Personal Learning Accounts: Building on Lessons Learnt, UK Commission for Employment and Skills.

⁵⁶ [Chwarae Teg, Deeds not Words Summary Report, Review of Gender Equality in Wales \(Phase Two\), June 2019.](#)

7.25 It is important to recognise that gender budgeting is something of a journey. PLA initially relied on theory, but more practical examples of how gender budgeting can be used are now sought. Stakeholders reported that the loss of Welsh Government staff as the programme was rolling out also resulted in the loss of knowledge regarding the gender budgeting approach. When PLA was rolled out to other colleges, the gender budgeting approach was not perceived to be fully embedded within programme delivery and at times was confused with the promotion of equal opportunities. The combination of the urgent COVID-19 response, new delivery partners, and a lack of retained programme and staff knowledge on gender budgeting would appear to have resulted in the approach being perceived to be a lesser priority.

Recommendation 7: Examples of gender budgeting for delivery partners to learn from, as well as data for them to use and interrogate to help instil behavioural change, will be important. Empowering providers to take the agenda forward will be vital to ensuring that it is understood and becomes integrated in everyday practice.

7.26 Progress of this nature is evident with Welsh Government officials engaging with the RSPs and FE colleges through regional engagement sessions. In sessions, officials have shared practical examples and are also internally developing a support offer on gender budgeting to ensure that a consistent foundation of knowledge on gender budgeting exists across the Welsh Government.

Recommendation 8: Explore options to strengthen the role of RSPs and Working Wales in furthering the gender budgeting agenda. This role could include leading the use of LMI, disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and disability, to identify intersectional needs by region and/or sector to ensure that the gender budgeting approach is embedded at a foundational level.

ELA

7.27 The PLA programme required an injection of resources to help facilitate its expansion. To do so, it drew on resources allocated to the former SDF programme. The SDF programme was targeted at employers; therefore, widening eligibility in the PLA programme to enable employers to access PLA via the ELA strand could be viewed as something of a compromise in securing that funding.

7.28 Aligning the ELA strand with the PLA programme (which, at its core, is learner-led) has proven to be difficult, diluting the messaging associated with the role of the programme and its objectives. That being said, it would appear that the role of employers in determining learning is less clear-cut than this, with almost three in every 10 learners in the PLA programme being made aware of the programme by their line manager/supervisor, and one fifth of learners having some employer influence on the ultimate decision as to whether the course might be suitable for them.

7.29 Parameters for employer eligibility were intentionally broad, with an emphasis on developing increased resilience amongst employers to the pandemic and with no earnings threshold being applied. Like the learner-led PLA offer, the ELA strand also generated considerable demand; however, with limited eligibility criteria, accessing the ELA strand commonly operated on the basis of first come, first served with larger employers, with more established college relationships being the more likely to benefit.

7.30 There were also concerns that ELA provision could effectively ‘crowd out’ the PLA offer at the expense of the individual learners, whom PLA had been designed to target, with this mismatch being a concern for most FE colleges:

“The thing I don’t understand is the rationale behind the two strands are very different, and there was no real monitoring or comparison between the two. We could have been delivering 99 per cent ELA and completely neglecting the PLA element.” (FE College Respondent)

7.31 Colleges also voiced concerns as to the fully funded model and the associated lack of co-investment in training provision:

“That co-investment [from employers] is important. They delay things [while] knowing there could be [another initiative] the year after.” (FE College Respondent)

7.32 Moreover, associated concerns surrounding the ELA programme related to the degree to which it was aligned with other provision. The ELA strand presented considerable similarities to the Flexible Skills Programme (FSP), which targets

priority employee skills in priority sectors, too. The FSP, however, required employer contributions with a 50 per cent intervention rate, and employers would therefore naturally pursue the more favourable funding package offered through ELA. Furthermore, several upskilling programmes were in operation at the launch of ELA through the European Social Fund, most of which have now ended or will end imminently. ELA has also ceased operation since September 2022, which, for the clarity of the PLA programme, is a very welcome development; however, it does raise concerns for some colleges with regard to the planned approach to employer-led upskilling in the future.

- 7.33 With the part-funded FSP continuing, it is important that consistency in relation to employer-led contribution to employer-led upskilling be established and maintained. This will help to strengthen the strategic focus on workforce development and avoid the risk of pursuit of the provision that demands least investment. However, with the arrival of the Shared Prosperity Fund and the channelling of these resources through local authorities, there is a risk of proliferation of various employer-led skill provisions once again.

Governance

- 7.34 The expansion in the funding of the PLA programme was not reflected in personnel to manage its operation. A recruitment freeze within the Welsh Government at the point of expansion placed considerable constraints on increasing the personnel to manage the programme. Ultimately, the staffing quota has been insufficient for a programme of this scale, resulted in gaps in communication and governance, and restricted the ability of the team to appraise new course and employer applications for the programme or measure progress and success.

Progress and performance

- 7.35 Since its expansion, the programme has struggled with the capture and analysis of the necessary management information to help assess patterns of performance, and progress has been problematic. The LLWR management information system is not currently set up to run reports on the programme; thus, obtaining relevant, timely information on performance requires bespoke analysis, which is resource-intensive.

7.36 The lack of performance data has been a source of frustration for the Welsh Government and for external partners, with RSPs being particularly keen to gain sight of data on attendance at recently approved courses to aid the determination of levels of demand, and FE colleges are keen to have sight of all approved courses to ascertain what range of provision is eligible for the programme and contextualise their performance and progress against other colleges.

7.37 An analysis of the MI as part of the evaluation has enabled the exploration of various patterns of note:

- Despite the pursuit of flexible provision, there remains a degree of alignment with the traditional academic timetable.
- There are considerable geographical fluctuations in the propensity to enrol in PLA, with residents of Carmarthenshire being 33 times more likely to enrol in PLA than those in Wrexham.
- Whilst the PLA strand has struggled with rates of completion, it has managed to enrol a more diverse population than has the ELA strand and who are typically attracted to adult learning provision throughout Wales.

Recommendation 9: To enable closer monitoring of the progress and performance of PLA, it is necessary to:

- Establish a series of bespoke reports that provide intersectional analysis of learner profiles, enrolments and completions by course and FE college, and ensure that all are consistently recorded.
- Ensure that the highest qualification prior to learning becomes a mandatory field for FE colleges (according to the LLWR guidance, it is only mandatory for work-based learning providers).
- Collate a list of approved courses and their CQFW-equivalent level and sector subject area in a consistent manner and establish these as a drop-down list or similar to ensure consistency of recording.
- Ensure that course costs, course duration (learning hours and total hours), and participant numbers are held and analysed in a consistent manner and that target

learner numbers are recorded and the means by which to determine actual learner numbers per course (and therefore demand) are established.

- Provide locked templates to ensure that learner sector, occupation and earnings are captured consistently for all participants upon enrolment.

7.38 FE colleges are also required to use a destination survey to capture detail on learners at the point of completion and six months after the completion of learning. Analysis has shown that key changes with regard to securing new roles and new careers tend to take over six months after learner completion. Furthermore, FE colleges are expending considerable resources while seeking to obtain this information from learners. Capturing whether a learner completes their learning or whether they leave early (and the reasons as to why) at the completion (or termination) of learning would seem to be sufficient and reasonable evidence to capture. A learner survey could then form part of a dedicated survey exercise through an impact evaluation or similar (in a similar manner to that of the ESF leavers survey, for example).

Recommendation 10: That the destination of learners six months after the completion of learning no longer be a requirement for FE colleges to capture.

Outcomes

7.39 The PLA programme has played a key role in attracting individuals to learning provision. Whilst most learners could not be described as non-traditional learners, almost half (46 per cent) in the absence of the PLA programme would not have embarked on their learning. Female learners and those who reported being in less secure employment⁵⁷ were more likely not to have undertaken any training than were males, thereby illustrating that additionality is strongest amongst those groups with protected characteristics.

