Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding Evaluation 2022-2023
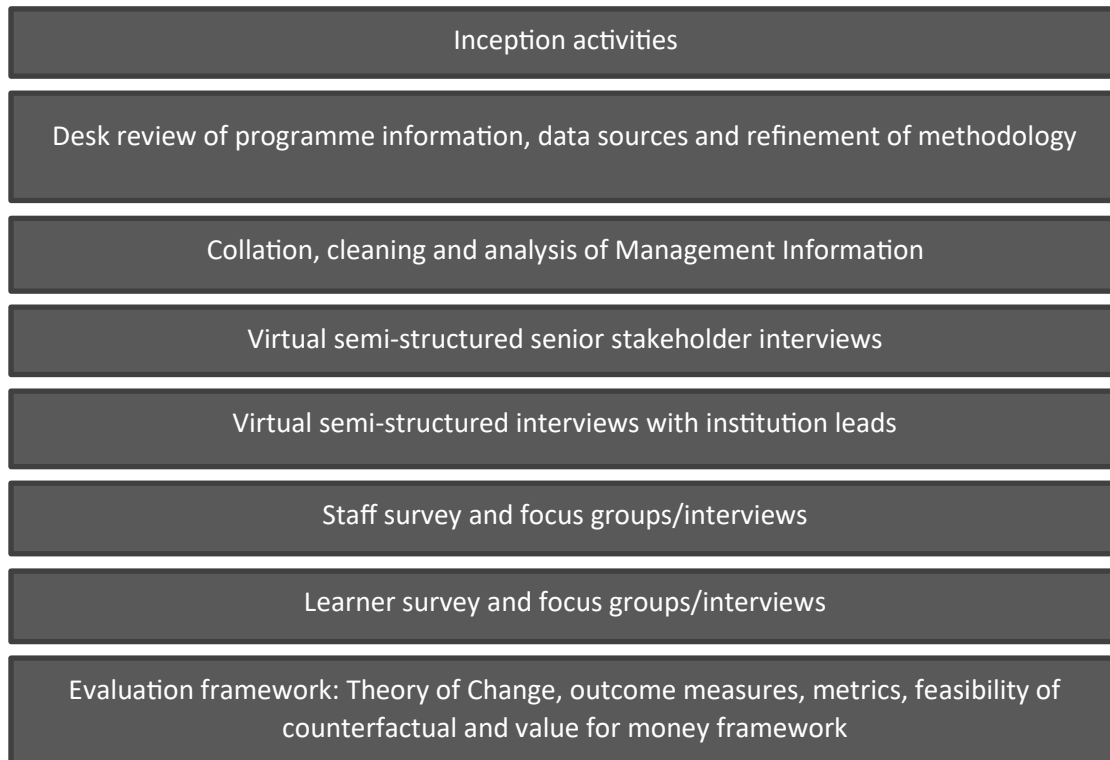
Executive Summary

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 The COVID-19 pandemic caused widespread disruption to teaching and learning across Wales. This included strong negative impacts for learners, staff and institutions/providers across the post-16 sector. In order to enable learning to continue and to address these negative impacts the Welsh Government distributed approximately £295 million in COVID-19 Recovery Funding to the sector. This included approximately £233 million of COVID-19 related funding in the 2020/21 financial year, and £62 million in 2021/22.

1.2 The funding was intended to address various needs and priorities, across different stages of the pandemic:

- **Practical response measures** (£50 million): to maintain the safety of learners and practitioners during the pandemic. This included funding for enhanced cleaning, personal protective equipment (PPE) such as face coverings, care parcels and support for learners required to self-isolate.

- **Learning response measures** (£195 million): to support learning and development during the pandemic. Examples include funding to ensure digital inclusion and to support learner mental health and wellbeing.

- **Forward support measures** (£50 million): to secure sustained progress over the medium and longer term. Ensuring that any legacy detrimental effects from the pandemic are minimised by building on best practice and lessons learnt during the response phases.

1.3 The funding was intended to support school sixth forms, Further Education (FE) institutions, Work-based Learning (WBL) providers, Higher Education institutions (HEIs) and Adult Learning in the Community (ALC) providers meet immediate and longer-term support needs.

1.4 It was delivered across several work streams including funding for digital inclusion and blended learning, mental health and wellbeing support, catch-up activities, learner transitions, and practical/ financial support for both learners (e.g., additional hardship funds, extended Free School Meals (FSM)) and institutions (e.g., implementing social distancing measures, purchase of PPE).

1.5 In April 2022 the Welsh Government commissioned Ecorys UK and Learning & Work (L&W) to undertake a mixed method multi-strand evaluation of the COVID-19 Recovery Funding for the post-16 sector.

