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# Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding Evaluation 2022-2023

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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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## Glossary

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>ALN</b>	Additional Learning Needs
<b>ESL</b>	English as a Second Language
<b>ESOL</b>	English for Speakers of Other Languages
<b>FE</b>	Further Education
<b>FG</b>	Focus Group
<b>FSM</b>	Free School Meals
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HEFCW</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
<b>ILS</b>	Independent Living Skills
<b>LA</b>	Local Authority
<b>LLWR</b>	Lifelong Learning Wales Record
<b>LRP</b>	Learning Recovery and Progression Funding
<b>MI</b>	Management Information
<b>NHS</b>	National Health Service
<b>WG</b>	Welsh Government
<b>WLGA</b>	Welsh Local Government Association

## Report outline

<b>Chapter 1</b>	Provides an introduction to the evaluation and sets out the policy context
<b>Chapter 2</b>	Outlines the evaluation aims and methodology
<b>Chapter 3</b>	Summarises key findings
<b>Chapter 4</b>	Sets out the different funding streams and how they were distributed across the sector
<b>Chapter 5</b>	Explores institutional decision-making and use of COVID-19 Recovery Funding
<b>Chapter 6</b>	Reports on the experiences of institution staff
<b>Chapter 7</b>	Reports on the experiences of learners
<b>Chapter 8</b>	Explores challenges, lessons learnt and considerations for sustainability
<b>Chapter 9</b>	Examines the overall outcomes and perceived effectiveness of COVID-19 Recovery Funding
<b>Chapter 10</b>	Presents recommendations emerging from the research
<b>Appendix A</b>	Presents options for a future evaluation framework



# 1. Introduction and background

## Introduction

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. The funding was intended to support school sixth forms, Further Education (FE) institutions, Work-based Learning (WBL) providers, Higher Education (HE) institutions and Adult Learning in the Community (ALC) providers meet immediate and longer-term support needs. Ecorys and L&W were commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake a mixed method multi-strand evaluation of COVID-19 Recovery Funding. The following report presents findings from the evaluation.

## **Policy context: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on post-16 learning**

- 1.2 The COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak (the pandemic) began in the UK in early 2020. The UK and Welsh Governments responded with a gradual increase in social distancing measures designed to slow the spread of the virus, leading to a national lockdown. Welsh schools, colleges, universities and training providers closed for face-to-face learning on Friday 20 March.<sup>1</sup> Wherever possible post-16 learning moved online, providers offering blended delivery<sup>2</sup> to those able to access it. Summer exams were cancelled, and qualifications were instead assessed using a centre-determined grade model.
- 1.3 Despite efforts from providers to move to blended learning, learners across the post-16 sector experienced gaps in their education due to the pandemic. They have also navigated the social challenges of isolation from their peers, the need to adapt to blended learning, and uncertainty around assessment and awarding methods.<sup>3</sup>
- 1.4 Additionally, learners' mental wellbeing, learning and physical health have been negatively impacted by the reduced access to safe and productive learning

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<sup>1</sup> Schools continued to offer core provision for vulnerable children and the children of key workers.

<sup>2</sup> Blended learning provides a combination of face-to-face learning and dynamic digital activities and content that facilitate any time/any place learning. <https://hwb.gov.wales/blended-learning/post-16-learning-and-skills/blended-learning-guidance-for-post-16-providers>

<sup>3</sup> Wales Centre for Public Policy (2021) The education response to Coronavirus: Implications for schools in Wales. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-education-response-to-Coronavirus.-Implications-for-schools-in-Wales.pdf>

environments. This has particularly impacted those who were already disadvantaged and/or those with additional caring responsibilities.<sup>4</sup>

- 1.5 A 2021 survey by YoungMinds found that 67 per cent of 13 to 25-year-olds, believed the pandemic would have a long-term negative effect on their mental health.<sup>5</sup> This was particularly evident among those who had been bereaved or had traumatic experiences during the pandemic, and those who were concerned about whether their friendships would recover. Survey respondents also reported feeling worried about the loss of education and their future employment prospects.
- 1.6 Whilst learners of all ages have been affected, younger learners within the post-16 sector, or those who transitioned into post-16 education during the pandemic, are likely to have been significantly impacted in terms of their social, emotional, and educational development. The pandemic also adversely impacted those from less advantaged communities and backgrounds and young people from families previously identified as requiring extra support, e.g., young people with Additional Learning Needs (ALN).<sup>6</sup>
- 1.7 As well as creating additional support needs for learners, the pandemic accelerated the need for digital support, as institutions were adapting to blended and online learning. Staff had to adapt their learning resources and approach to fit the blended/online delivery. Providers and staff who incorporated aspects of blended learning into their approach prior to the pandemic were able to move provision online more quickly. This placed significant pressure on staff members, across the post-16 sector, to build their digital skills as institutions increasingly relied on blended learning.<sup>7</sup>
- 1.8 There was continued disruption to post-16 education across the 2020/21 academic year, with widespread closures affecting the first few weeks, and a return to remote/blended learning. In September 2021, most post-16 education providers had

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<sup>4</sup> Children, Young People and Education Committee, Welsh Parliament (2020) Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people. [Online]. Available at: <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld13315/cr-ld13315%20-e.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> YoungMinds (2021) The impact of COVID-19 on young people with mental health needs. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports-and-impact/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

<sup>6</sup> Welsh Government (2020) Welsh Government Integrated Impact Assessment Summary: Assessing the impact of the initial policy decisions taken in relation to the provision of education in response to Covid-19. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/provision-education-response-covid-19-impact-assessment>

<sup>7</sup> Estyn (2021) Developments in remote and blended learning practice. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-report/developments-remote-and-blended-learning-practice>

returned to in-person teaching, with institutions retaining aspects of blended delivery, where appropriate. Despite this return the pandemic continued to cause considerable disruption within (and beyond) the post-16 sector. Continued outbreaks led to several localised lockdowns over the course of the term, including a 'firebreak' scheduled to coincide with the Autumn half-term break. As cases of COVID-19 amongst the staff and learners increased, and difficulties finding supply staff continued, some providers were forced to send classes or year groups home. This was a particular issue with the spread of the Omicron variant.

- 1.9 Despite a recognised need to address learning gaps, the pandemic worsened the recruitment challenges many providers were already facing. Institutions struggled to recruit new staff, especially support staff such as administrative and teaching assistants or IT specialists.<sup>8</sup>
- 1.10 There was also a notable negative impact on learners' ability to use spoken Welsh. Specifically, there was evidence that learners lacked confidence in speaking Welsh and continued to struggle when they returned to face-to-face learning as their main contact with the language had always been through their education provider.<sup>9</sup>
- 1.11 Reflecting the disruption to learning, a majority of FE learners were starting their courses from a lower starting point than would have been expected. This was a particular issue for FE learners' numeracy/mathematical skills.<sup>10</sup> Many new learners had not had to take external examinations during Year 10 and 11 as a result of COVID-19 disruption, leading to increased exam anxiety, and prompting concerns about grade inflation.
- 1.12 Following the return to face-to-face learning, FE institutions focused on preparing learners for external examinations. However, colleges reported concerns about the timeliness and clarity of guidelines around adaptations to assessment arrangements and disparities between academic and vocational programmes. FE colleges also reported a substantial increase in the number of learners facing mental health and wellbeing challenges because of the pandemic. Learners' participation and engagement in learning were also negatively impacted.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Estyn, Recovery from COVID-19. [Online]. Available at: [https://annual-report.estyn.gov.wales/annual\\_report/recovery-from-covid-19/](https://annual-report.estyn.gov.wales/annual_report/recovery-from-covid-19/)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Estyn, Sector Report: Further Education 2021-2022. [Online]. Available at: [https://annual-report.estyn.gov.wales/annual\\_report/sector-report-further-education-2021-2022/](https://annual-report.estyn.gov.wales/annual_report/sector-report-further-education-2021-2022/)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

- 1.13 WBL learners' education appears to have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, with very limited opportunities to participate in practical learning and work experience. Even where learners belonged to one of the sectors remaining open throughout (or through much of) the pandemic, such as health and social care, there were restrictions on what they were able to do. Such limitations on work placements and practical learning led to a backlog of incomplete qualifications. Once work-based learners had returned to placements and in-person practical learning, providers prioritised those who needed to complete outstanding assessments. Providers ensured that learners had access to facilities and workshops to complete practical assessments and catch-up learning. Evidence suggests that those starting an apprenticeship in 2021/22 often had literacy and numeracy skills below the levels of those learners who joined apprenticeship programmes before the pandemic.<sup>12</sup>
- 1.14 HE institutions were also severely adversely affected by the pandemic. Concerns about the continued operation of HEIs were widespread and included: students' health and welfare; difficulties moving learning online (particularly for practical and lab-based courses); continuation of research studies; and worries about financial sustainability. During periods of lockdown HEIs moved to blended learning and many students left term-time accommodation. With the phased return to in-person learning HEIs found ways to provide practical support for students isolating in university accommodation. HEIs experienced a contraction in income as the number of HE learners dropped in 2020/21, alongside reductions in income from accommodation fees, commercial services, short and summer courses, research funding and other sources. However, mitigation measures (including freezing staff vacancies, the use of the UK Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme<sup>13</sup> to 'furlough' staff, and a general tightening of expenditure controls) taken by universities meant that the actual income reduction was lower than predicted at the start of the pandemic.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Estyn, Sector Report: Work-based learning 2021-2022. [Online]. Available at: [https://annual-report.estyn.gov.wales/annual\\_report/sector-report-work-based-learning-2021-2022/](https://annual-report.estyn.gov.wales/annual_report/sector-report-work-based-learning-2021-2022/)

<sup>13</sup> Gov.uk (2022) Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-screening-equality-impact-assessment/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

<sup>14</sup> HEFCW (2021) Impact of Covid-19 on Welsh HE Sector. [Online]. Available at: <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s113515/CYPE5-08-21%20-%20Paper%201.pdf>

1.15 ALC experienced a notable decline in number of learners in 2021/22 (32 per cent lower than in the previous year). Whilst the decline in learner numbers began before the pandemic, evidence suggests that COVID-19 disruption exacerbated this change. ALC partnerships<sup>15</sup> carried out reviews of their provision and adjusted delivery in response to changes to the ALC landscape that had occurred since the start of the pandemic. Like learners from other parts of the post-16 sector, ALC learners reported a loss of confidence. However, this was partly rebuilt after the return to in-person learning.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Welsh Government response**

1.16 To mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the post-16 education sector, the Welsh Government announced almost £295 million in Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding to be delivered across several work streams. These work streams included 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 FSM) and institutions (e.g., implementing social distancing measures, purchase of PPE) (see Appendix B Funding streams diagram). In addition to the funding commitment, the Welsh Government:

- Developed a range of online learning resources to support students who were learning remotely.
- Introduced exam alternatives for A level, AS level, and GCSE students in Wales, with grades awarded on the basis of teacher assessments and other evidence.

### **Support available before the pandemic**

1.17 Institution leads across the sector explained that prior to the pandemic they offered some level of additional support for their learners in areas such as mental health and wellbeing, additional academic learning, digital inclusion, and financial/practical support for vulnerable learners. However, the level of support varied considerably across the sector and across settings.

1.18 FE leads highlighted Digital Inclusion as one of the priority areas in which they had invested prior to the pandemic. Some institutions specified that they had a limited

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<sup>15</sup> Adult learning in the community (ALC) is delivered by 13 partnerships across Wales and the further education institution, Addysg Oedolion Cymru/ Adult Learning Wales.

<sup>16</sup> Estyn, Sector Report: Adult Learning in the Community 2021-2022. [Online]. Available at: [https://annual-report.estyn.gov.wales/annual\\_report/adult-learning-in-the-community-2021-2022/](https://annual-report.estyn.gov.wales/annual_report/adult-learning-in-the-community-2021-2022/)

supply of IT equipment such as laptops that they could make available to learners and/ or that they were already using online collaboration tools such as Google Classroom or Microsoft Teams. COVID-19 Recovery Funding allowed the institutions to build on the existing support and speed up the implementation of their Digital Inclusion priorities via development of online and blended teaching/learning approaches.