7.40 Almost four in 10 learners in PLA are recorded as 'learning programme continuing'. It is unclear as to what proportion of these learners may simply have left their course and failed to notify the FE college or training provider. The degree of

⁵⁷ Defined as being on furlough, on zero hours, in agency employment, at risk of redundancy, or employed and financially negatively impacted by the economy.

variation in learner status by FE college is illustrative of an issue that is specific to FE college operations and data capture systems. The early leaver rate of 16 per cent is therefore likely to be an underestimate; however, it is difficult to determine of what scale.

- 7.41 Intersectional analysis of completion rates cross-programme shows higher early leaver rates for certain ethnicities; when analysed on a college-by-college basis, however, no significant variation is evident. It is therefore the distribution by FE college (rather than any specific characteristic of a learner) that appears to be the driver of any fluctuations identified.
- 7.42 Learners are reporting increased self-confidence and self-motivation, as well as feeling more independent and with clearer career aspirations. Most participants are pursuing further learning; however, they were already more engaged in learning than was the typical adult prior to PLA enrolment. Furthermore, across most sector subject areas, females are more prevalent on PLA courses than they are in post-16 learning provision generally.
- 7.43 Almost 40 per cent (149/381) of surveyed learners who had completed their learning or had left after having completed over half of their course are now in a different career from when they enrolled in PLA or have secured a pay rise as a result of their participation in the PLA programme. Of these, 85 per cent (127/129) attribute this change, at least to some extent, to the PLA programme. This represents one third of all learners who had completed a course or left early after having completed over half of the course. Given the socioeconomic context within which the programme has been delivered, these would appear to be strong outcomes for the programme, and with reported salary increments of, on average, over £10,000 per annum per learner, they represent a massive increase in earnings for affected learners.
- 7.44 The programme, however, appears to be relatively expensive to deliver and whilst course cost data are incomplete or inconsistently completed, the evidence that is available suggests a cost that is far in excess of adult part-time learning, which

ranges from £7.06 to £14.12 per hour.⁵⁸ As a result, early indications are that the programme currently represents acceptable value for money.

⁵⁸ Based on Welsh Government analysis.

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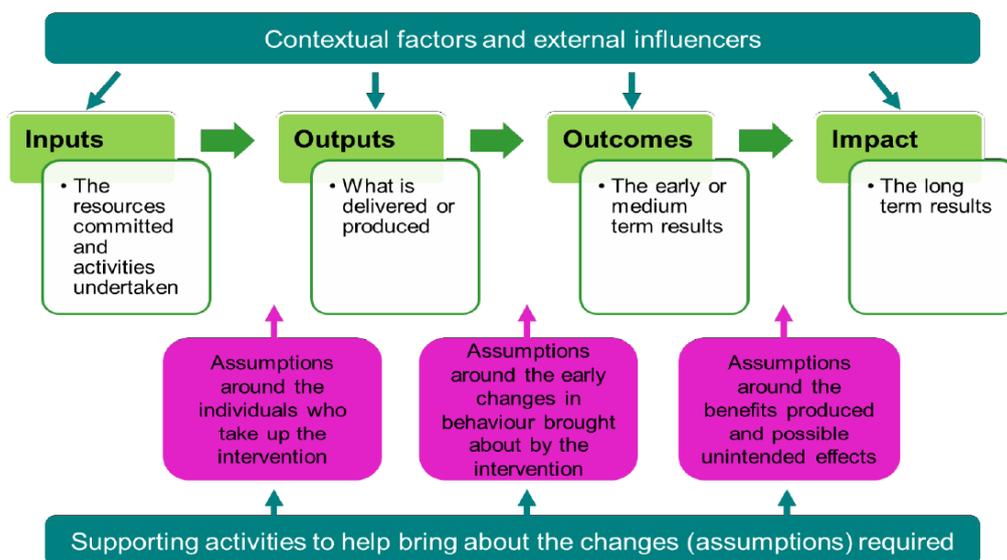
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Annexe 1: Programme Theory of Change

This section explores the design of PLA through the programme’s theory of change. HM Treasury’s Magenta Book states that good policymaking necessitates a thorough understanding of the intervention and how it is expected to achieve the expected outcomes. A good evaluation also requires this understanding, and a theory of change is an approach which helps to ensure that the subject of an evaluation is fully understood.⁵⁹

A theory of change explains how an intervention is expected to work (setting out all of the steps expected to be involved in achieving the desired outcomes), the assumptions made, the quality and strength of the evidence supporting them, and wider contextual factors.⁶⁰ Developing a theory of change typically involves considering the proposed inputs (what investment/actions will take place) and the causal chain that leads from these inputs through to the expected outputs (what is delivered or produced), outcomes (the early or medium-term results), and, ultimately, impact (the long-term results).

Figure A1: An example of a linear theory of change



Source: The Magenta Book: Central Government Guidance on Evaluation.

⁵⁹ [HM Treasury \(2020\) The Magenta Book: Central Government Guidance on Evaluation.](#)

⁶⁰ There are several tools that can be used to explore how an intervention is expected to work, often described as the ‘programme theory’. These include a theory of change, logic mapping, log frames, benefits mapping, and system mapping. All of these processes involve the mapping of causes and effects. See Chapter 2 of the Magenta Book.

Drawing on insight gathered from the scoping interviews, workshops with Welsh Government officials involved in the design, management and delivery of the service, and engagement with partners and stakeholders, this Annexe outlines a theory of change for PLA.

The theory of change is built around a relatively simple logic (as set out in Figure A2 below). However, whilst the overarching goals of both PLA and the ELA strand are similar, there are areas of distinction that necessitate a dedicated theory of change for the ELA strand in addition to one for the PLA programme. The more comprehensive theory of change for the individual learner element of PLA is presented in Figure A3 overleaf, with the theory of change associated with the employer strand being presented in Figure A4 on the subsequent page.