Evaluation Approach

1.6   The evaluation was conducted between April 2022 and May 2023, and used an iterative mixed methods approach which included several strands of primary and secondary research, as set out below:

Figure 1 Phases of evaluation activity

Inception activities

Desk review of programme information, data sources and refinement of methodology

Collation, cleaning and analysis of Management Information

Virtual semi-structured senior stakeholder interviews

Virtual semi-structured interviews with institution leads

Staff survey and focus groups/interviews

Learner survey and focus groups/interviews

Evaluation framework: Theory of Change, outcome measures, metrics, feasibility of counterfactual and value for money framework

1.7   **Online semi-structured interviews** were conducted with:

- 17 senior stakeholders from the Welsh Government and sector organisations. Interviews with senior stakeholders were conducted between June and August 2022.

- 43 leads/senior staff from 34 institutions including ALC (5), FE (14), HE (14), sixth forms (6) and WBL (4) to explore institution experiences in depth. Interviews with institution leads were conducted between September and December 2022.

1.8   **Online surveys and focus groups/interviews** were undertaken with staff and learners to better understand experiences and views of support provided by COVID-19 Recovery Funding. The survey sample achieved was 279 institutional staff and 362 post-16 learners.

1.9   Both surveys included an opt-in where staff and learners could agree to be contacted about taking part in a focus group. All those opting-in and providing direct contact information were invited to take part in a focus group, or where availability was more limited, an interview. Focus groups/interviews took place in February and March 2023 with 16 institutional staff and 26 post-16 learners.

1.10   **An overarching framework** was developed to guide the evaluation. This process included mapping key evaluation aims and research questions against methods, to inform the development of research tools, creating a co-produced Theory of Change (ToC) with policy stakeholders and exploring options for evaluating programmes/funding streams in the future.

1.11   **Data limitations**

It is important to note that there are several limitations in the data collected and collated as part of the evaluation and presented in the final report:

- Response to both surveys was low and resulted in small sample sizes, which limited opportunities for sub-group analysis, as well as generalisability of findings. Response was affected by the survey approach, specifically an open link shared by email via institutions. This indirect form of contact meant that the evaluation team was unable to assess the reach of two surveys (i.e., the extent to which the links had been shared) or to directly influence response, for example, through targeted reminders.

- Detailed Management Information (MI) data connected to the distribution and use of COVID-19 Recovery Funding was collected by institutions/LAs and shared with the Welsh Government over the course of the pandemic. However due to various factors exacerbated by the pandemic the MI data collected included missing and erroneous data. Therefore, only a small proportion of the MI data has been included in the report, and all MI presented in the report comes from that originally supplied by the Welsh Government.

2. Summary of findings and recommendations

2.1 COVID-19 Recovery Funding ('funding') was intended to address the needs and priorities of post-16 education across the different stages of the pandemic, including practical response measures, learning response measures and forward support measures. Funding was distributed through several streams: digital inclusion and blended learning, academic support and catch-up, wellbeing and mental health support, transitions (within and out of post-16 education), financial and practical support and workforce resilience.

2.2 Interviews with senior stakeholders exploring the distribution of funding, stressed the need for quick decision-making in the face of challenging and rapidly evolving circumstances. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of collaborative working among institutions, and between institutions and the Welsh Government, to ensure that decisions could be made as efficiently as possible.

2.3 Opportunities for evidence-based decision-making, full consideration of value for money and consultation with staff and learners were limited during the early stages of the pandemic. Instead, decisions were based on collective best judgement and trust in the experience and knowledge of sector stakeholders regarding what was needed and how to address identified support needs.

2.4 Interviewees noted changing priorities over the course of the pandemic, with early concerns about the continuation of learning, and (longer-term) financial viability (particularly in HE), gradually superseded by concerns for the health and wellbeing of learners and staff as this moved into the remit of institutions, and latterly with the challenges of learner engagement, behaviour, and progression.

2.5 Institutional leads found funding guidance valuable for informing spending decisions and noted that the Welsh Government was helpful and responsive to queries. There was, however, some confusion about the requirements of different funding streams, exacerbated by the complexity of the funding, and the necessary speed of the response. This prompted calls for greater clarity of the aims and expectations of the different funding streams.

2.6 A key theme in consultation with institutional leads was the value of flexibility in how and when to use funding. This was seen as important for addressing needs specific to institutions and in response to changing circumstances. The positive feedback around flexibility was often accompanied by discussion of the challenges created by short timeframes in which to use the funding and delays in receiving funds.