- 1.19 Similarly, some FE institutions and school sixth forms reported that their wellbeing provision was relatively strong before the pandemic. Existing services included pastoral support from counselling sessions, and signposting (through progress and resilience coaches, personal mentors, or similar). However, COVID-19 Recovery Funding enabled the institutions to strengthen those services and expand their offer.

“With regards to mental health and wellbeing, I would say we were in a strong position before [the pandemic period].” (Institution lead, school sixth form)

## 2. Evaluation aims and methodology

2.1 This chapter sets out the aims of the evaluation and summarises the methods used to address them.

### Evaluation objectives

2.2 Ecorys UK and the Learning and Work Institute (L&W) were commissioned by the Welsh Government to evaluate COVID-19 Recovery Funding to post-16 education and training providers across Wales in April 2022. The overarching aim of the research was to provide evidence to inform the Welsh Government's strategic and operational approaches to ongoing support for post-16 education and training as the sector recovers from the disruptive impacts of the pandemic.

2.3 This evaluation provides evidence of how Welsh Government Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding has supported the post-16 sector and how this funding has been used in practice by institutions. This includes an account of the perceived effectiveness of different teaching and learning approaches/interventions adopted by the sector and the additional mental health and wellbeing support put in place. The evaluation also explores how collaboration across the sector has been affected by the funding. A key aim is to collate and triangulate findings from across the evaluation to provide recommendations for the design and development of future funding models, and ongoing delivery (ranging from funding decisions, guidance and distribution to addressing ongoing learner and staff needs). The evaluation findings are also expected to help shape an understanding of the future needs and concerns of the sector, which will guide the Welsh Government's shift in focus towards forward support measures.

2.4 This evaluation of the use and effectiveness of funding will be important in building a foundational evidence base, alongside evaluations of the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards Programme<sup>17</sup> and the Winter of Wellbeing.<sup>18</sup> Collectively, findings from these studies will support the Renew and Reform programme, determine appropriate responses to support young people, and inform future funding

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<sup>17</sup> Andrews, G; Bajjada, T; Howells, J; KilBride, K; Morgan, N; Richardson, M; Wise, C; Bebb, H; Bryer, N; Roberts, M; (2023). Evaluation of Recruit, Recover, and Raise Standards & Early Years Programmes – Final Report. Cardiff: Welsh Government. GSR report number 50/2023. [Online]. Available at:

<https://www.gov.wales/evaluation-recruit-recover-and-raise-standards-rrrsprogramme>

<sup>18</sup> Bertolotto, E., Williams, J., Goddard, C., Main, H., Freitas, G., Browett, T., McKenna, K. (2022). Winter of Wellbeing Evaluation. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 4/2023. [Online]. Available at:

<https://www.gov.wales/winter-wellbeing-programme-evaluation>

decisions, as well as the ongoing support strategy for post-16 education and training.

### Evaluation methods

- 2.5 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 in Figure 2.1.

**Figure 2.1 Phases of evaluation activity**



- 2.6 These strands included:

- **A rapid document review** of relevant programme, policy and strategy documents, to set the context for and inform the design of the evaluation. The document review was conducted between May and July 2022.
- **Assessment, collation and augmentation of MI data** collected during the pandemic. MI data was reviewed and any gaps identified, before the evaluation team reached out to institutions to request missing data using bespoke data collection templates. Newly delivered data was merged with existing MI and the augmented data was analysed using a complete-case analysis approach. The MI data review took place between June and August 2022, with contact with institutions following from September. The majority of missing data was provided by institutions by December 2022. The MI data review, collection, collation and analysis process spanned the length of the evaluation (April 2022 – May 2023).
- **Online semi-structured interviews** conducted with:



- 17 senior stakeholders from the Welsh Government and sector organisations to provide an overview of the policy context, examine decision-making processes, and explore how funding was distributed across the post-16 sector. 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), school sixth forms (6) and WBL (4) to explore institution experiences in depth, including an exploration of funding use, institutional decision-making, and the perceived effectiveness of funding. Interviews with institution leads were conducted between September and December 2022.
- **Online surveys and focus groups/interviews** with staff and learners, to better understand experiences and views of support provided by COVID-19 Recovery Funding.

The short online surveys were developed in consultation with the Welsh Government and programmed by the evaluation team. The purpose of the surveys was to improve understanding of staff and learner perspectives of COVID-19 support, as well as to create a sample for the focus groups. As it was not considered possible to send surveys directly to staff and learners, they were administered via an open link shared by institutions. In most cases requests to share the open survey links were sent to institution leads who had taken part in interviews. This differed for school sixth forms, where regional education consortia leads were asked to share survey links with schools in their local area. Staff and learner surveys were launched in parallel in January 2023.

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.<sup>19</sup> Focus groups/interviews with staff and learners took place in February and March 2023.

- **Developing an evaluation framework**, which encompassed several activities including:
  - mapping key evaluation aims and research questions against methods, to inform the development of research tools.
  - creating a co-produced Theory of Change with policy stakeholders (see Appendix C Theory of Change)
  - exploring options for evaluating programmes/funding streams in the future, taking account of evaluation design and value for money (see Appendix A).

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<sup>19</sup> All participant-facing study materials were professionally translated into Welsh, and all interviews, focus groups and surveys were offered/available in both Welsh and English.

- 2.7 A key component of the evaluation, and underpinning the different phases of work, was assessing the likely impact of funding based on the views of senior stakeholders, institution leads, staff and learners. The evaluation used the iterative approach outlined above which included perspectives across multiple stakeholder groups to explore whether and how COVID-19 Recovery Funding contributed towards observed outcomes.
- 2.8 Participant groups and achieved samples for the different phases of data collection are set out in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Participant groups and achieved samples**

Participant group	Achieved sample	Method	Purpose	Time period
<b>Senior stakeholders</b> Welsh Government officials/national partners	<b>17</b>	Qualitative interviews	Provide programme context, how the funding was distributed and how decisions were made.	June - August 2022
<b>Institution leads<sup>20</sup></b>	<b>43</b>	Qualitative interviews	Explore funding use, decision-making and perceived effectiveness.	January – March 2023
▪ ALC	5			
▪ FE	14			
▪ HE	14			
▪ School sixth forms	6			
▪ WBL	4			
<b>Institutional staff</b>	<b>279</b>	Online survey	Gather views and experiences of staff in post-16 education.	January – March 2023
• ALC	22			
• FE	143			
• HE	39			
• School sixth forms	7			
• WBL	22			
• Other <sup>21</sup>	9			
<b>Institutional staff</b>	<b>16</b>	Focus groups <sup>22</sup> and interviews	Understand the views and experiences of staff in post-16 education.	February - March 2023

<sup>20</sup> Our aim was to achieve 39 interviews with leads from across the post-16 sector. This included leads/senior staff from all HE (8) and FE (13) in Wales, all WBL (4) and ALC (4) providers, and a sample of school sixth forms (10).

<sup>21</sup> This included care workers, employability providers, and staff working across different setting types.

<sup>22</sup> The number of focus group participants ranged between 3 and 6.

<b>Post-16 learners</b>	<b>362</b>	Online survey	Gather views and experiences of learners studying in post-16 education.	January – March 2023
• ALC	13			
• FE	98			
• HE	148			
• School sixth forms	41			
• WBL	42			
• Other/refused	20			
<b>Post-16 learners</b>	<b>26</b>	Focus groups <sup>23</sup> and interviews	Understand the views and experiences of learners studying in post-16 education.	February - March 2023

### Data management and analysis

- 2.9 All qualitative discussions were facilitated with the aid of semi-structured topic guides and conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and auto transcribed. The resulting transcripts were used to summarise interview data under thematic headings and sub-headings in Excel. This created a findings matrix for each phase of qualitative data collection and was used to identify key themes in response to the evaluation’s research questions.
- 2.10 Survey data was collected in Confirmit software and exported to Excel for initial review and cleaning. This data cleaning process included removing duplicate, partial and erroneous responses. Survey data was then imported into R for analysis. All survey data was explored descriptively (in the form of frequency analysis), we then selected a series of questions to explore using regression analysis. Specifically, ordinal multivariate regression modelling was used to explore whether the support provided through COVID-19 Recovery Funding to institutions is linked to an improvement in outcomes for staff and learners as collected in the surveys. Prior to analysis, the survey team pre-defined the types of support that might reasonably explain variance in each outcome and included these as binary covariates in the model. The target parameters in each model were the coefficients for each type of support received through the funding. It is worth noting that analysis was exploratory in nature and did not estimate causal effects of the support provided and outcomes. Rather, the analysis sought to understand any *associations* between

<sup>23</sup> The number of focus group participants ranged between 2 and 6.

support and outcomes, which could be triangulated with other strands of the evaluation.

### **Data limitations**

2.11 It is important to note that there are several limitations in the data collected and collated as part of the evaluation and presented in this 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. There was an additional layer of complexity as survey invitations to school sixth forms were required to go through regional education consortia leads.<sup>24</sup>
- Detailed 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. The challenges of data collection were exacerbated by the pandemic, and the MI data was shared as a series of data files in various formats with the evaluation team with the aim of collating and gathering additional data to help build a more complete picture. The MI was assessed for missing data and suspected erroneous data, and institutions/LAs were subsequently contacted with requests to supply missing data. Despite considerable support from the Welsh Government, sector stakeholders and institutions/LAs the final dataset remained partial with notable gaps in the data. More specifically, average missingness (i.e., missingness across all relevant variables) was particularly high among school sixth forms (65 per cent), and to a lesser extent work-based providers and adult learning providers (29 per cent on average across both types) as well as FE institutions (28 per cent). There was no missing data for HEIs. The time lag between the original phase of data collection and Ecorys' follow-up will also likely have led to some inaccuracies in the data. Finally, MI data was supplied in different formats and using guidance which appears to have been interpreted inconsistently. Therefore, only a small proportion of the MI data has been included in the report, and the summary tables in Chapter 0 should be treated with caution. All MI data presented in the report comes from that originally supplied by the Welsh Government.

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<sup>24</sup> One of the 5 regional leads contacted confirmed that the invitation emails had been shared with school sixth forms. No response was received from the other regions.

### **3. Key findings**

- 3.1 In April 2022, the Welsh Government commissioned Ecorys, with L&W, to evaluate the use and perceived effectiveness of Welsh Government Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding. This summary brings together key findings and recommendations from across the evaluation.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 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 the decisions could be made as efficiently as possible.
- 3.4 Opportunities for evidence-based decision-making, full consideration of VfM, 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.
- 3.5 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.
- 3.6 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.

- 3.7 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.
- 3.8 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.
- 3.9 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 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.
- 3.10 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 to be a significant area of need.

3.11 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 school sixth forms and FE). 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 school 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.

3.12 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 school 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.

- 3.13 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 personal protective equipment (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 Free School Meals (FSM) support to FE, with institutions also taking steps to address food poverty by setting up food banks.
- 3.14 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.
- 3.15 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.

- 3.16 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).
- 3.17 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.
- 3.18 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.
  - Celebrate the good practice in collaborative work across post-16 institutions 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.
- Future evaluation framework:
  - Undertake a feasibility study when designing future funding models.
  - Review outcomes and impacts in the Theory of Change (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.

## 4. How Welsh Government Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding was distributed

4.1 This chapter outlines the structure and distribution of the Welsh Government's Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding, exploring how resources have been allocated across the sector and identifying any operational challenges that were experienced. Findings are drawn primarily from interviews with senior stakeholders from across the post-16 sector.

### COVID-19 Recovery Funding Streams

4.2 The pandemic created an unprecedented crisis in education, requiring a rapid and considerable financial response to continue learning, and meet the additional needs of staff and learners. As part of the response, the Welsh Government allocated almost £295 million support to post-16 providers. This included approximately £233 million of COVID-19 related funding in the 2020/21 financial year, and £62 million in 2021/22.<sup>25</sup>

4.3 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, 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):**<sup>26</sup> 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.