Figure A2: Central logic of the PLA theory of change

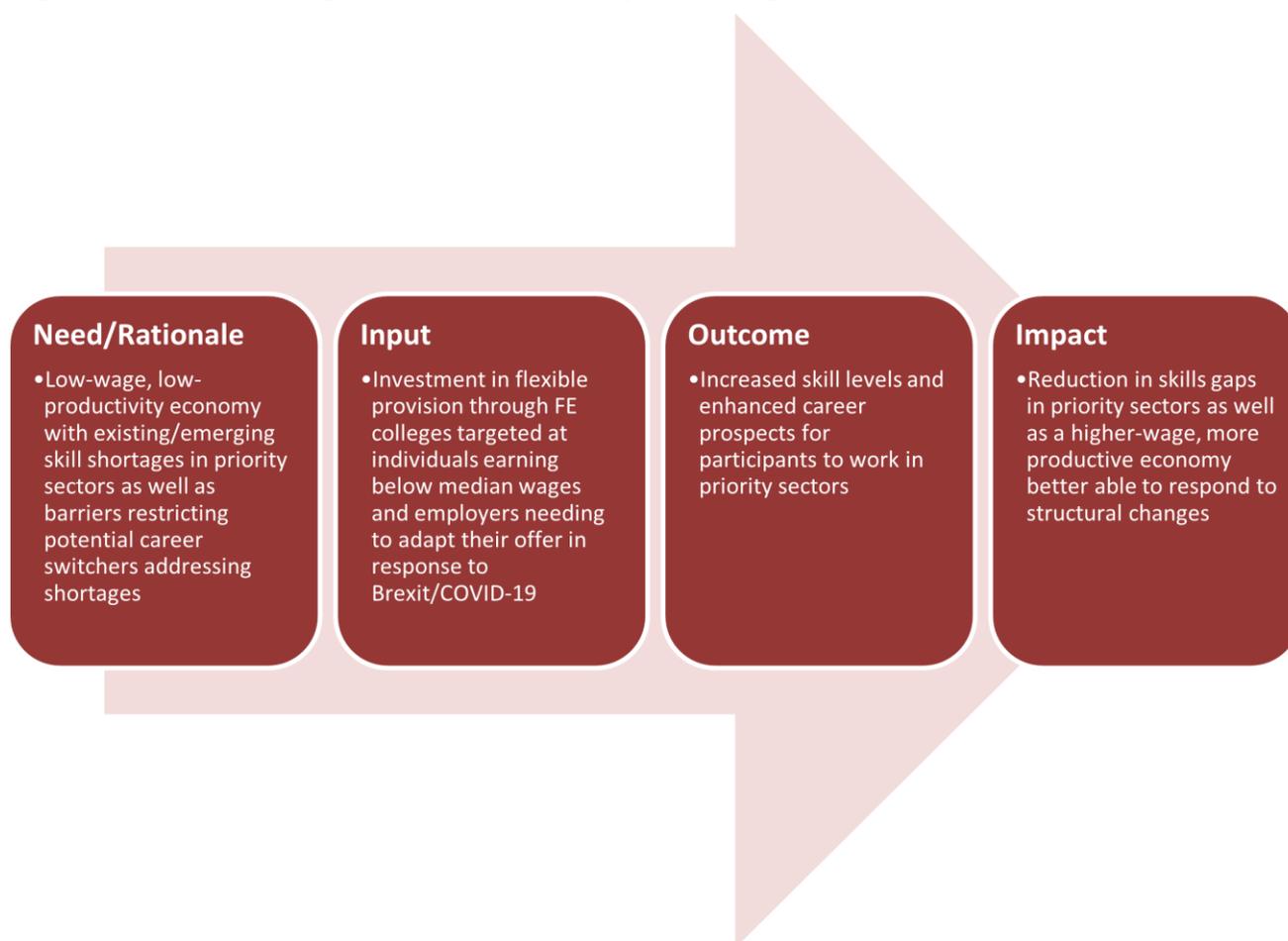


Figure A3: Theory of change – PLA learner-led strand

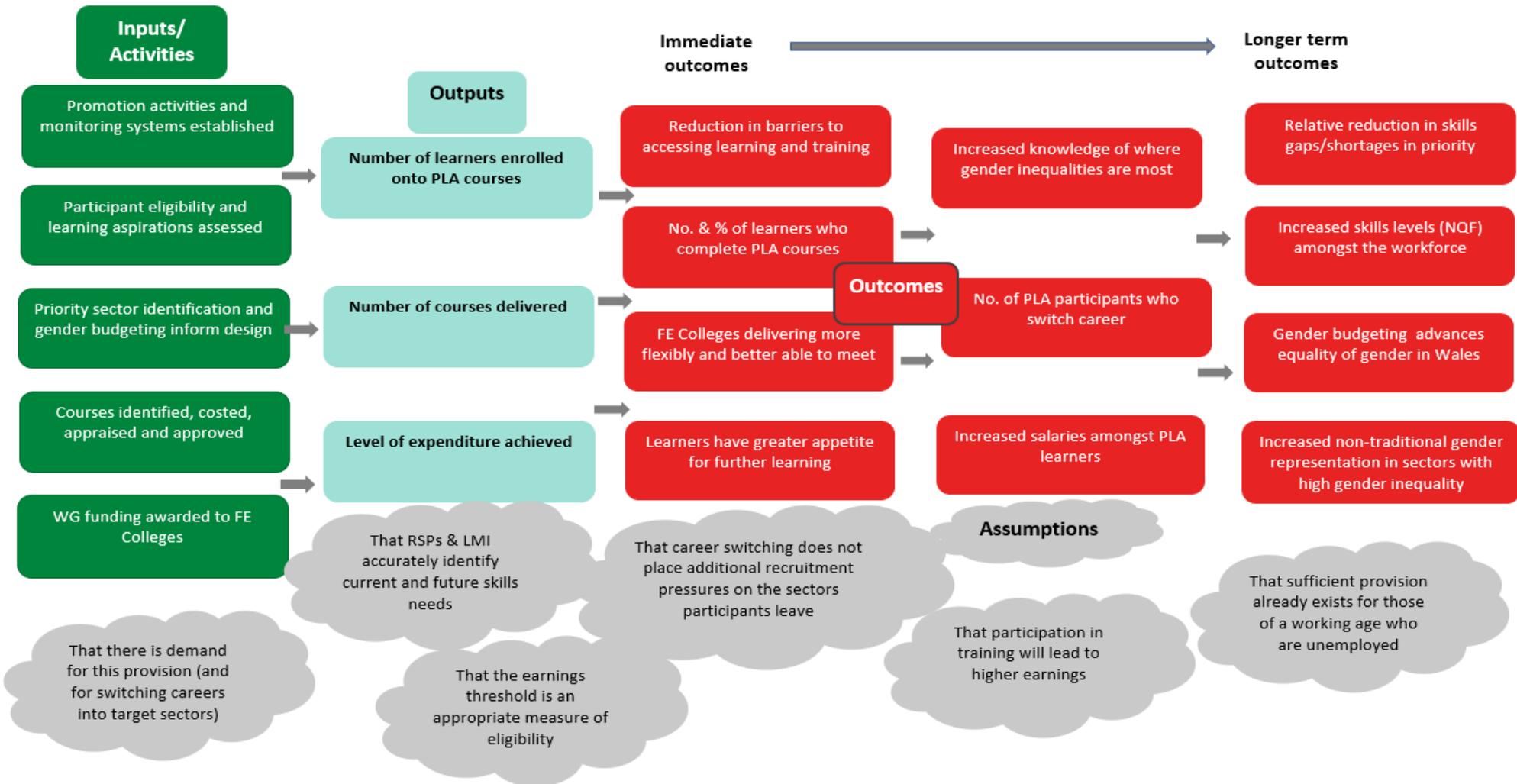
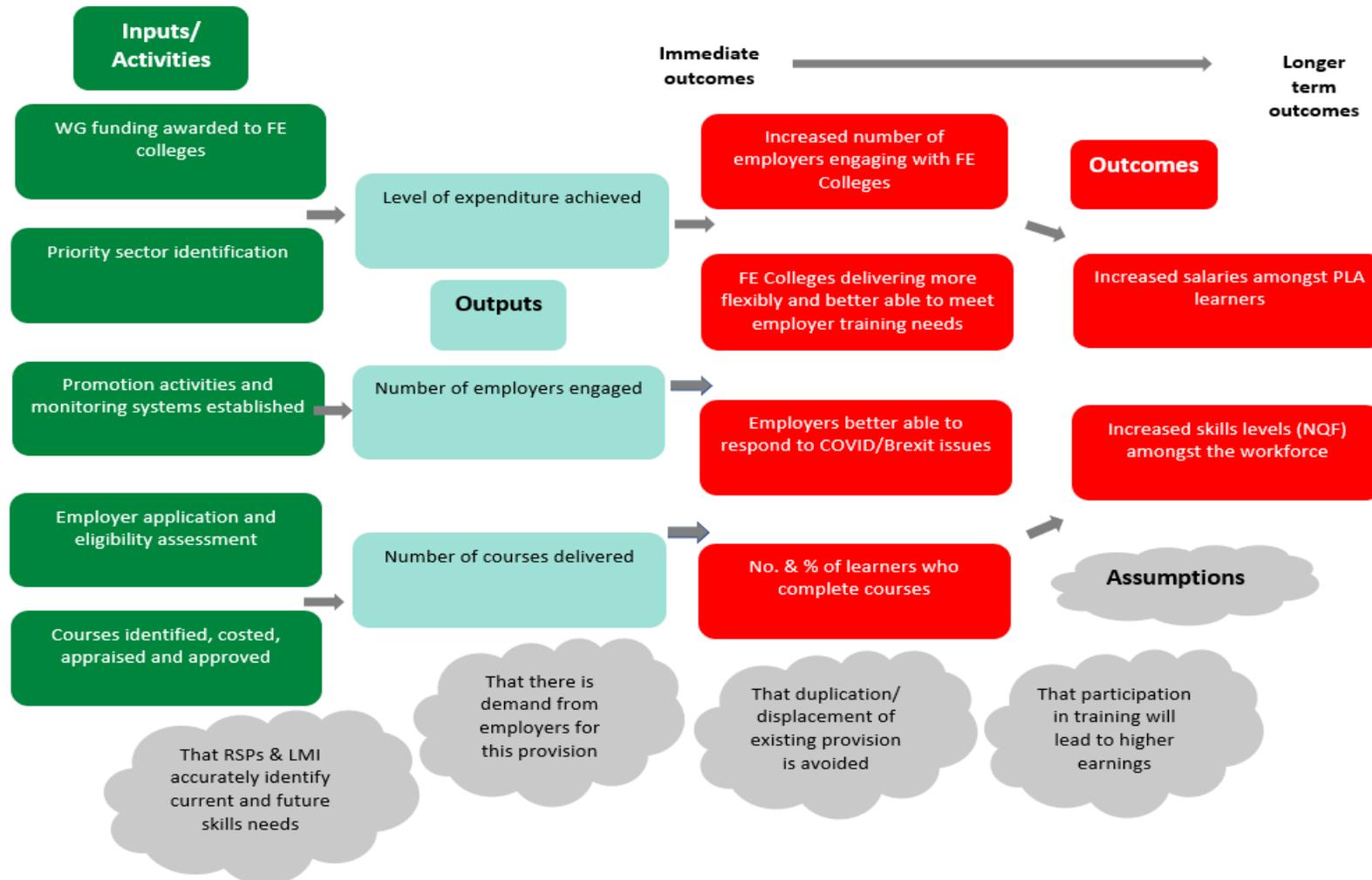