2.7 Most institutions followed similar decision-making processes with senior leadership teams (SLT) playing a pivotal role in deciding how funding would be allocated and used, with some 'cascading' of funding decisions to different departments/teams in HE and FE institutions. Decision-making typically included consideration of how to reach vulnerable learners, and/or those less able to access/adapt to blended learning. Institutions also took efforts to understand and respond to the changing needs of learners and staff in decision-making, and increasingly built learner and staff voice into that process.

2.8   Supporting blended/online learning and digital inclusion was a key focus for institutions during the pandemic, particularly to enable continuation of learning during the early stages. Funding in this area was used to purchase devices, such as laptops and tablets, and to support learners/staff to access the internet via portable Wi-Fi hotspots/dongles. Funding was also used to train and/or support learners and staff on how to use blended learning platforms and software. It was noted that some learners (and staff) were more digitally confident than others and therefore better able to manage the transition to blended learning, with some groups, particularly in Adult Learning in the Community (ALC), requiring additional support. However, there was also recognition of the wider accessibility benefits of blended learning, for example, for those who found it more difficult to travel as a result of disability or caring responsibilities. There was consensus among stakeholders that digital funding had been vital to ensure learning continued throughout the pandemic but had also allowed institutions to make wider investments in their blended learning offer, accelerating progress.

2.9   Mental health and wellbeing was another priority area across the post-16 sector, with universal recognition of the negative impact of the pandemic on wellbeing. Institutions used funding for a variety of approaches to support learners and staff, including provision of online mental health resources and online counselling services, hosting in-person wellbeing activities, creating wellbeing support hubs and recruiting (additional) wellbeing and pastoral support staff. Institution leads recognised the pressure the pandemic and move to online/blended learning had placed on staff and sought to expand their wellbeing offer, including additional support from managers. Leads and staff highlighted the negative effects of social isolation and time outside the classroom on learners, stressing the importance of opportunities to reconnect and socialise with peers, including through social activities and sports. This was reflected in the accounts of learners, and a belief that mental health issues had become more prevalent in the wake of the pandemic and continued be a significant area of need.

2.10   Academic support and catch-up was also an important area of support, increasing in priority as the pandemic progressed and awareness of learning gaps grew (particularly in sixth forms and FEIs). Funding was typically used to provide additional one-to-one and group tuition/catch-up sessions, extra revision classes, exam support and online learning resources (designed to address learning gaps). Some FE institutions delivered extra academic or practical learning sessions via an 'Extended College Day' increasing curriculum delivery time, and one sixth form brought in 'learning coaches' to support those in Years 12 and 13. Findings suggest that providing catch-up activities for vocational/practical courses was more difficult than for academic subjects, particularly while still managing social distancing restrictions. Feedback from institutions suggested that recruiting new staff to support catch-up activities was challenging, so funding was more often used to remunerate staff for their additional time. As with wellbeing support, learning catch-up was considered an area of ongoing need.

2.11   Funding for learner transitions was more often used to support learners moving within (rather than out of) post-16 education. Institutions introduced and/or extended a range of activities to support learners including online materials, virtual open days, summer transition events, college taster sessions/tours, personal interviews, and (in sixth forms) UCAS application support. Staff and learner awareness of additional transition support was limited, partly reflecting the circumstances of interviewees, who did not come into contact with services unless directly connected with them (i.e., at the point of transition). Whilst staff knew of different transition activities available at their institutions, they were often unsure whether these activities were supported by COVID-19 Recovery Funding. Learners saw few differences between the transitions support available before and during the pandemic (although recognised that some support necessarily moved online). Transitions was also one of the areas where learners responding to the survey felt least supported by institutions.

2.12   Financial and practical support encompassed both measures to protect the health and safety of learners and provide them with the financial support they needed to continue learning. In the early stages of the pandemic and initial return to in-person learning, institutions across the post-16 sector used funding to purchase PPE and develop their COVID-19 Health and Safety measures/update safeguarding policies. This was an essential part of moving back to the classroom. As the pandemic progressed funding was increasingly used to provide direct financial and practical support to

learners. In HE this support was centred on addressing student hardship through new COVID-specific funds available to students experiencing financial difficulties. Younger learners were able to benefit from the expansion of FSM support to FE, with institutions also taking steps to address food poverty by setting up food banks.

2.13 There was considerable positive feedback from across the sector about COVID-19 Recovery Funding and what it had enabled institutions to do, as well as how it had been administered. Funding was seen to have enabled learning to continue during the early days of the pandemic, and to have gone some way towards mitigating its negative effects. Whilst stakeholders recognised the difficulties in evidencing progress in some areas (i.e., wellbeing), they felt that there had been clear, rapid advances in terms of blended learning. One of the commonly cited successes in terms of administering funding was collaborative working, both between institutions, and with the Welsh Government/HEFCW. More frequent meetings between institution leads encouraged sharing of best practice and pooling resources which, in turn, enabled them to better support learners and staff. This change was facilitated by the move to remote working, allowing institution leads to meet more easily. In many cases collaborative relationships looked set to continue beyond the pandemic, bringing a sustained positive change.