4.4 The funding was also intended to meet specific types of need, and as such was divided into several funding streams:

- **Digital inclusion and blended learning:** Developing digital skills of staff and learners to support blended/online learning during the pandemic, capital funding

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<sup>25</sup> Totals per financial year have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

<sup>26</sup> Totals per stage have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

for equipment and infrastructure, adapting digital systems, developing online resources and adopting new approaches to teaching remotely.

- **Mental health and wellbeing support for staff and learners:** Safeguarding the wellbeing of practitioners including workload considerations; supporting the wellbeing of learners including their mental and physical health; promoting learners' aspirations and confidence; promoting healthy choices and productive study environments.
- **Academic support and catch-up:** Delivering additional teaching and learning that enhances the knowledge and skills of learners; formative assessment activities that help optimise teaching and learning; developing learner's study skills, interpersonal skills, and resilience.
- **Transitions and career support:** Gathering information about learners' abilities, needs and attributes; sharing knowledge and information about learners and their needs with relevant practitioners in a secure and timely way to support learner progress; providing enhanced support for learners in moving between stages of education and training and into the workplace.
- **Financial and practical support:** Developing practical measures to maintain the safety of learners and practitioners during the pandemic, providing additional practical and financial support for learners and their families and FSM.
- **Workforce resilience:** Developing the resilience of the education workforce through professional learning; expanding the workforce through recruitment and retention and making the most of individual and collective attributes.

4.5 The specific details of these funding streams and their distribution across the post-16 sector are set out in Appendix B Funding streams diagram. The multiple streams and sources of funding illustrates the complexity of COVID-19 Recovery Funding.

#### **Distribution of funding: Decision-making**

4.6 The following sub-section explores the distribution of COVID-19 Recovery Funding, including the decision-making process across different stages of the pandemic, and parts of the post-16 sector. It highlights the challenges of responding rapidly in the face of considerable uncertainty, logistical difficulties and anxiety, and the importance of joint working and collaboration.

4.7 Interviews conducted with senior stakeholders from across the sector indicate that the challenges presented by the pandemic forced necessary changes to the pace of funding decision-making, which became "much, much quicker". Stakeholders highlighted that the context at the start of the pandemic was intense and

pressurised, with the sector facing both challenging and rapidly changing circumstances.

- 4.8 Whilst the nature of collaboration with institutions varied across the post-16 sector, all stakeholders highlighted the importance of collaborative working, and ensuring relationships were maintained and strengthened within the context of rapid and responsive decision-making.
- 4.9 Senior stakeholders working with FE institutions and school sixth forms, stressed the importance of communication and collaboration. The first step was a meeting between ColegauCymru, college principals and the Welsh Government, and the agreement that ColegauCymru would collate a written account of FE support needs for the education minister (activities which took place in March 2020, immediately before the first lockdown). This approach was considered a useful first step in assessing and communicating needs.
- 4.10 Well-established relationships between the Welsh Government, FE finance directors and curriculum leads allowed regular information sharing and coordination across FE institutions throughout the pandemic. Meetings continued on a termly and then monthly basis. This coordination between institutions helped to create a more unified approach to COVID-19 recovery, including identifying priority areas for additional funding.
- 4.11 It was noted that pre-16 education had attracted considerable political attention in the early stages of the pandemic, and stakeholders perceived post-16 (specifically FE) as being something of a 'Cinderella service' with less focus on, and attention shown to, post-16 learners. The enhancement of collaborative networks was partly a response to this perception, ensuring the recognition of the needs of post-16 learners.<sup>27</sup> Efforts were also taken within the Welsh Government to coordinate support for pre- and post-16 education in schools and colleges.
- 4.12 HE stakeholders also emphasised the importance of close collaboration with institutions, whilst recognising the autonomy of HE institutions and the role of HEFCW as funder and regulator. The Welsh Government worked very closely with HEFCW from the start of the pandemic, drawing on their well-established

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<sup>27</sup> Whilst groups and networks such as the Curriculum and Quality network existed and worked closely with the Welsh Government pre-COVID, they met more frequently and worked together to identify needs created by the pandemic.

relationship. The aspiration was to work in close collaboration with the higher education sector, “we wanted to do with and not do to.” (Senior stakeholder, HE)

- 4.13 Decision-making processes were perceived by HE stakeholders to be complicated in the early stages of the pandemic while the remit letter from the Welsh Government to HEFCW was being agreed. There were also deep concerns about the future financial viability of HE institutions within the context of the pandemic.
- 4.14 Two HE collaborative groups were established, the cross-sector ‘Looking Forward Group’ and the ‘Guidance Group (originally ‘Task and Finish’). The latter was originally intended as a sounding board to sense check guidance for HE institutions but became a forum for the discussion of broader issues, for example, student GP registrations and vaccine administration. Both groups were widely valued by stakeholders from across organisations, encouraging open and effective communication about challenges and priorities for funding.
- 4.15 WBL operated on a different structure and through a different funding arrangement to other parts of the post-16 sector, limiting the scope of Welsh Government intervention. Rather than establishing working groups, the Welsh Government worked with the National Training Federation for Wales (NTfW) and ColegauCymru to liaise with, and support, WBL. While there was regular communication with providers, the approach to working with WBL was reported by senior stakeholders to be more organic and less structured than other parts of the post-16 sector. This approach was felt to be effective, facilitating timely decision-making, building on existing positive relationships between the Welsh Government, NTfW, ColegauCymru and WBL providers.
- 4.16 Alongside building and reinforcing connections in different parts of the post-16 sector, a ‘national education group’ was established to coordinate action across the Welsh Government, bringing together education policy officials with Public Health Wales, LAs and education providers. Public health information was typically cascaded to the different parts of the post-16 sector by Welsh Government stakeholders. Public health officials would also check education guidance documents as needed.

### **The role of evidence and learner voice in decision-making**

- 4.17 Opportunities for evidence-based decision-making were limited during the early stages of the pandemic due to the unprecedented nature of the situation and the

need to make decisions at speed. 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.

- 4.18 There was limited engagement with learners within the decision-making process overall, although HE stakeholders noted that the education minister consulted regularly with representatives from NUS Wales. This engagement offered opportunities to learn about issues pertinent to post-16 learners (albeit with a particular focus on HE and FE). There were expectations that individual learning institutions would engage with their learners in taking decisions about needs and spending priorities.

### **Value for money considerations**

- 4.19 Value for money (VfM) was a factor in funding decisions for FE and school sixth forms but considered less than would typically be the case. This was connected to the speed at which decisions needed to be taken to support the sector.
- 4.20 HE operated slightly differently, with institutions applying directly to HEFCW for funding, but with autonomy over how that funding was spent within the different funding streams.<sup>28</sup> Decision-making was based on best judgement with consideration of VfM, although some spending guidance was provided by HEFCW.
- 4.21 Likewise, value for money was a factor in decision-making within WBL, but within the context of longer-term financial sustainability. Specifically, funding formulas were established to support WBL providers based on historical delivery to ensure they would be able to resume work after the pandemic:
- “The sustainability of the network was a real concern. Would be a huge issue if once the pandemic was over there would be providers that had gone under.”  
(Senior stakeholder, WBL)
- 4.22 It was noted by stakeholders across the sector that the VfM test was applied to all major funding applications as part of the Star Chamber<sup>29</sup> process. This process also ensured a prioritisation of funding to the areas of greatest need.

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<sup>28</sup> There were some funding streams which proved exceptions to this autonomy, for example, the Pan-Wales Digital Learning fund discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>29</sup> The Star Chamber is a Department for Education review process for data relating to children's services, schools and families, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/star-chamber-scrutiny-board>



## **Priorities and decision-making over the pandemic period**

- 4.23 Priorities and decision-making varied over the course of the pandemic, with some commonalities across different parts of the post-16 sector. After the initial lockdowns had been implemented to ensure staff and student welfare, the first months of the pandemic brought significant concerns about the financial viability of providers,<sup>30</sup> followed by the health, welfare and wellbeing of learners across the sector as these moved into the remit of individual institutions. This was followed in the later stages by a greater focus on course completion and progression.
- 4.24 For HE stakeholders, early concerns about financial sustainability operated alongside scenario planning for international and domestic student admissions. Decision-making was supported by a financial commitment from the UK government. Autumn 2020 brought an increased focus on student health and welfare, including managing a second wave of the virus. There were also growing concerns about learners' mental health and wellbeing. In summer 2021, there was an increased focus on student hardship, which had been exacerbated by a contraction in part-time working opportunities, particularly in the retail and leisure industries.
- 4.25 Like HE, WBL stakeholders were initially concerned about the financial viability of providers (within the context of national/international public health measures including ongoing restrictions on face-to-face learning). However, the desire to offer financial support had to be balanced against the need to financially support the public health response to the pandemic. This pressure eased with funding from the UK government. Fears about financial viability ran alongside ongoing and significant concerns about learners' health and wellbeing, and encouragement for providers to ensure that learners felt connected and supported. IT connectivity was an issue as many were involved in work-based learning outside an office environment. Qualification completion became a priority later in the pandemic period, particularly for students on courses with a significant practical assessment or required to accumulate a minimum number of hours.

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that the interviewees were asked to comment on priorities in their role as senior stakeholders in the post-16 sector. Concerns about financial viability took place within the context of large-scale measures designed to protect public safety when protecting learner and staff health fell beyond the control of educational institutions (i.e., during periods of lockdown/closure).

## **5. How funding was used, and institutional decision-making**

5.1 The following chapter provides an overview of the funding guidance, spending decision-making processes, and a summary of how the post-16 education institutions used the funding. We also examine institutions' approaches to considering priority groups, learners and staff needs, and their involvement in the spending decision-making processes. The chapter draws on findings from interviews with institution leads, as well as MI data.

### **Funding guidance**

5.2 Institution leads typically agreed that the guidance provided by the Welsh Government for individual funding streams was clear, stating the parameters of what could and could not be covered. However, because the funding came in through different funding streams, and in some cases during the same time period, it was challenging for some institutions to understand which of the funding streams the guidance related to.

“There was some confusion about what funding could be used for in some cases [...] Even Welsh Government colleagues were getting themselves confused because it [funding] was coming from different parts of Welsh Government as well.” (Institution lead, FE)

5.3 There was consensus among institution leads that the Welsh Government had been available to provide support and respond to any queries. The Welsh Government was also proactive in engaging with FE institutions during the pandemic through regular engagement meetings. This was appreciated by the FE leads, as the meetings allowed institutions to share their experiences and learning with each other as well as Welsh Government officials.

“What was particularly impressive from the Welsh Government was the regular meetings.” (Institution lead, FE)

5.4 However, ALC leads reported that following a meeting with the Welsh Government to discuss the funding and accompanying guidance, they ended up more confused, as the verbal guidance differed from the written version. Therefore, they suggested that in future, teams within the Welsh Government could make decisions jointly and publish any funding guidance alongside any monitoring templates (ensuring internal consistency in any guidance shared with the sector).

- 5.5 Although school sixth forms received funding guidance from the Welsh Government some LAs provided additional support by responding to school sixth forms' inquiries around the use of funding.
- 5.6 HE institutions received guidance for relevant funding streams from HEFCW. Whilst some HE leads found the funding guidance and HEFCW communication style clear, others felt the guidance notes could be clearer in terms of terminology and that communication could be more proactive. One of the respondents reported that HEFCW did not share any guidance with them until it was directly requested. Suggestions to address these issues included establishing a project governance framework and providing a 'crib sheet of things to consider' – a short list of key considerations to support HE institutions when applying for funding and delivering projects.