Figure A4: Theory of change – ELA strand



Annexe 2: Discussion Guides

Management and Delivery Survey – PLA Rollout Colleges

Ask all

1. Could you please outline your role and how it relates to the PLA programme?
 - a. For how long have you been in this role?
 - b. Has the nature of your role in relation to the PLA programme evolved at all over time?

If so, in what ways?

2. Please outline the approach that you took in relation to the design and implementation of the PLA programme within your college.
3. A national campaign for the programme was launched in December 2020 and ran until March 2021. From your perspective, how effective was this campaign in raising awareness of and demand for the PLA programme?
4. What promotional activity did you undertake? (Are you able to provide any examples of these?)
 - a. How effective did you consider the promotional activity to be?
5. What would you describe as being your (your organisation's) primary source of referrals?
 - a. Approximately what proportion of your learners in the individual PLA strand of the programme are referred from Working Wales?
6. Approximately what proportion of participants are involved (as part of the enrolment process) in an appraisal and assessment of their training needs?
 - a. How is this typically undertaken (face-to-face, telephone, online, etc.)?
 - b. Approximately what proportion of learners have a training/learning plan developed as part of their application process?
 - i. Where a plan was developed, what process did you/your colleagues undertake in the development of that plan?
 - c. What (if any) other approaches were taken for determining suitable provision for PLA participants?

7. In developing your approach to PLA, what guidance were you provided in relation to gender budgeting?
 - a. What do you understand gender budgeting to be?
8. What examples (if any) of adaptations were applied to enable participants with different barriers to learning to access learning provision?

New courses

9. What processes do you undergo to identify new courses for the PLA programme?
 - a. What approach is taken in the appraisal of these courses?
10. What approaches do you use for estimating the likely cost of new courses?

Delivering course provision

11. How are courses being delivered? (What range of approaches to course delivery have been adopted?)
12. What adjustments to service delivery for adult learning has the college made and why? (evenings, weekends, remote, etc.)
 - a. In what ways have distinctions and differing needs of different groups (including those with protective characteristics) been addressed?
 - i. To what extent has this led to a change in design to positively address any identified unintended impacts or bias in delivery?
13. What provision is being offered through the medium of Welsh?
14. In what ways is PLA providing opportunities for individuals to undergo Welsh language skill development training?
15. Approximately what proportion of learning provision delivered through the PLA programme is subcontracted to third party providers?
 - a. Which typical courses or industrial sectors does this learning provision relate to?
 - b. Which training providers are you/is your college most commonly subcontracting to?
16. Additional funding (two per cent of each college's budgetary allocation) has been allocated to each college to be used as a student support budget. In what ways (if at all) has this budget been used?

17. Reflecting on the PLA delivery model, what would you consider to be its key strengths?

18. In what ways (if at all) could the PLA delivery model be improved?

ELA (Employer Learning Accounts)

The widening of eligibility criteria associated with the rollout of the PLA programme also meant that the programme became available to employers who were seeking to upskill/reskill their workforce to meet the challenges of new operating requirements during and after COVID-19. We refer to this in this consultation as the ELA strand of the programme.

19. What approaches did you use for promoting ELA to employers?

20. Are those employers participating in the ELA programme primarily?

- Employers with whom the college had a pre-existing relationship
- Employers with whom the college had not previously engaged
- A mixture of the two

21. How did you determine the eligibility of employers for the ELA programme?

22. Reflecting on the ELA delivery model, what would you consider to be its key strengths?

23. In what ways (if at all) could the ELA delivery model be improved?

National sector priorities

There have been two competitive bidding rounds to deliver learning provision linked to sector priorities in the PLA programme.

24. How have you/your college responded to these opportunities?

25. How effective do you consider this approach to be?

26. Are there other priority areas that should be considered? If so, which (and why)?

Measuring progress

27. What approaches (if any) are you using to collect learner experiences for the programme?

- a. Is there any feedback/evidence of note?

28. What management information systems are you currently using to capture the various information for the PLA programme?

a. How (if at all) could the process requirements for capturing management information be improved?

29. Reflecting on all that we have discussed today, is there anything that you would recommend for the future delivery of PLA?

30. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Stakeholder interviews

1. Could you please outline your role and how it relates to the PLA programme?

The pilot phase of the PLA programme commenced in September 2019 in two areas of Wales through Coleg Gwent and GLLM.

2. What did you understand the rationale to be for the initial targeting of learners from the engineering, construction and digital sectors?
 - a. What (from your perspective) led to the expansion in sectors to encompass health and financial services?
3. To your knowledge, how would you describe levels of demand during the pilot phase?
4. Reflecting on that pilot phase, what would you describe as the key learning points from that phase?

The transition and rollout phase of the PLA programme led to a widening of eligibility for PLA combined with a considerable expansion in the scale of investment in the programme.

5. Were other approaches to widening the eligibility criteria considered?
 - a. If so, for what reasons were these discounted?
6. The PLA pilot was the recommended policy area to test the approach to gender budgeting. What do you feel has been learnt from testing gender budgeting through PLA?
 - a. What changes (if any) would you make to how gender budgeting is implemented in future policy interventions?

Programme progress and achievements

The PLA programme was designed with the following aims:

- To be a flexible programme of learning entitlement
- To be personalised for individual learning to help employees to progress in employment or achieve their career aspirations
- To be accessible for eligible individuals by offering learning choices to individuals to enable them to decide how and when they learn
- To meet the needs of the economy linked to key sector drivers

- To offer an independent assessment, prior to learning, to ensure that the right learning is considered and undertaken
7. How do you feel the PLA programme is progressing against each of these aims?
 8. How effective do you feel the current monitoring and reporting procedures for capturing progress in the programme to be?
 - a. What improvements could be made?
 9. There is evidence through analysis of the management information of considerable geographical variation in the extent to which adults are engaging with PLA. What do you think might be influencing this variation?
 - a. What plans are there to address this issue?
 10. Reflecting on the PLA delivery model, what would you consider to be its key strengths?
 11. In what ways (if at all) could the PLA delivery model be improved?

ELA

The widening of eligibility criteria associated with the rollout of the PLA programme also meant that the programme became available to employers who were seeking to upskill staff in response to the pandemic. We refer to this as the ELA (employer-led) strand of the programme.

12. What was the rationale behind the inclusion of an ELA strand in the programme?
13. From your perspective, how successful has the ELA strand of the programme been?
14. Reflecting on the ELA delivery model, what would you consider to be its key strengths?
15. In what ways (if at all) could the ELA delivery model be improved?

National sector priorities

Furthermore, there have been two competitive bidding rounds to deliver learning provision linked to sector priorities in the PLA programme.

16. How effective do you consider this approach to have been?
 - a. Why do you say that?
17. Are there other priority areas that should be considered? If so, which (and why)?

Strategic alignment

18. In your opinion, how effectively does the PLA programme align with other provision that seeks to support adults in Wales to raise their skill levels?
 - a. Why do you say that?
 - b. Are there ways in which integration could be improved?
19. Looking forward, what changes (if any) would you propose to the design of PLA?
20. Is there anything else that you would like to raise?

Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) Learner Survey

Before we proceed, please confirm your preference for completing the questionnaire in:

English

Welsh

Q1 Are you happy to continue with the survey? Please note that you can stop completing the questionnaire at any time if you decide that you do not want to continue.

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Are you happy to continue with the survey? Please note that you can stop completing the questionnaire ... = No

Q2 Thank you for your time. To exit this survey, you can close this tab in your browser.

Q4 Can we confirm that you started taking part in xxxx course in xx/xx/xx?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Can we confirm that you started taking part in xxxx course in xx/xx/xx? = No

Q5 Can you recall participating in a course with xxx college?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Can you recall participating in a course with xxx college? = Yes

Q6 Please can you provide the correct details?

Display this question:

If Can you recall participating in a course with xxx college? = No

Q7 Thank you for your time. To exit this survey, you can close this tab in your browser.

Q8 At the time that you accessed the PLA learning, were you ...?

Please tick all that apply

- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Self-employed
- On furlough
- On zero-hours contract
- Agency staff
- At risk of being made redundant

Employed and 'financially' negatively impacted by the economy, e.g. where their anticipated annual salary this financial year will be less than £29,534 or the future of their employment is at risk due to working in a sector which is likely to see a negative impact going forward due to COVID-19 or the UK's departure from the European Union

Other (please specify)

Display this question:

If At the time that you accessed the PLA learning, were you ...? Please tick all that apply
= Other (please specify)

Q9 Please tell us what your circumstances were at the time that you accessed PLA learning.

Q10 What sector did the organisation that you worked for at the time that you accessed PLA support operate in?

- Agriculture, forestry & fishing
- Mining, quarrying & utilities
- Manufacturing
- Construction
- Motor trades
- Wholesale
- Retail
- Transport & storage
- Accommodation & food services
- Information & communication
- Financial & insurance
- Property
- Professional, scientific & technical
- Business administration & support services
- Public administration & defence
- Education
- Health
- Arts, entertainment & recreation
- None of the above

Display this question:

If What sector did the organisation that you worked for at the time that you accessed PLA support operate in? = None of the above

Q13 What did the business that you were employed in at the time that you accessed PLA learning do? What goods or services did it provide?

Q11 Please tick one of the following categories which best describes your job role at the time that you received support from the PLA programme.

- Routine or general (e.g. general cleaners, food and drink hospitality staff, warehouse, and agricultural workers)
- Process, plant and machine (e.g. machine operatives, assemblers, forklift truck, train, and coach drivers)
- Sales and customer service (e.g. sales assistants, customer service)
- Care, leisure, and other occupations (e.g. nursery workers, veterinary nurses, hairdressers, and caretakers)
- Skilled trades (e.g. maintenance and telecommunications engineers, construction workers, butchers, chefs, and farmers)
- Administrative and secretarial occupations (e.g. bookkeepers, library assistants, and office workers)
- Technical and associate professional occupations (e.g. engineering technicians, IT support, and taxation experts)
- Professional occupations (e.g. scientists, architects, IT specialists, medical practitioners, solicitors, and journalists)
- Chief executives and senior officials (e.g. division directors, production managers, and practice managers)
- None of the above

Display this question:

If Please tick one of the following categories which best describes your job role at the time that you received support from the PLA programme = None of the above

Q12 What is your job title?

Q14 At the time that you accessed the PLA learning, approximately how long had you been employed by that employer?

Please provide a numerical figure

- Number of years _____
- Number of months _____

Q15 Is this the only role that you had been employed in at that organisation prior to accessing PLA learning?

- No
- Yes

Display this question:

If Is this the only role that you had been employed in at that organisation prior to accessing PLA learning? = No

Q16 How long had you been in your most recent job role with the organisation prior to accessing PLA learning?

Please provide a numerical figure

- Number of years _____
- Number of months _____

Q17 At the time that you accessed PLA learning, within which of the following bands did your annual salary fall?

- £0–£10,000
- £10,001–£15,000
- £15,001–£20,000
- £20,001–£25,000
- £25,001–£30,000
- Over £30,000
- Prefer not to say

Q18 Prior to engaging with this specific course that you accessed through PLA, can you recall how long it had been since you had previously taken part in some sort of work-related training or training that would enhance your career?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to 11 months
- 1 to 2 years
- 3 to 4 years
- 5 years or more
- Cannot recall
- Not applicable

Q19 Prior to accessing PLA, what was your highest level of qualification?

- Entry level – e.g. entry-level diploma / ESOL
- Level 1 – e.g. Level 1 NVQ, GCSE grades D–G
- Level 2 – e.g. Level 2 NVQ, GCSE grades A*–C
- Level 3 – e.g. A Level, Level 3 NVQ
- Level 4 – e.g. certificate of higher education, higher apprenticeship, HNC
- Level 5 – e.g. foundation degree, Higher National Diploma (HND)
- Level 6 – e.g. undergraduate degree, degree apprenticeship
- Level 7 or above – e.g. master's degree, postgraduate certificates, PhDs, PGCEs
- Not sure

Application and enrolment

Q21 Were you referred to the programme by Working Wales (Careers Wales)?

- Yes
- No
- Cannot recall

Display this question:

If Were you referred to the programme by Working Wales (Careers Wales)? = No
Or Were you referred to the programme by Working Wales (Careers Wales)? = Cannot recall

Q22 How did you first hear about the PLA programme?

- Seed name of college undertook PLA learning with
- Another college
- Online search
- Social media
- (If employed) Line manager / supervisor
- Word of mouth
- Do not know
- Other

Display this question:

If How did you first hear about the PLA programme? = Other

Q23 Please specify how you first found out about the programme.

Q24 When you first heard about the programme, why did you decide to apply for it?

Q25 How straightforward did you find the application and enrolment process?

- Very straightforward
- Relatively straightforward
- Somewhat complicated
- Very complicated

Display this question:

If How straightforward did you find the application and enrolment process? = Somewhat complicated

Or How straightforward did you find the application and enrolment process? = Very complicated

Q26 In what ways was the process complicated?

Q27 Can you recall working with an advisor to develop an individual learning plan?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Can you recall working with an advisor to develop an individual learning plan? = Yes

Q28 On a scale of 1 to 5, how useful was this process?

- 1 – not useful at all
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 – very useful

Display this question:

If Can you recall working with an advisor to develop an individual learning plan? = Yes

Q29 Did you feel that the learning plan was appropriate for your needs?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Can you recall working with an advisor to develop an individual learning plan? = Yes

Q30 What makes you say this?

Display this question:

If On a scale of 1 to 5, how useful was this process? = 3

Or On a scale of 1 to 5, how useful was this process? = 2

Or On a scale of 1 to 5, how useful was this process? = 1 – not useful at all

Q31 Were there any areas where this process could be improved?

Display this question:

If Can you recall working with an advisor to develop an individual learning plan? = Yes

Q32 To what extent did the learning plan influence the course that you chose to participate in?

- To no extent
- To some extent
- To a great extent

Display this question:

If Can you recall working with an advisor to develop an individual learning plan? = Yes

Q33 Who decided that the PLA learning course that you chose would be most suitable for you?

- I did
- Joint decision between myself and my family/friends
- Joint decision between myself and my employer
- My employer
- Other
- Cannot remember

Q34 Were you able to apply for/enrol on your first choice of course?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Were you able to apply for/enrol on your first choice of course? = No

Q35 Why was this?

Q36 How quickly after applying did you start your course?

- 1 to 2 weeks
- Within 1 month
- Within 2 to 3 months
- Within 6 months
- Longer than 6 months after applying
- Cannot remember

Q37 Do you know the level of the course that you attended?

- Credits or modules towards a qualification
- Entry level (e.g. entry-level diploma / ESOL)
- Level 1 (e.g. Level 1 NVQ, GCSE grades (D–G))
- Level 2 (e.g. GCSE grades (A*–C))
- Level 3 (e.g. A Level, Level 3 NVQ)
- Level 4 (e.g. certificate of higher education, higher apprenticeship)
- Level 5 (e.g. foundation degree)
- Level 6 (e.g. undergraduate degree)
- Level 7 or above (e.g. master's degree, postgraduate certificates, PhDs)
- Not sure

Q38 Experience of course

We would like to know a little bit more about your course and how it was delivered.