2.14 Whilst highlighting positive practice, stakeholders also highlighted several challenges in the funding process. For example, although they recognised the need for swift, responsive decision-making in the challenging context of the pandemic, they would have welcomed longer lead-in times, and extended periods in which to use the funding, as well as (continued) flexibility. They also felt that the ongoing needs created by the pandemic, and cost-of-living crisis which followed, warranted a longer-term funding commitment. Having an extended period of funding would also enable institutions to fully embed new ways of working.

2.15 Mental health and wellbeing presented a notable ongoing challenge and area where staff, learners and leads felt that institutions needed to offer continued support. Indeed, learner wellbeing and engagement were the two ongoing issues most frequently selected by staff responding to the survey. Similarly, catch-up learning remained an ongoing need for many learners, who had lost learning as a result of periods of lockdown and had difficulties re-engaging with education. Staff stressed ongoing difficulties with learner engagement, concentration and behaviour, as well as a perceived deterioration in resilience when given constructive criticism. Staff and institution leads stressed the need for continued financial support and of sharing best practice. It was felt that extending additional funding would help institutions meet the ongoing COVID-19 recovery needs, as well as new needs created by the cost-of-living crisis (allowing them to pre-emptively address concerns with learner retention).

2.16 Monitoring and measurement of progress varied across the sector and between institutions, with many relying on existing indicators such as retention and progression. There was widespread recognition that efforts to measure effectiveness were limited by institutional capacity, and a lack of clarity around objectives/monitoring requirements from the outset. For future funding streams it would be advantageous for monitoring to be clearly considered ahead of distribution, for requirements to be straightforward and guidance notes clear. Full consideration should also be given to the potential of using existing administrative data to assess effectiveness.

2.17 **Key recommendations** emerging from the evaluation, are grouped around several themes, and include:

- **Clarity of information**:
  - Provide clear and consistently presented information about available funding that maps distinct funding streams, their monetary value and aims.
  - Compile a master list of all institutions that will receive the funding and clearly define which types of post-16 institution are entitled to specific funding streams from the outset.

- **Monitoring and management information**:

- Establish the monitoring requirements attached to any future funding in the design of funding models, engage relevant organisations early in the data collection process and create data collection tools that minimise the scope for data entry errors.

- Collect, collate and process data at the institution level, encouraging institutions to provide data in (near) real-time, and to report on outputs/outcomes of interest at the start of the funding period (providing a baseline).

- Review monitoring requirements, and associated instructions, whenever a change is made to the eligibility criteria.

- **Collaboration and information sharing**:

- Identify potential approaches to sustain collaborative relationships between the Welsh Government and post-16 sector bodies/institutions.

- Explore options to collate and share best practice and learning on providing mental health and wellbeing support for staff in post-16 institutions.

- Ensure evaluation findings on learners' perceptions of support for transitions between different education levels are shared with relevant Welsh Government programme teams.

- Ensure any future funding decisions require collaboration where relevant and known to be effective but avoid mandatory collaboration. Our evaluation showed that most post-16 institutions considered collaboration with other institutions or settings to be a productive endeavour. However, some reported that mandatory collaboration had been more of a burden than a valuable activity to engage in.

- Celebrate the good practice in collaborative work across post-16 institutions which was developed during the pandemic.

- **Process and implementation**:

- Offer enhanced flexibility in how funding can be used at an institutional level, for example to repurpose and/or redistribute any underspend.

- Align the academic year and the timelines for funding allocation, distribution and spending.

- **Future/ongoing workforce and learner needs**:

- Highlight and prioritise the ongoing need for professional training and development in digital skills for staff in the post-16 sector.

- Explore the extent to which post-16 institutions publicise the availability of remote learning options.

- Consider the need for further research to explore communications within post-16 institutions in relation to the availability and nature of support for learners, in specific types of post-16 institutions. Further research could helpfully explore the nature of communications to staff regarding learner support and whether lack of awareness is an issue which requires attention.

- **Future evaluation framework**:

- Undertake a feasibility study when designing future funding models.

- Review outcomes and impacts in the ToC to ensure that they are measurable.

- Consider regular, population-wide data collection for key outcomes and impacts in the ToC.

- Continue to identify administrative data that could be utilised for future research and consider data linkage in all future data collection activities.

2.18   A further detailed list of full recommendations can be found in the final report.