### **Flexibility in the use of funding**

- 5.7 Leads from across the sector appreciated flexibility in how the funding could be used (and as indicated in the guidance documents), which allowed institutions to address needs specific to them and/or their local area. Flexibility also allowed institutions to respond to changing needs.
- “Very little guidance was given but that was good in a way. I think each region of the country has had a very different experience through COVID and they might all need to spend it in slightly different ways, so I think that loose guidance was quite sensible.” (Institution lead, ALC)
- “It [the guidance] was written very well in the sense that you knew where the boundaries and parameters were. But within those boundaries and parameters it was very flexible.” (Institution lead, FE)
- 5.8 Whilst leads were predominantly positive about the lack of prescriptive guidance, some found it frustrating. For example, one ALC lead would have welcomed a stronger steer on the use of funding and indicated that, rather than encouraging flexibility, the lack of guidance reflected a lack of understanding and clarity from the funding body.
- 5.9 Some institution leads noted that the funding guidance had become more prescriptive over the course of the pandemic, offering more detail about what each funding stream covered. Interviewees described quite open guidance during the

early stages of the pandemic but noted that this was followed by a more thorough and clearer set of guidance documents, which included examples of best practice.

### **Reallocation and/or repurposing existing funding streams**

- 5.10 Institutions did not typically have to reallocate any core funding for the purpose of COVID-19 recovery and described the financial support provided by the Welsh Government as sufficient for the additional support they provided during the pandemic (discussed further in chapter 9). However, one FE lead explained that alongside COVID-19 Recovery Funding, they welcomed an agreement with the Welsh Government to reduce their mainstream delivery target. This allowed the institution to repurpose the money that would have been spent on delivery to provide additional support for learners during COVID-19 lockdown periods.
- 5.11 Some HE leads reported that they redirected part of their core funding to expand mental health and wellbeing support during the pandemic, as it was a key area of concern.

### **Timeframes for spending**

- 5.12 Institution leads from across the sector recognised that due to the nature of the crisis there were limited timescales for both the Welsh Government to distribute funding and for the institutions to allocate and spend it. Short timelines for using the funding created challenges for institutions in terms of planning and using the funding effectively. This was partly because funding cycles followed the financial year rather than the academic year, an issue which had been raised with the Welsh Government and responded to.

“The sector has been quite honest about this ongoing issue [with funding periods and limited timeframes] with the Welsh Government and the Welsh Government had made some adjustments in response to that feedback.” (Institution lead, FE)

- 5.13 Institution leads also expressed concerns about delays in distribution of digital funding, which meant that some institutions had to purchase devices up front and were later reimbursed. This was more financially challenging for smaller institutions who had fewer financial reserves to draw on.
- 5.14 Whilst feedback about tight spending timelines came from across the post-16 sector, HE leads appeared to face particular challenges, finding the “extremely short” spending window difficult. One HE lead highlighted the challenges short

timeframes presented for recruiting staff to support delivery of COVID-19 response interventions.

### **Spending decisions and considerations**

- 5.15 Findings suggest that most institutions followed similar decision-making processes with the senior leadership team (SLT) at each institution playing a pivotal role in deciding how funding would be allocated and used. There was some variation in the process for FE and HE, leads describing a “phased approach” to decision-making, with funding shared among departments/teams and spending decisions delegated to department/team leads. This allowed spending decisions to be better tailored to the needs of learners and staff in different parts of the institution. There were reflections from across the sector that processes had become more effective over time, and increasingly incorporated the views of staff and learners (see 5.19).

### **Priority groups in spending decisions**

- 5.16 Institution leads from across the sector considered a range of priority groups in spending decisions. Key priority groups focused on the ‘most vulnerable’ learners, such as those living with a disability, learners struggling with their mental health, and those at risk of abuse. Other key priority groups included learners who were more likely to struggle with accessing, or adapting to, online and blended learning, such as those with ALN, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those living in remote areas.

“We focused first and foremost on people [...] in the ALC network who couldn't access the internet and making sure that they could. We also looked at those with safeguarding challenges or health and wellbeing concerns. The learners who were in our essential skills programme were the other target group.”

(Institution lead, ALC)

### **Involving learners and staff in decision-making**

- 5.17 There was a consensus among institution leads that the nature of the pandemic, and urgency of the response, made it extremely difficult to include learner voice in spending decisions (see also 4.18). They noted that the key priority was being able to continue teaching and learning in the face of considerable practical challenges. However, institutions did consider learner and staff needs and factored these into spending decisions as far as they were able to. Key considerations included:

- safeguarding and learner wellbeing (particularly for vulnerable groups)
- having the necessary equipment and connectivity to deliver learning remotely
- digital skills among staff
- financial and practical support for learners, staff, and their families.

5.18 The nature of these considerations shifted over the course of the pandemic, mirroring the changing needs of learners and staff. Emerging priorities in the later stages of the pandemic, including the return to in-person provision, were:

- catching up on lost learning
- mental health, wellbeing, and social interaction
- engagement and behavioural issues
- staff workloads, and
- support with blended learning.

5.19 Institution leads also reported that after the initial 'emergency' response, they were better able to include learner and staff voice in the decision-making process. Learners' views were collected via surveys and/or verbally during schools' assemblies or during their classes. Staff were asked to give verbal feedback or were included directly in the decision-making chain.

5.20 Although WBL providers also used learner surveys to explore learner voice during the pandemic, it was challenging for them to include apprentices' views in the initial decision making due to limited timeframes. This meant that initially the feedback from apprentices was limited to anecdotal accounts from providers/employers.

### **Improving the decision-making process**

5.21 As discussed above, institutions often found the timescales for using funding challenging and noted that they would have welcomed a longer lead-in time, to help them be better prepared. Institution leads felt that setting expectations about the value and nature of the funding streams before awards were made would have made decision-making easier and more effective.

"The logistics and the coordination of it [the funding] could have been considered more." (Institution lead, school sixth form)

5.22 HE leads found funding streams which required joint/collaborative decision-making more difficult, referring in particular to the Pan-Wales Digital Learning fund (part of the Higher Education Investment and Recovery Fund). They felt that decision-

making would have been improved had they been able to make the spending decisions independently, allowing each HE institution to tailor the financial package to their learners' needs, rather than as a consortium.

- 5.23 ALC leads found that their decision-making processes were often made more complex by the need to coordinate work with multiple teams within their LA, and the additional layer of bureaucracy this created. For example, one ALC lead noted that within their LA it was the IT team who were responsible for purchasing digital devices for ALC services, and that the IT team were being presented with multiple and competing demands in the wake of the pandemic. This made the process difficult and slow.

“I don't manage the IT team so I can't tell them when you've got to do this, or you've got to do that. Different groups within the LA formed a working group so that they could coordinate requests and demands on the IT team.” (Institution lead, ALC)

### **Use of funding**

- 5.24 The following sub-section provides an overview of how COVID-19 Recovery Funding was used by post-16 education institutions. Examples are also included throughout the report. Findings are discussed across 5 thematic areas:

- digital inclusion and blended learning
- mental health and wellbeing
- academic support and catch-up
- learner transitions and career support
- financial and practical support.

- 5.25 Findings are drawn from qualitative interview data and MI data. However, it is important to note that the MI data only offers a partial picture of funding use (due to missing data) and should be treated with caution.

### **Digital inclusion and blended/online learning**

- 5.26 Leads across the sector agreed that supporting blended/online teaching and digital inclusion was a key focus during the pandemic. The majority of funding in this area was spent on purchasing devices – mainly laptops, but also tablets, and portable Wi-Fi hotspots/dongles which could be lent to both staff and learners. Funding was

also used to provide internet connectivity services for learners and their families, and additional software licence costs to enable remote access.

5.27 MI data collected from institutions provides an overview of use of digital funding by FE institutions. The data reinforces reports from setting leads that funding was primarily used to purchase laptops.

**Table 5.1 MI data: Use of digital funding by FE institutions**

Items purchased through digital funding by FE institutions	Number of purchased items	Total cost of purchased items (£)	Average cost per item (£)
Laptops	23,992	7,938,450	£331
Tablets	1,529	600,740	£393
Phone and internet data	1,431	275,856	£193
Digital accessories	11,735	207,589	£18
Software licences	5,987	154,857	£26
TOTAL SPEND		9,177,491	
TOTAL AWARD		<b>9,917,400</b>	

*Source: Management Information*

### **Mental health and wellbeing support**

5.28 Mental health and wellbeing was a key area of focus across the post-16 sector. Institutions used funding to adopt a variety of existing approaches to support learners and staff, including:

- online mental health resources, events and wellbeing sessions (for example, mindfulness, yoga and meditation)
- in-person wellbeing activities, including sports
- in-house counselling services and/or signposting to relevant services
- wellbeing support hubs
- recruitment of additional wellbeing and pastoral support staff.

5.29 FE institutions and school sixth forms invested in expanding existing services, in particular by introducing wellbeing support hubs and recruiting additional, pastoral support staff such as counselling and safeguarding team members. They also used a proportion of the funding to create or extend wellbeing activities and student clubs, including sports.



“We found that many of them found things quite difficult socially when they came back, so we ran some clubs, things like basketball, badminton, art, just to enable them to socialise a bit more.” (Institution lead, FE)

5.30 Leads in ALC highlighted that their learners faced additional challenges, such as caring responsibilities, English as a Second Language (ESL), and physical and mental health conditions, which exacerbated the challenges of managing through the pandemic period. In FE, wellbeing concerns focused on supporting mental health during periods of lockdown and the return to in-person learning, with particular emphasis on those who were clinically vulnerable. In HE, funding was allocated to Student Unions to arrange and publicise additional wellbeing support.

5.31 Institutional leads from across the sector flagged concerns about the increase in workload that blended learning brought for teaching staff. As a result, some institutions provided dedicated staff wellbeing support, such as staff wellbeing days, online wellbeing sessions and staff assistance programmes, and encouraged line managers to offer further support and signposting. ALC leads reported that staff were offered mental health and wellbeing support provided by their LA, alongside other LA staff. One of the HE institutions introduced a Wellbeing and Health Implementation Plan, building on existing work already underway to support their staff.

“We actually put more management support in for staff, working remotely was a wellbeing issue in itself as it created more pressure.” (Institution lead, HE)

### **Academic and catch-up support**

5.32 FE institutions and school sixth forms received Learner Recovery and Progression (LRP) Funding to provide learners with additional academic support, and to help them address the learning gap created by the pandemic. The funding was typically used to provide support in the form of one-to-one and group tuition sessions, extra revision classes and online resources. Some FE institutions delivered extra academic or practical learning sessions via an ‘Extended College Day’ to help learners to catch-up on what they had missed. One of the school sixth forms brought in ‘learning coaches’ who had supported younger learners at the school prior to the pandemic, to support learners in Years 12 and 13.

5.33 FE leads reported that in the first year of the pandemic (March to July 2020 and academic year 2020/21) funding was primarily used to develop online teaching materials. In the following year (2021/22), funding was used more systematically to address gaps in learners' knowledge and skills. FE leads explained that the shift in spending was mainly a result of more specific guidance provided by the Welsh Government. The guidance required institutions to increase the curriculum delivery time by 5 per cent and increase Welsh lessons for Welsh speakers and bilingual learners.

“Certainly, by the second year of the catch-up funding we were more formal in our approach [...] There was a difference in approach, largely because the guidance was much clearer.” (Institution lead, FE)

### **Learner transitions and career support**

5.34 Transition funding was distributed to FE institutions and school sixth forms to support learners who were completing courses and leaving post-16 education, in particular, with careers advice. However, findings suggest that spending on transitions tended to focus on supporting learners moving within post-16 education (e.g., from school to sixth form or college), rather than into employment.

5.35 Institution leads reported that transition funding was used to deliver a range of activities:

- online support materials
- virtual open days
- summer transition events
- college taster sessions and tours.

5.36 Transition Monitoring Data (TMD) provides further insights into how FE institutions and school sixth forms spent transition funding and the number of learners who benefited from these activities (see Table 5.). Data shows that the largest numbers of FE learners participated in virtual open days and personal interviews, whilst for school sixth form learners the most common transition activity was UCAS Curriculum Vitae (CV) support and careers advice, closely followed by personal interviews.

5.37 In some cases, institution leads reported the funding was also used to support learners with transport to ensure they could attend events/sessions (for example, a free bus to the college open day).