Q39 Did the training take place:

Please select all that apply

- At seed college name
- Both at seed college name and online
- Online
- In your workplace
- Somewhere else

Q40 What were you hoping to get out of the training?

Tick all that apply

- To refresh my skills
- Support to move into a new career
- To progress in my existing career
- To gain new ideas / methods / inspiration
- To improve a job-related skill
- To learn a new skill related to my job role
- To learn more about new processes / policies
- To gain a qualification / work towards a qualification
- To increase my confidence
- To learn more about / improve my mental health
- To learn more about supporting others with their mental health
- Business management
- Other (please specify)

Display this question:

If What were you hoping to get out of the training? Tick all that apply = Other (please specify)

Q41 What else were you hoping to get out of the training?

Q42 If you had not accessed this learning opportunity through PLA, would you have ...?

Tick all that apply

- Not done any training
- Secured this training through a different provider
- Done a different kind of training
- Other
- Not sure

Q43 What makes you say that?

Prompt about opportunities available and affordability

Q44 When did you access the course to undertake your learning?

Tick all that apply

- During weekends
- During the evenings on weekdays
- During the day on weekdays
- It was flexible – I could choose when to access the learning
- Other

Q45 Would you have preferred the course to be delivered differently?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Would you have preferred the course to be delivered differently? = Yes

Q46 How would you have liked the course to be delivered?

Q47 Could we just ask you a few questions about yourself? These questions help us to check that the experiences of PLA are not different for some groups of participants in comparison to others to help PLA to be as inclusive as possible.

Q48 Do you have any care or childcare responsibilities?

Do not include anything that you might do for work

- Yes
- No

Q49 If not in MI

Do you have any physical, sensory, learning, or mental health conditions or illnesses that have lasted, or are expected to last, 12 months or more?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Q50 On a scale of 1–5, how easy was it to access the course in terms of fitting around work/personal commitments and schedules?

- 1 – very difficult
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 – very easy

Q51 Did you face any barriers which made taking part in training more challenging (e.g. care or childcare responsibilities, travel, accessibility requirements)?

Q52 Did you require any additional support to be able to take part in the training?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Did you require any additional support to be able to take part in the training? = Yes

Q53 Were your support needs met by xxx college or the training provider?

- Yes
- Partly
- No

Display this question:

If Were your support needs met by xxx college or the training provider? = Yes
Or Were your support needs met by xxx college or the training provider? = Partly

Q54 How, if at all, did xxx college or the training provider support you to help you to take part in the training?

Display this question:

If Were your support needs met by xxx college or the training provider? = No
Or Were your support needs met by xxx college or the training provider? = Partly

Q55 In what ways were your support needs not met?

Q56 Was the training delivered in Welsh or English?

- Welsh
- English
- Bilingually

Display this question:

If Was the training delivered in Welsh or English? = English

Q57 Would you have preferred the training to be delivered in ...?

- Welsh
- Bilingually
- I was happy with English only

Display this question:

If Was the training delivered in Welsh or English? = English
Or Was the training delivered in Welsh or English? = Bilingually

Q58 As part of your application or course, were you offered any Welsh language training?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If As part of your application or course, were you offered any Welsh language training?
= Yes

Q59 Could you tell us a bit more about this training?

Q60 (Ask only if no completion date) Are you still on the course?

- I am still on the course
- I left the course early
- I have completed the course

Display this question:

If (Ask only if no completion date) Are you still on the course? = I have completed the course

Q61 When did the course come to an end?

- Month _____
- Year _____

Display this question:

If (Ask only if no completion date) Are you still on the course? = I have completed the course

Q62 Approximately how many hours of learning and teaching did you receive in total?

Display this question:

If (Ask only if no completion date) Are you still on the course? = I left the course early

Q63 Roughly what percentage of the course had you completed at the point at which you left?

- 0–25%
- 26–50%
- 51–75%
- 76–99%

Display this question:

If (Ask only if no completion date) Are you still on the course? = I left the course early

Q64 Why did you leave the course early?

Display this question:

If (Ask only if no completion date) Are you still on the course? = I left the course early

Q65 Is there anything that could have been provided or done to enable you to complete the course?

Q66 Roughly what percentage of the course have you completed?

- 0–25%
- 26–50%
- 51–75%
- 76–99%

Outcomes

Q68 To what extent has the training that you received through PLA led to ...?

	To a great extent	To some extent	Not at all
An increase in your self-confidence	•	•	•
Improvements in your communication skills	•	•	•
An increase in your levels of self-motivation	•	•	•
Clearer aspirations for your career	•	•	•
Being more able to support friends / family / my wider community	•	•	•
Better work–life balance	•	•	•
Being more able to support other colleagues	•	•	•
Being able to work more independently	•	•	•

Q69 Are you now in a different career from the one that you were in when you accessed PLA learning?

Please note that by “a different career” we mean a new job in a different sector or industry to the job that you were in when you first accessed PLA learning.

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Are you now in a different career from the one that you were in when you accessed PLA learning? Please ... = Yes

Q70 Can you tell us what sector this new career is in?

Display this question:

If Are you now in a different career from the one that you were in when you accessed PLA learning? Please ... = Yes

Q71 What is your new job title? What does your new role involve?

Display this question:

If Are you now in a different career from the one that you were in when you accessed PLA learning? Please ... = Yes

Q72 To what extent would you attribute your new career to the PLA learning that you undertook?

- To a great extent
- To some extent
- To no extent

Display this question:

If Are you now in a different career from the one that you were in when you accessed PLA learning? Please ... = Yes

Q73 Why do you say this?

Display this question:

If Are you now in a different career from the one that you were in when you accessed PLA learning? Please ... = No

Q74 As a result of the PLA course, have any of the following changes occurred?

	Yes	No
Recognition from your line manager (e.g. during an appraisal or performance review or in general feedback)	•	•
Recognition from your peers	•	•
More responsibility in the workplace	•	•
A pay rise	•	•
Recommendation for a promotion	•	•
Secured a promotion	•	•
Moved to a new employer for a new role	•	•
Increased your hours at work	•	•
Any other	•	•

Display this question:

If As a result of the PLA course, have any of the following changes occurred? = Secured a promotion [Yes]

Or As a result of the PLA course, have any of the following changes occurred? = Moved to a new employer for a new role [Yes]

Or Are you now in a different career from the one that you were in when you accessed PLA learning? Please ... = Yes

Q75 Did the new job role lead to an increased salary?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Did the new job role lead to an increased salary? = Yes

Q76 Approximately how much more are you earning per year?

You can answer with a percentage increase or the extra amount that you are earning.

- % _____
- £ _____

Q77 Having now completed the course, how likely is it that you will progress to further learning?

- I already have progressed to further learning since completing the course
- I am likely to progress to further learning in the next 12 months
- I am unlikely to progress to further learning in the next 12 months
- I am unsure if I will undertake any further learning in the next 12 months

Q78 On a scale of 1 to 5, how satisfied are you with the training that you undertook through the PLA programme?

- 1 – not satisfied at all
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 – very satisfied

Q79 What makes you say this?

Q80 Is there anything else that you would like to add about your experiences with PLA?

Employer Survey – Personal Learning Accounts

Q1 Before we proceed, please confirm your preference for completing the questionnaire in:

- English
- Welsh

Q2 Are you happy to take part in an 8-minute survey? Please note that you can withdraw your consent at any time during the interview.

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Are you happy to take part in an 8-minute survey? Please note that you can withdraw your consent ... = No

Qa1

Thank you for your time. To exit the survey, please close this tab in your browser.

Q3 Can we confirm that your employees took part in a funded courses with $\{e://Field/College\}\{e://Field/College2\}\{e://Field/College3\}$ college?

- Yes
- No

Display this question:

If Can we confirm that your employees took part in a funded courses with $\{e://Field/College\}$... = No

Q3a

Thank you for your time. To exit the survey, please close this tab in your browser.

Q4 Please outline what your business does. What type of goods does your organisation produce or what services do you provide?

Q5 Please outline your role in your organisation.