**Table 5.2 MI data: Transition activities in FE and school sixth forms 2020/21**

Activity	Number of learners taking part - FE institutions	Number of learners taking part - school sixth forms
Virtual open day	8,951	6,224
Personal interview	6,828	7,208
Early enrolment with campus tour	6,658	1,953
UCAS CV support	5,731	8,013
Skill support session	5,412	4,342
Careers advice	3,510	7,316
Wellbeing support	1,774	3,771
Oxbridge or Seren <sup>31</sup> transition support	749	701
Summer sport academies	485	189

*Source: Management Information*

### **Financial and practical support**

5.38 In the early stages of the pandemic institutions were provided with funding for practical response measures, specifically to implement safety measures and protect the health of staff and learners. Institutions across the post-16 sector used the funding to purchase PPE including face masks and hand sanitiser as well as develop their COVID-19 Health and Safety measures and update safeguarding policies. COVID-19 Recovery Funding was later also used to provide practical and financial support for learners, especially those in vulnerable groups.

5.39 HE institutions provided additional hardship support to their learners using funding distributed by HEFCW. This included the ‘COVID-19 Student Support Fund’ available to learners struggling to meet expenses resulting from the pandemic, and an additional (universally awarded) bursary for low-income students/those with caring responsibilities. All institutions agreed to use a common system to deliver

<sup>31</sup> Seren is a Welsh Government initiative dedicated to helping Wales’s brightest state educated learners achieve their full academic potential and support their education pathway into leading universities in Wales, the UK, and overseas.

support so that there was equity across the country.<sup>32</sup> Due to the time pressure to get the support to students, as well as staff shortages across HE, a simplified award process was agreed, with a fixed amount available to students. However, some HE leads expressed concerns about the effectiveness of this approach, as the funding was designed to provide the same amount of financial support to all learners. Interviewees suggested that a more targeted approach, which provided support proportionate to the learners needs, may have proved more effective.

“Allocating the hardship fund became a very mechanistic way of getting [...] useful but small sums of money to a majority of students, whereas a targeted approach would have been better.” (Institution lead, HE)

- 5.40 Free school meal (FSM) funding was provided to FE institutions to extend FSM support to more learners. Prior to COVID-19 free school meals had only been available for learners in schools, on institutional premises, and during term times. Some FE leads also described how they set-up food banks at their institution to support learners experiencing food poverty. In some cases, FSM support had been replaced by cash or food deliveries during periods of lockdown, to support learners and their families.

### **Challenges and barriers in the use of funding**

- 5.41 The key challenge reported by institution leads was using COVID-19 funding within specified timeframes (see 5.12). However, some institution leads struggled to meet needs with the amount of funding available, reporting overspends within some funding streams (for example, catch-up learning).<sup>33</sup>
- 5.42 Alongside the timescale issues, institution leads also reported that key barriers to the effective use of funding were staff capacity and difficulties with recruitment. Specifically, institution leads reported that recruitment of teaching and support staff (e.g., IT support) had been, and continued to be, extremely difficult.
- 5.43 In addition to workforce shortages, institution leads reported shortages in particular types of digital equipment, specifically Chromebooks. The huge surge in demand created by the pandemic meant that it was not always possible to purchase the

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<sup>32</sup> Hardship funds are usually distributed to learners via Student Finance Wales (SFW) after learners have submitted an application to institution.

<sup>33</sup> The Welsh Government offered FE institutions an opportunity to submit overbids for digital funding if their needs exceeded initial allocations, and these were met in full.

digital equipment in the required timeframe. This meant institutions had not been able to spend the money as they intended.

## 6. Experiences of institution staff

- 6.1 This chapter outlines staff perceptions of COVID-19 Recovery Funding and how it was used by institutions. It explores staff perceptions of need, the support on offer, and the effectiveness of that support, across the different funding streams. Findings are drawn from interviews and focus groups with institution staff and leads as well as analysis of staff survey data.
- 6.2 The staff survey included perspectives of employees from across the post-16 sector. As shown in Table 2.1 the number of responses varied considerably by type of institution, from 143 responses from FE staff to 7 from school sixth form employees. There was also variation by staff role, which provides important context for the findings discussed below, in particular the level of awareness/knowledge about COVID-19 Recovery Funding and how it was used. The breakdown of responses by role is displayed in Table 6.1. It shows that the largest proportion of staff responding to the survey were teachers/tutors/assessors (41 per cent).

**Table 6.1 Staff survey: Role of staff responding to the survey<sup>34</sup>**

Staff role	Number	Proportion (%)
Teacher/tutor/assessor	114	41
Middle leader	48	17
Senior leader	32	11
Student support worker	16	6
Teaching assistant	7	3
Other	43	15
Prefer not to say	19	7

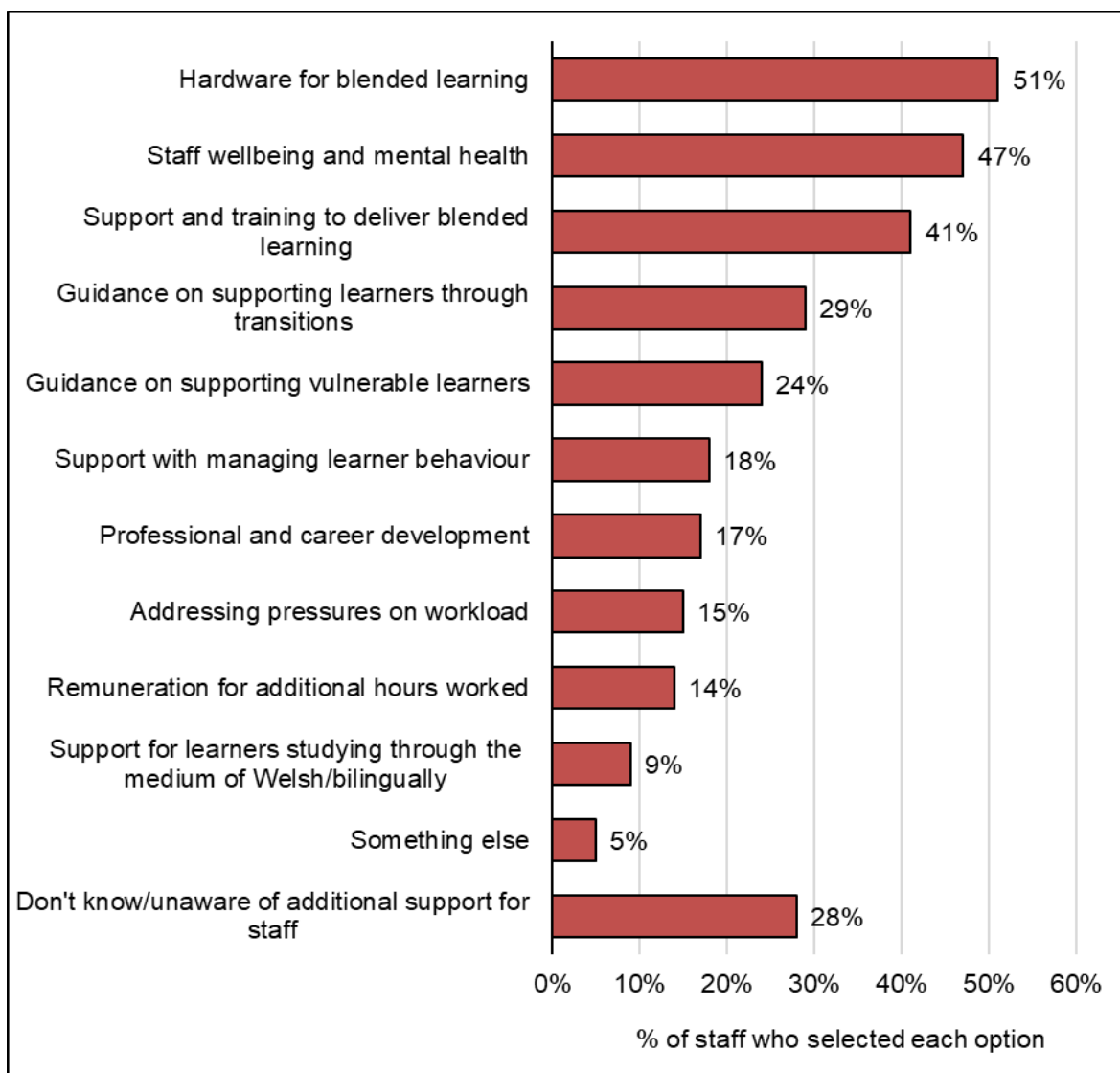
*Base n=279; Source: Staff survey*

### **Staff perspectives: How COVID-19 funding was used to support staff**

- 6.3 Discussions with staff suggested a limited of awareness of the COVID-19 funding and the details of how it had been used, with staff sometimes unaware of whether expanded provision had been paid for from one of the funding streams. This finding is reinforced by data from the staff survey where more than a quarter of respondents were unsure what additional support had been offered to staff as a result of the COVID-19 funding (28 per cent, n=79) (see Figure 6.1).

<sup>34</sup> Survey question: 'What is your role at the institution?'

**Figure 6.1 Staff survey: Staff perceptions of how COVID-19 Recovery Funding was used to support staff<sup>35</sup>**



*Base n=279; Source: Staff survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

- 6.4 Despite difficulties linking newly available support and COVID-19 response measures to funding, focus group participants were able to discuss provision available to themselves and other members of staff at their institution. Although staff talked about a range of provision, the most common themes in terms of support for staff were around the move to blended learning, and with mental health and wellbeing.
- 6.5 Staff members reported a range of support from institutions to facilitate the move to blended learning. This frequently included digital equipment and provision of software to ensure learning could continue during periods of lockdown. Focus group

<sup>35</sup> Survey question: 'How has COVID-19 recovery funding been used by your institution to support staff?'

participants also noted that the rapid move to blended learning, and the need to support learners to make effective use of digital resources, highlighted a gap in staff members' digital skills. This was particularly true for those working in ALC, where learners tended to face greater barriers to accessing learning online. The expansion in blended learning meant that institutions not only had to purchase equipment, but also upskill staff. Staff reported that their institutions had offered training on how to effectively use digital platforms to deliver blended learning, engage learners online and to support them to access all the resources they needed.

“It was recognised that significantly beefing up our e-learning capacity and communications network was going to be our path to survival.” (Staff FG participant, HE)

- 6.6 These findings were reinforced by the staff survey, where the provision of hardware and support and training to deliver blended learning were both identified by a large proportion of staff members as support offered by their institutions, as a result of COVID-19 Recovery Funding (51 per cent, n=141 and 41 per cent, n=114 respectively).
- 6.7 Mental health and wellbeing support was also commonly discussed in focus groups and interviews with staff. This support took the form of online social events via Microsoft Teams, stress management (e.g., online meditation sessions), signposting to external resources, and provision of mental health first aiders. Staff also highlighted more regular wellbeing check-ins with line managers as a key form of support but were unsure whether this had been financed by COVID-19 Recovery Funding. The frequency of the wellbeing support varied across setting types (as well as individual institutions), with staff from FE and ALC reporting more regular wellbeing check-ins and contact with managers.
- 6.8 Findings were underlined by the staff survey where ‘mental health and wellbeing’ was the second most commonly reported type of support, selected by nearly half of respondents (47 per cent, n=131).
- 6.9 In interviews and focus groups, as well as discussing specific support for staff, participants also mentioned the work they had been involved in to support learners to address lost learning, and with managing learner behaviour. These themes were more common in the accounts of school sixth form and FE staff and usually connected with a younger cohort of learners. They were also linked to a perception