Awareness and application

Q6 Can you recall how you found out about the PLA programme?

- From the Regional Skills Partnership (RSP)
- From an FE college
- From a training provider
- On the TV/radio
- Social media
- Colleague
- Another employer
- Friend/family
- Other

Display this question:

If Can you recall how you found out about the PLA programme? = Other

Q6a Please specify how you found out about the PLA programme.

Q7 Can you recall what attracted you to enquire about the programme?

Q8 What approaches did you use to determine the training requirements that you/your organisation needed?

Q9 What role (if any) did the college/training provider play in helping to determine your training needs? (e.g. workforce development/training plan)

Q10 Are you aware of whether the learning provision identified initially was available with the college or were they required to secure approval for the course?

Q11 How did you hope the training would benefit your organisation?

Q12 Had you participated in training through that college prior to this?

- Yes, on several occasions
- Yes, once or twice
- No
- Do not know

Q13 Prior to your employees commencing the training, to what extent did you feel that the range of provision on offer through the programme reflected your requirements?

- To no extent
- To some extent
- To a great extent

Q13a Why do you say that?

Delivering the training

Q14 To your knowledge, in what ways, if at all, did the college/training provider adapt the learning provision to suit your/your employees' needs? (these could include timing, location, course structure/length/accessibility needs, etc.)

Q15 Can you recall where the training was delivered? (tick all that apply)

- In the workplace
- Online
- At the college/training provider
- At a separate location

Q16 Approximately how many staff have attended training funded through the PLA programme?

Q17 From what occupational categories were these staff?

- Routine or general (e.g. cleaners, food and drink hospitality staff, warehouse, and agricultural workers) _____
- Process, plant and machine (e.g. machine operatives, assemblers, forklift truck, train, and coach drivers) _____

- Sales and customer service (e.g. sales assistants, customer service) _____
- Care, leisure, and other occupations (e.g. nursery workers, veterinary nurses, hairdressers, and caretakers) _____
- Skilled trades (e.g. maintenance and telecommunications engineers, construction workers, butchers, chefs, and farmers) _____
- Administrative and secretarial occupations (e.g. bookkeepers, library assistants, and office workers) _____
- Technical and associate professional occupations (e.g. engineering technicians, IT support, and taxation experts) _____
- Professional occupations (e.g. scientists, architects, IT specialists, medical practitioners, solicitors, and journalists) _____
- Chief executives and senior officials (e.g. division directors, production managers, and practice managers) _____
- None of the above _____

Q18 As far as you are aware, was the training delivered in Welsh or English?

- Welsh
- Bilingually
- English
- Do not know

Q19 Reflections

On reflection, to what extent did the training offered to you by the college through the ELA programme reflect the needs of your business?

- To no extent
- To some extent
- To a great extent
- Do not know

Q19a Why do you say that?

Q20 To what extent did the participation of your employees in the training lead to the following?

	To a great extent	To some extent	To no extent	Too early to say	Do not know
Addressing skills gaps in the organisation					
Changing operational processes					
Greater resilience					
Increased productivity					
Increased profitability					
The creation of new jobs					

Q21 In what ways did the participation of your employees in training improve the following?

Display this choice:

If To what extent did the participation of your employees in the training lead to the following? = Addressing skills gaps in the organisation [To a great extent] Or [To some extent]

- Addressing skills gaps in the organisation

Display this choice:

If To what extent did the participation of your employees in the training lead to the following? = Changing operational processes [To a great extent] Or [To some extent]

- Changing operational processes

Display this choice:

If To what extent did the participation of your employees in the training lead to the following? = Greater resilience [To a great extent] Or [To some extent]

- Greater resilience

Display this choice:

If To what extent did the participation of your employees in the training lead to the following? = Increased productivity [To a great extent] Or [To some extent]

- Increased productivity

Display this choice:

If To what extent did the participation of your employees in the training lead to the following? = Increased profitability [To a great extent] Or [To some extent]

- Increased profitability

Display this choice:

If To what extent did the participation of your employees in the training lead to the following? = The creation of new jobs [To a great extent] Or [To some extent]

- The creation of new jobs
-

Q22 Reflecting on the PLA (ELA) programme and your/your employees' experience of it, is there any way in which it could be improved at all?

Q23 Would you recommend the programme to others?

- Yes, I would
 - Yes, I already have
 - No
-

Display this question:

If Would you recommend the programme to others? = No

Q23a Why would you not recommend the programme to others?

Q24 Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Q26 Interviewer comments

Annexe 3: Privacy Notices

Evaluation of Personal Learning Accounts: Learner Telephone Survey

The Welsh Government has commissioned Wavehill Research to undertake an evaluation of the Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) pilot and programme. The main aims of this evaluation are to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, value for money, outcomes, and initial impact of the pilot and programme phases of the PLA scheme. In addition, it will investigate the effects of the period between March and July 2020, and the decisions made therein, on the PLA programme. The wider objective of the evaluation is to provide the Welsh Government with robust information on the implementation of PLA as well as the lessons learned for improvement of the scheme.

As part of this evaluation, Wavehill are undertaking a telephone survey with learners to gather feedback on their learner journey. In particular, we want to know about your motivations for undertaking a PLA course, your experience of the PLA course and accessing support, and what has happened since you completed your learning.

Wavehill will be gathering information through a telephone survey.

The Welsh Government is the data controller for the research. However, Wavehill will delete any personal data provided through the interviews, and anonymise the raw data, before they are shared with the Welsh Government.

The information collected during the project will be included in a report published on the Welsh Government website.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. However, your views and experiences are important in order to help inform Welsh Government policies.

The contact for this research at Wavehill is Oliver Allies.

Email: oliver.allies@wavehill.com

Tel: 01545 571711

PRIVACY NOTICE

What personal data do we hold and where do we obtain this information?

Personal data are defined under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) as “any information relating to an identifiable person who can be directly or indirectly identified by reference to an identifier”.

Your contact details (name, email address, and telephone number) were provided to Wavehill by the Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) team in the Welsh Government as well as your college, which hold your details because of your involvement in the PLA pilot and programme.

This research does not require the collection of additional personal data from you as part of the survey. The survey will take place via the telephone and we wish to record your survey responses for operational reasons. We will make this clear to you before the survey begins and you will have the opportunity to tell us if you are not happy for the discussion to be recorded. If the survey is recorded, personal data will be removed during the process of transcription. Recordings will be deleted as soon as this process is completed. Your survey responses will be entered by the telephone interviewer, and any personal data that you mention will not be included in the survey responses that are entered.

Your participation is voluntary and if you do not wish to take part or be sent reminders, then please reply to the invitation email and your details will be removed. Wavehill will only use your email address and telephone number for the purposes of this evaluation.

If you raise a query or complaint and provide personal data requesting a response, the researcher will forward the request only to the relevant official and subsequently delete it from the research data.

What is the lawful basis for using your data?

The lawful basis for processing information in this data collection exercise is our public task, that is, exercising our official authority to undertake the core role and functions of the Welsh Government.

Participation is completely voluntary. Research studies such as this are important for the Welsh Government to collect information and actionable evidence on its ability to deliver governmental priorities. The information collected in this research, for example, might be used to understand how well the programme is working and why, as well as to help WG officials to make decisions regarding potential changes to the PLA programme.

How secure are your personal data?

Personal information provided to Wavehill is always stored on a secure server. The data can only be accessed by a limited number of researchers working on this project. Wavehill will only use these data for research purposes. Wavehill has Cyber Essentials certification.

Wavehill use a survey software program called Qualtrics, which is compliant with the UK GDPR and meets the Welsh Government's expectations in terms of the security of any data collected via the software (e.g. all data are processed within the UK/EEA).

Wavehill has procedures with which to deal with any suspected data security breaches. If a suspected breach occurs, Wavehill will report this to the Welsh Government, which will notify you and any applicable regulator where legally required to do so.

All data gathered through this research will be reported in an anonymised format. It will not contain your contact details, and any identifiable information in open-ended answers will be removed. Wavehill will use the information gathered to produce a report that will be published on the Welsh Government website. This report will not include any information that could be used to identify individual participants.

How long do we keep your personal data?