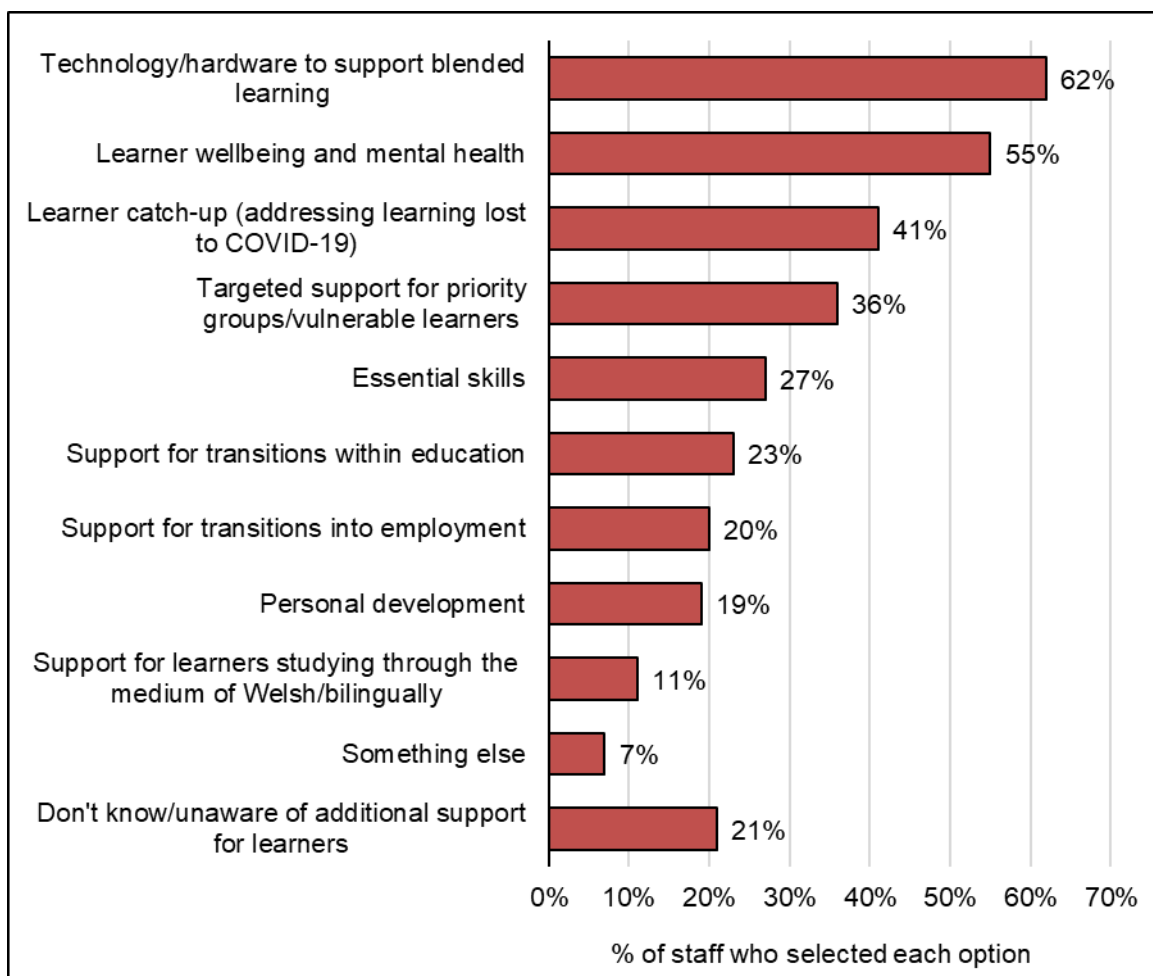
that learner behaviour had deteriorated since the return to in-person learning. However, staff were not always able to connect the use of COVID-19 Recovery Funding to the support offered to help staff manage learner behaviour.

- 6.10 Awareness of these other types of support was reflected in the staff survey with a small proportion of respondents selecting remuneration for additional hours worked (14 per cent, n=40) and support managing learner behaviour (18 per cent, n=50). Whilst more than a quarter of survey respondents (29 per cent, n=82) selected guidance on supporting learners through transitions as a key area in which funding had been used, this was less commonly discussed in focus groups and interviews with staff. When it was raised in staff focus groups, participants focused on transition events held between different institutions to support learners (see 6.20).

### **Staff perspectives: How COVID-19 funding was used to support learners**

- 6.11 Focus group participants felt better able to discuss and offer examples of support available for learners, than for staff. The most commonly occurring themes concerned learner mental health and wellbeing, blended learning and catch-up; showing parallels with findings from staff focus groups (see 6.4). As with support for staff, there was a lack of clarity from some interviewees/focus group participants about how COVID-19 Recovery Funding directly contributed to expanded support. This is reinforced by findings from the staff survey, where just over a fifth of respondents (21 per cent, n=60) reported that they were unsure, or were not aware that any additional funding support had been offered (see Figure 6.2).

**Figure 6.2 Staff survey: How COVID-19 Recovery Funding was used to support learners<sup>36</sup>**



*Base n=279; Source: Staff survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

- 6.12 Focus group participants and interviewees referred to institutional provision to loan digital equipment to learners to help them access blended/online learning and resources. Interviewees/participants also frequently cited investment in their institution's digital infrastructure to enable learning to continue remotely, for example, purchasing and setting up new online learning platforms.
- 6.13 This finding was reflected in the staff survey, where the most common types of support identified for learners were technology/hardware to support blended learning (62 per cent, n=173) and mental health and wellbeing support (55 per cent, n=153).
- 6.14 When discussing mental health and wellbeing support for learners, focus group participants offered examples such as additional counselling sessions or extended pastoral support, some of which had been provided by existing staff and some by

<sup>36</sup> Survey question: 'How has COVID-19 recovery funding been used by your institution to support learners?'

newly hired specialists. Staff also referenced online sessions to support learner wellbeing during periods of lockdown. For example, some ALC providers hosted online social events which for their learners, and some FE institutions had a designated wellbeing space available for learners once they returned to in-person learning.

- 6.15 For some staff, however, it was the continuation of learning (albeit online) that supported learner wellbeing the most.

“I think the fact that courses didn’t stop [was good] because that would have meant some people would have been cut off again from yet another area of life, not only are [you] not seeing anybody, but now you’re also not allowed to carry on learning.” (Staff FG participant, ALC)

- 6.16 Another common theme emerging from focus groups and interviews with staff was around supporting learners to re-engage with their studies and to catch-up with lost learning. Learner engagement had been a particular problem during periods of lockdown when teaching was delivered remotely. This continued to be a challenge even with the return to in-person learning. Re-engaging learners was highlighted as a particularly pressing issue for HE and ALC settings, which some staff felt resulted in a slower return to learning once they moved back to face-to-face delivery.

- 6.17 Lost learning and catch-up activities were a concern for staff across the sector. This is illustrated by the results from the staff survey, where 41 per cent of respondents (n=115) reported that their institution was supporting learner catch-up. Staff working with learners to complete qualifications, and transition within or out of post-16 education, often talked about catch-up activities in terms of small group or one-to-tuition as well as support with revision and exam techniques. Catch-up sessions were usually delivered by staff already employed by the institution who were then remunerated for the extra time.

“Once it started to calm down a little bit, the people that were far behind on work were invited into the school, obviously wearing masks and following safety regulations.” (Staff FG participant, FE)

- 6.18 WBL differed in that learner catch-up more typically involved reinforcing links with employers and supporting learners to address gaps in practical learning experiences. Creating opportunities for catch-up activities which were practical (or

lab-based), whether for WBL or FE, was complicated by ongoing COVID-19 restrictions.

- 6.19 Other themes emerging from discussions with staff included support for vulnerable learners, such as those in financial hardship, and with learner transitions. Focus group participants discussed financial support in the form of HE hardship funds and food packages sent home for school sixth form and FE learners eligible for FSM. These findings were reflected in the survey where just over a third of staff reported that their institution offered support for vulnerable learners (36 per cent, n=101). Regression analysis showed that staff who were aware of some types of support (i.e., did not say they were unaware of funding support) were more likely to feel funding had positively influenced their confidence in supporting attainment for disadvantaged learners.<sup>37</sup>
- 6.20 Staff taking part in focus groups also demonstrated an awareness of support for learner transitions, but only when prompted. Staff from school sixth forms discussed additional catch-up sessions to support younger learners transitioning into the school sixth form or to FE during the pandemic. Some school sixth forms and HE institutions hosted online welcome and induction days to facilitate transitions. Staff also referred to online reference materials for learners, guidance for staff, summer transition events and college taster sessions. HE staff talked about careers advice and transitions support offered for final year learners moving into employment but were unsure whether COVID-19 Recovery Funding had been used to support these activities. Findings align with responses to the staff survey where just under a quarter of respondents reported that their institution provided learner support for transitions within post-16 education (23 per cent, n=64) and from education to employment (20 per cent, n=55).

### **The return to in-person learning**

- 6.21 Staff taking part in focus groups highlighted the benefits of returning to in-person delivery for learners' mental health, engagement with learning and social wellbeing. For some institutions, such as HE and FE, staff had been keen to return as soon as possible, indicating that learners had been less engaged when learning took place

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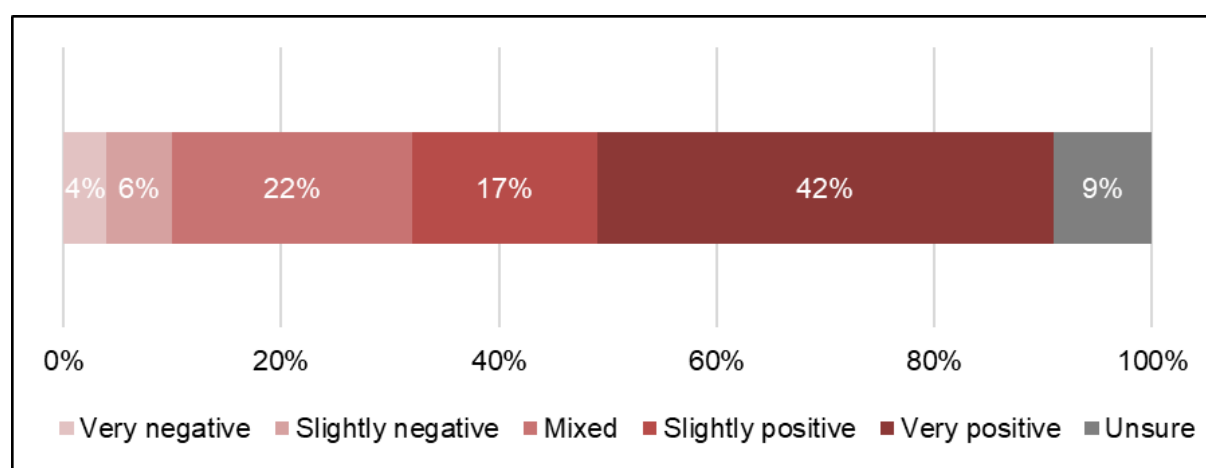
<sup>37</sup> Staff who were not aware of any type of funding support were less likely to feel funding had improved their confidence in supporting attainment for disadvantaged learners ( $\beta=-1.01$ ,  $p=0.05$ ). The survey question collected responses on a scale of 1-10 where 1 = funding had no positive impact and 10 = funding had an extremely positive impact.

online, and that it had been more difficult to support them. This positive response to returning to in-person learning was also evident in the staff survey, where more than half of respondents (59 per cent, n=165) felt positive about going back to face-to-face delivery (see Figure 6.3).

6.22 Despite a strong positive response to returning to in-person learning there was a strong consensus that elements of blended delivery (which combines face-to-face learning with digital activities and content) worked well and should be retained. Staff, particularly in ALC, recognised that blended learning could have benefits for some groups of learners (as well as tutors), for example, those who found it more difficult to travel as a result of disability or caring responsibilities. Staff in HE noted that learners appreciated being able to access recorded lectures and online learning materials, and those in FE/school sixth forms reported that online learning platforms worked well. Some staff, particularly in HE and ALC noted that giving learners the option of attending classes virtually removed some of the financial pressure of going to university in another city and paying for accommodation.

“There are going to be some serious questions asked about the boarding school model of higher education, particularly in courses where the student does not need to be physically present in a city far away from their home or their hometown in order to be studying.” (Staff FG participant, HE)

**Figure 6.3 Staff survey: How staff felt about returning to in-person learning<sup>38</sup>**



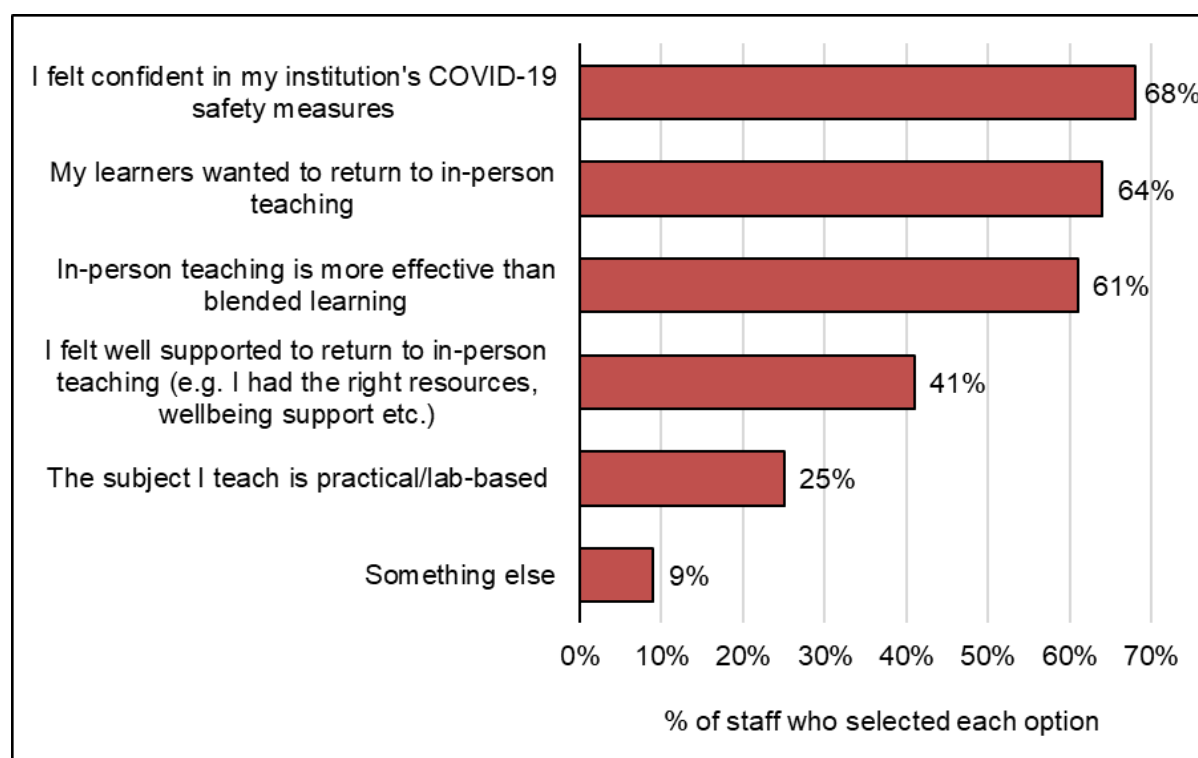
*Base n=279; Source: Staff survey*

6.23 Whilst there was limited discussion in focus groups and interviews about the reasons staff felt confident to return to in-person learning, survey findings suggest

<sup>38</sup> Survey question: ‘How did you feel about returning to in-person teaching?’ Where very negative = 1-2, slightly negative = 3,4, neutral = 5,6, slightly positive = 7,8, very positive = 9,10

that staff were happy that institutions had taken adequate COVID-19 safety precautions (68 per cent, n=119) and would provide them with the support they needed to return (41 per cent, n=72). Survey findings also reflected feedback from staff about the perceived benefits of face-to-face delivery for most learners (see 6.21), with a large proportion reporting that in-person teaching was more effective than blended learning (61 per cent, n=107). Moreover, nearly two-thirds of staff reported a desire from learners to return to in-person learning (64 per cent, n=112).

**Figure 6.4 Staff survey: Reasons staff felt positive about returning to in-person learning<sup>39</sup>**

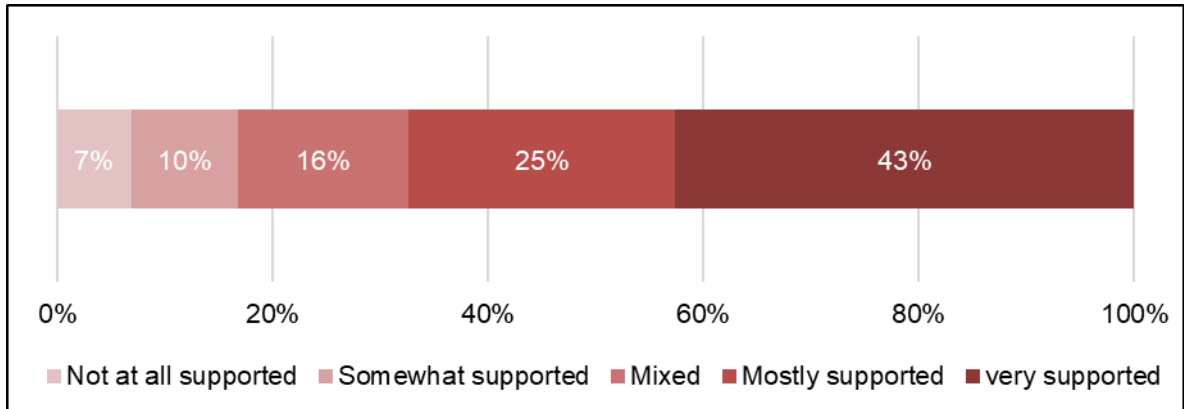


*Base n=244; all those who felt positive about returning to in-person learning;  
Source: Staff survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

6.24 When asked specifically how supported they felt when returning to in-person teaching more than two-thirds of staff (68 per cent, n=164) reported feeling mostly or very supported (see Figure 6.5). Just 7 per cent of staff reported not feeling at all supported (n=16).

<sup>39</sup> Those who answered 6-10 on the response scale when asked 'How did you feel about returning to in-person teaching?' The follow-up survey question asked: 'Why did you feel this way?'

**Figure 6.5 Staff survey: How supported staff felt when returning to in-person learning<sup>40</sup>**



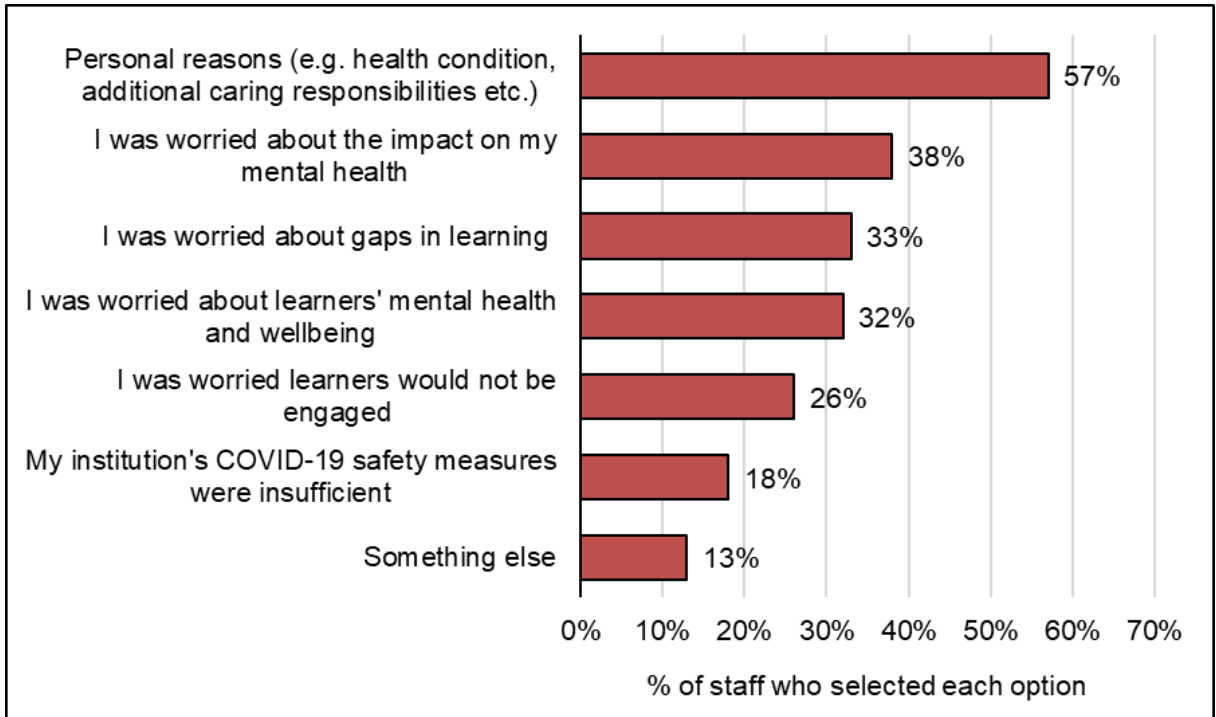
*Base n=279; Source: Staff survey*

- 6.25 These findings are reinforced by regression analysis which showed that staff who felt that their institution offered mental health and wellbeing support to their employees were more likely to feel positive about the return to in-person teaching.<sup>41</sup>
- 6.26 Despite a consensus among staff that the return to in-person learning marked a positive shift, there was recognition in focus groups and interviews that there were elements of home working such as flexibility and greater ability to balance work with domestic responsibilities, that they would miss. Staff also appreciated the benefits of home working for those with accessibility needs and caring responsibilities. Furthermore, staff recognised that some workforce members were clinically vulnerable and therefore concerned about a return to the workplace.
- 6.27 There was a notable minority of respondents to the staff survey who reported mixed feelings (22 per cent, n=60) or negative feelings (10 per cent, n=29) about the return to in-person learning (see Figure 6.3). Respondents cited a number of reasons, the majority of which were centred around personal reasons or concerns over their own mental health and their learners' health (see Figure 6.6).

<sup>40</sup> Survey question: 'How supported did you feel by your institution when returning to in-person teaching?' Where 'not at all supported' = 1,2; 'not very supported' = 3,4; 'mixed' = 5,6; 'mostly supported' = 7,8; 'very supported' = 9,10

<sup>41</sup> Staff who felt that their institution had used COVID-19 Recovery Funding to support employees' mental health and wellbeing were more likely to feel positive about returning to in-person teaching ( $\beta=0.95$ ,  $p=0.01$ ). The survey question collected responses on a scale of 1-10 where 1 = very negative and 10 = very positive.

**Figure 6.6 Staff survey: Reasons staff felt negatively about returning to in-person learning<sup>42</sup>**



*Base n=79; Source: Staff survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

<sup>42</sup> Those who answered 1-5 on the response scale when asked 'How did you feel about returning to in-person teaching?' The follow-up survey question asked: 'Why did you feel this way?'