Wavehill will hold personal data during the contract period, and any personal data not already removed during transcription will be deleted by Wavehill three months after the end of the contract. These include your contact details. Wavehill will provide the Welsh Government with an anonymised version of the data which will not include information that could identify you.

Individual rights

Under the UK GDPR, you have the following rights in relation to the personal information that you provide as part of this [project]:

- To access a copy of your own data;
- For us to rectify inaccuracies in those data;
- To object to or restrict processing (in certain circumstances);
- For your data to be 'erased' (in certain circumstances); and
- To lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), which is our independent regulator for data protection.

The contact details for the Information Commissioner's Office are: Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF. Tel: 01625 545 745 or 0303 123 1113. Website: www.ico.gov.uk.

Further information

If you have any further questions about how the data provided as part of this study will be used by the Welsh Government, or wish to exercise your rights by means of the UK General Data Protection Regulation, please contact:

Name: Kimberley Wigley

Email: kimberley.wigley@gov.wales

Tel:

The Welsh Government's Data Protection Officer can be contacted at:

Welsh Government, Cathays Park, Cardiff, CF10 3NQ. Email:

DataProtectionOfficer@gov.wales.

Evaluation of Personal Learning Accounts: Employer Telephone Survey

The Welsh Government has commissioned Wavehill Research to undertake an evaluation of the Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) pilot and programme. The main aims of this evaluation are to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, value for money, outcomes, and initial impact of the pilot and programme phases of the PLA scheme. In addition, it will investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the PLA programme. The wider objective of the evaluation is to provide the Welsh Government with robust information on the implementation of PLA as well as the lessons learned for improvement of the scheme.

As part of this evaluation, Wavehill are undertaking a telephone survey with employers that have arranged for their staff to undertake a PLA course. This survey will capture your feedback on your experience of the programme as well as the impact of the learning that your employees received to help us to better understand the impact of the PLA programme.

The Welsh Government is the data controller for the research. However, Wavehill will delete any personal data provided through the interviews, and anonymise the raw data, before they are shared with the Welsh Government.

The information collected during the project will be included in a report published on the Welsh Government website.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. However, your views and experiences are important in order to help inform Welsh Government policies.

The contact for this research at Wavehill is Oliver Allies.

Email: oliver.allies@wavehill.com

Tel: 01545 571711

PRIVACY NOTICE

What personal data do we hold and where do we obtain this information?

Personal data are defined under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) as “any information relating to an identifiable person who can be directly or indirectly identified by reference to an identifier”.

Your contact details (name, email address, and telephone number) were provided to Wavehill by the Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) team in the Welsh Government and the college, which hold your details because of your involvement in the PLA pilot and/or programme.

This research does not require the collection of additional personal data from you as part of the survey. The survey will take place via the telephone and we wish to record your survey responses so that we can check the accuracy of our written notes. We will make this clear to you before the survey begins and you will have the opportunity to tell us if you are not happy for the discussion to be recorded. If the survey is recorded, personal data will be removed during the process of transcription. Recordings will be deleted as soon as this process is completed. Your survey responses will be entered by the telephone interviewer and any personal data that you mention will not be included in the survey responses that are entered.

Your participation is voluntary and if you do not wish to take part or be sent reminders, then please reply to the invitation email and your details will be removed. Wavehill will only use your email address and telephone number for the purposes of this evaluation.

If you raise a query or complaint and provide personal data requesting a response, the researcher will forward the request only to the relevant official and subsequently delete it from the research data.

What is the lawful basis for using your data?

The lawful basis for processing information in this data collection exercise is our public task, that is, exercising our official authority to undertake the core role and functions of the Welsh Government.

Participation is completely voluntary. Research studies such as this are important for the Welsh Government to collect information and actionable evidence on its ability to deliver governmental priorities. The information collected in this research, for example, might be used to understand how well the programme is working and why, as well as to help WG officials to make decisions regarding potential changes to the PLA programme.

How secure are your personal data?

Personal information provided to Wavehill is always stored on a secure server. The data can only be accessed by a limited number of researchers working on this project. Wavehill will only use these data for research purposes. Wavehill has Cyber Essentials certification.

Wavehill use a survey software program called Qualtrics, which is compliant with the UK GDPR and meets the Welsh Government's expectations in terms of the security of any data collected via the software (e.g. all data are processed within the UK/EEA).

Wavehill has procedures with which to deal with any suspected data security breaches. If a suspected breach occurs, Wavehill will report this to the Welsh Government, which will notify you and any applicable regulator where legally required to do so.

Wavehill will use the information gathered to produce a report that will be published on the Welsh Government website. This report will not include any information that could be used to identify individual participants.

How long do we keep your personal data?

Wavehill will hold personal data during the contract period, and any personal data not already removed during transcription will be deleted by Wavehill three months after the end of the contract. These include your contact details. Wavehill will provide the Welsh Government with an anonymised version of the data which will not include information that could identify you.

Individual rights

Under the UK GDPR, you have the following rights in relation to the personal information that you provide as part of this [project]:

- To access a copy of your own data;
- For us to rectify inaccuracies in those data;
- To object to or restrict processing (in certain circumstances);
- For your data to be 'erased' (in certain circumstances); and
- To lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), which is our independent regulator for data protection.

The contact details for the Information Commissioner's Office are: Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF. Tel: 01625 545 745 or 0303 123 1113. Website: www.ico.gov.uk.

Further information

If you have any further questions about how the data provided as part of this study will be used by the Welsh Government, or wish to exercise your rights by means of the UK General Data Protection Regulation, please contact:

Name: Kimberley Wigley

Email: kimberley.wigley@gov.wales

Tel:

The Welsh Government's Data Protection Officer can be contacted at:

Welsh Government, Cathays Park, Cardiff, CF10 3NQ. Email:

DataProtectionOfficer@gov.wales.

Evaluation of Personal Learning Accounts: Stakeholder Interviews

The Welsh Government has commissioned Wavehill Research to undertake an evaluation of the Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) pilot and programme. The main aims of this evaluation are to assess the effectiveness, efficiency, value for money, outcomes, and initial impact of the pilot and programme phases of the PLA scheme. In addition, it will investigate the effects of the period between March and July 2020, and the decisions made therein, on the PLA programme. The wider objective of the evaluation is to provide the Welsh Government with robust information on the implementation of PLA as well as the lessons learned for improvement of the scheme.

As part of this evaluation, Wavehill will be gathering information via MS Teams or telephone interviews.

The Welsh Government is the data controller for the research. However, Wavehill will delete any personal data provided through the interviews, and anonymise the raw data, before they are shared with the Welsh Government.

The information collected during the project will be included in a report published on the Welsh Government website.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. However, your views and experiences are important in order to help inform Welsh Government policies.

The contact for this research at Wavehill is Oliver Allies.

Email: oliver.allies@wavehill.com

Tel: 01545 571711

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Personal data are defined under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) as “any information relating to an identifiable person who can be directly or indirectly identified by reference to an identifier”.

Your contact details (name and email address) were provided to Wavehill by the Personal Learning Accounts (PLA) team in the Welsh Government, which hold your details because of your involvement in the PLA pilot and programme.

This research does not require the collection of additional personal data from you other than your telephone number if you ask to have an interview via the telephone.

Your participation is voluntary and if you do not wish to take part or be sent reminders, then please reply to the invitation email and your details will be removed. Wavehill will only use your email address and telephone number for the purposes of this evaluation.

If you choose to provide additional personal data as part of the research, we will try not to identify you from, or link your identity to, the responses that you provide. If you raise a query or complaint and provide personal data requesting a response, the researcher will forward the request only to the relevant official and subsequently delete it from the research data.

What is the lawful basis for using your data?

The lawful basis for processing information in this data collection exercise is our public task, that is, exercising our official authority to undertake the core role and functions of the Welsh Government.

Participation is completely voluntary. Research studies such as this are important for the Welsh Government to collect information and actionable evidence on its ability to deliver governmental priorities. The information collected in this research, for example, might be used to understand how well the programme is working and why, as well as to help WG officials to make decisions regarding potential changes to the PLA programme.

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Name: Kimberley Wigley

Email: kimberley.wigley@gov.wales

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