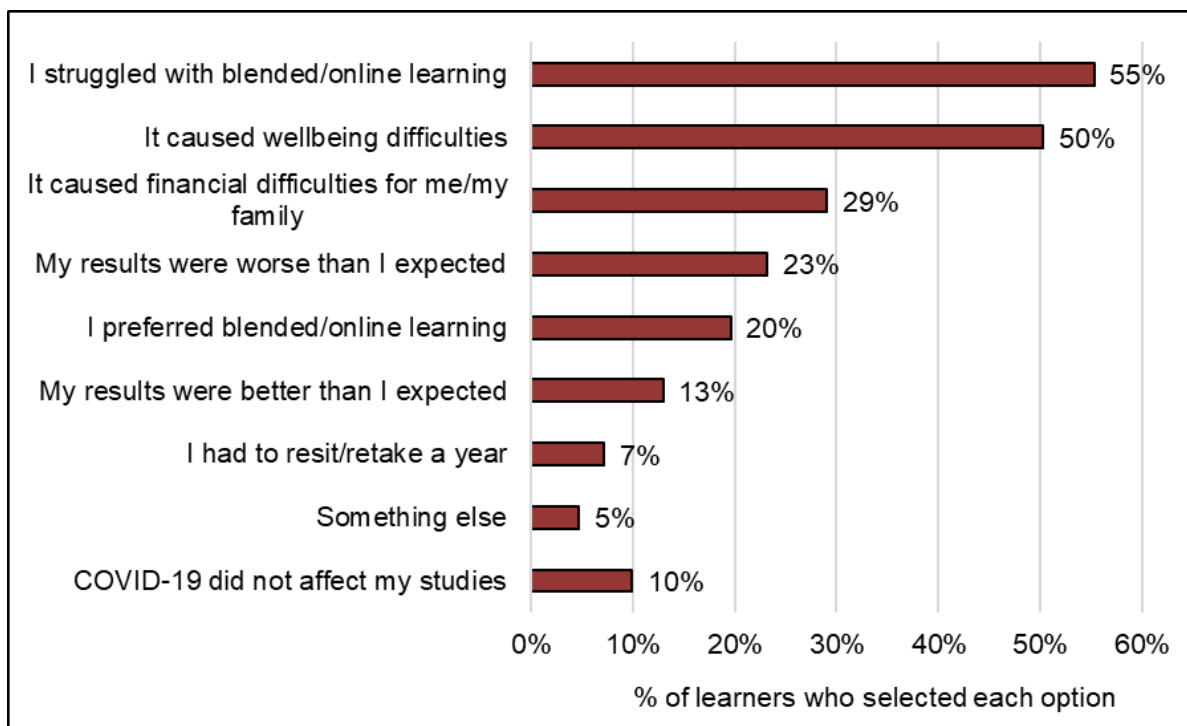
## 7. Experiences of post-16 learners

7.1 The following chapter outlines learners' experiences in relation to support provided by post-16 education institutions using COVID-19 Recovery Funding. The chapter examines the effects of COVID-19 on learners' studies, their support needs and perceptions of support provided by institutions, as well as their feelings about the return to in-person teaching. Findings are drawn from focus group discussions and interviews with learners as well as the learner survey.

### Effects of the pandemic and learners' needs

7.2 The pandemic impacted learners' studies in different ways. The impacts most commonly raised in focus groups and interviews with learners included issues with mental health and wellbeing, difficulties adapting to blended/online learning, financial struggles, and negative impacts on their exam results/attainment. More than a half of those responding to the learner survey selected 'I struggled with blended/online learning' (55 per cent, n=200) and 'it caused wellbeing difficulties' (50 per cent, n=182), when asked about the effects of the pandemic on their studies.

**Figure 7.1 Learner survey: Effects of COVID-19 on learners' studies<sup>43</sup>**



*Base: n=362; Source: Learner Survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

<sup>43</sup> Survey question: 'In what ways has COVID-19 affected your studies?'

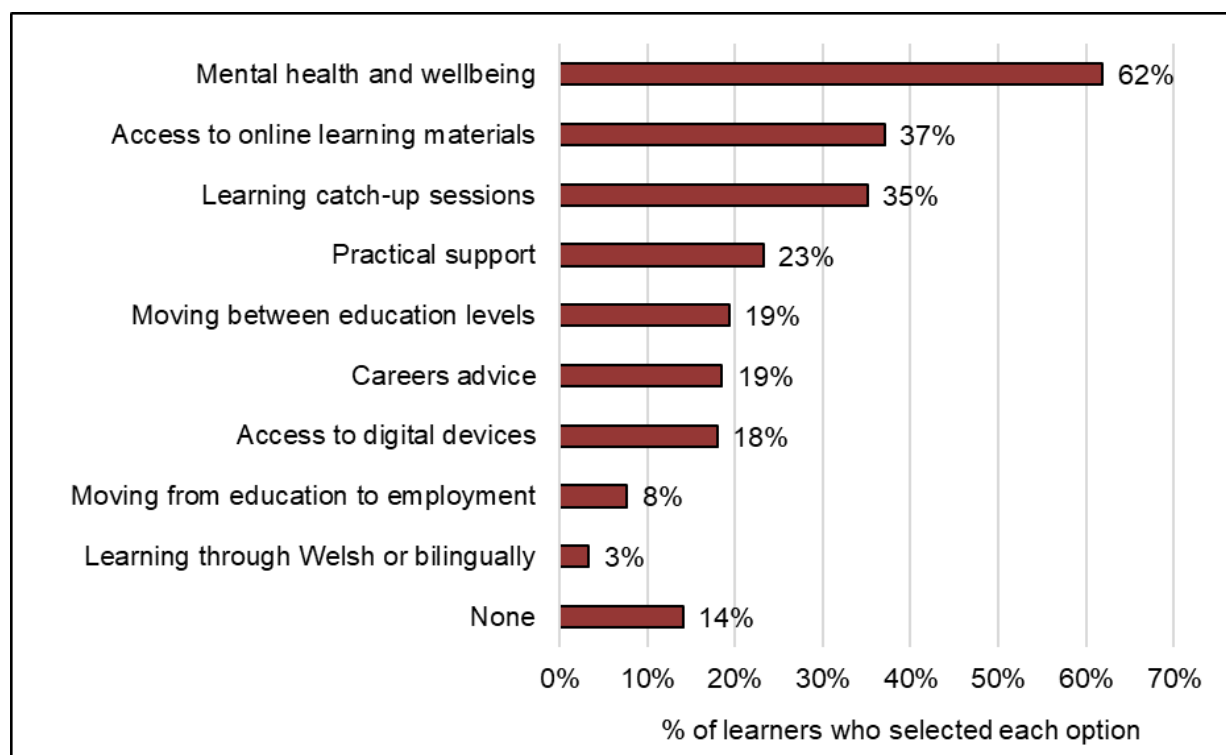
7.3 Learners from across the post-16 sector reported that they had faced some level of isolation as a result of the national lockdowns, which affected their confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, some learners found it challenging to stay motivated and engaged once teaching moved online. They described a sense of fatigue and isolation which impacted their academic work.

“When I was learning online, I think it knocked my confidence. It stopped me from speaking up and asking questions.” (Learner FG participant, HE)

Additionally, learners who had experienced mental health challenges prior to the pandemic reported that their mental health worsened during the lockdowns. They saw this as resulting from social isolation and limited access to services they were using.

7.4 These findings were supported by results from the learner survey, where 62 per cent (n=224) of respondents reported a mental health and wellbeing support need during the pandemic.

**Figure 7.2 Learner survey: Learners' support needs<sup>44</sup>**



*Base: n=362; Source: Learner Survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

<sup>44</sup> Survey question: ‘During the COVID-19 pandemic (that is between March 2020 and July 2022), which of the following did you need or want support with?’

- 7.5 The main priority for ALC learners was being able to continue learning during the pandemic. During focus groups ALC learners reported that for those motivated to study for personal development reasons, to socialise, or to stay active, the course became even more important during COVID-19 lockdowns. As institutions moved courses online the digital support provided by COVID-19 Recovery Funding proved crucial for many ALC learners to continue learning.
- 7.6 Whilst many school sixth form, FE and HE learners taking part in focus groups and interviews reported being digitally confident prior to the pandemic, the learner survey indicated that the majority of respondents (55 per cent, n=200) still struggled with the move to blended/online learning (see Figure 7.1). Some learners highlighted that the quality of their studies was affected, and they would have benefited from the online resources being better tailored to the needs of specific cohorts (i.e., staff could have tailored the reused online materials from previous years or across different cohorts in a better way). Additionally, some of the learners whose studies included a practical element (such as lab work and internships) felt like they missed out on that experience, with no adequate alternative being offered.
- 7.7 Similarly, some WBL learners reported they would have benefited from more learning support and meaningful alternatives being put in place.
- “Even though you could get support [during the lockdown] it wasn't enough support because it was all over the computer. You couldn't be shown anything practically.” (Learner FG participant, WBL)
- 7.8 HE learners reported that they struggled financially as a result of the pandemic. This was often caused by increased expenses related to their accommodation (for example, needing to move house or pay for unused term-time accommodation), loss of income from part-time jobs, and wider financial impacts for their parents/families, limiting their ability to offer financial support.

### **Learners' awareness of support**

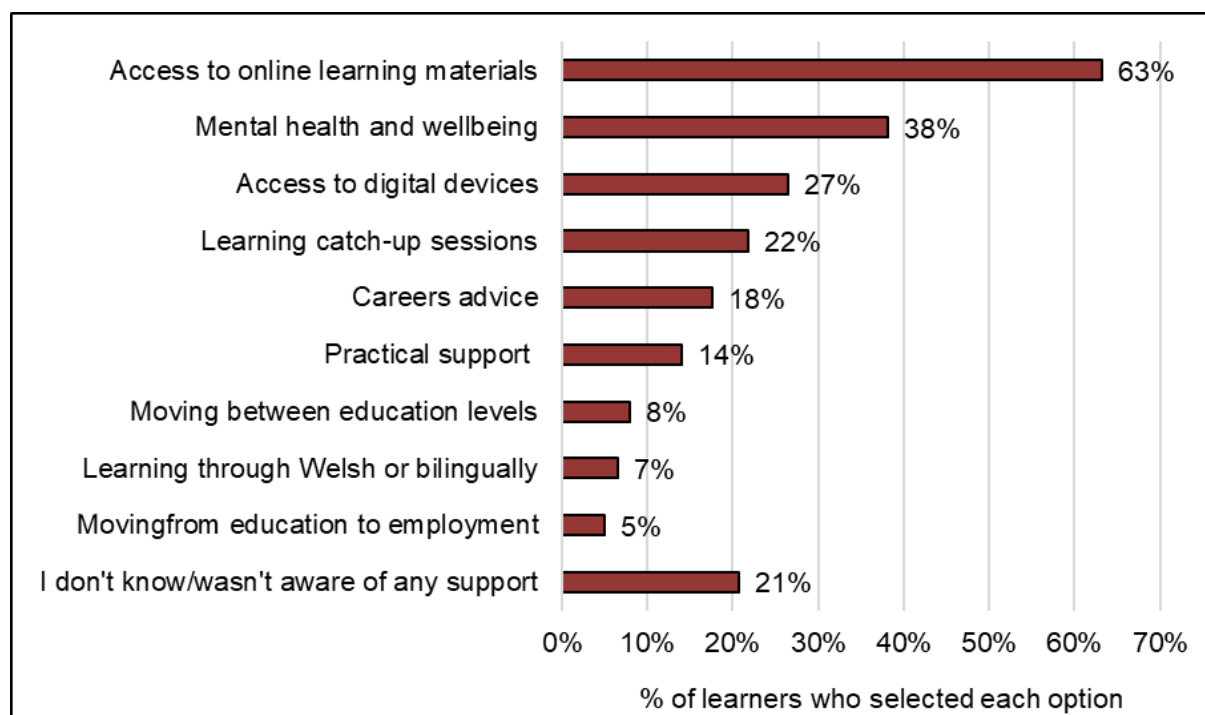
- 7.9 Learners taking part in focus groups and interviews reported a good awareness of mental health and wellbeing support, help with blended/online learning (such as access to online resources, digital devices, and technical support), additional academic support and catch-up activities, as well as different types of practical support (e.g., extended FSM, food banks, and financial support) provided by their institutions.

7.10 Learners appreciated the efforts of institution staff who provided online learning resources during COVID-19 lockdowns and made themselves available online to provide one-to-one support and/or signposting where needed. HE learners explained that university staff made sure learning materials were all available via online learning platforms such as Moodle.

“The Uni were really good and we knew that we could speak to any of the lecturers and e-mail them at any time if we had any concerns and all our resources were available on Moodle before and after seminars.” (Learner, FG participant, HE)

7.11 Results from the learner survey suggest that around a fifth of respondents (21 per cent, n=75) were not aware of any support provided by their institution to address the negative impact of the pandemic. When asked what type of support was offered by their institution, the most commonly selected response was ‘Access to online learning materials’ (63 per cent, n=229). This was followed by mental health and wellbeing support offer (38 per cent, n=138), and access to digital devices (27 per cent, n=96).

**Figure 7.3 Learner survey: Support offered by institutions<sup>45</sup>**



*Base: n=362; Source: Learner Survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

<sup>45</sup> Survey Question: ‘During the COVID-19 pandemic (that is between March 2020 and July 2022), which of the following did your educational institution (e.g. school, college) offer you support with?’

7.12 HE and FE learners participating in the focus groups reported that institutions (and in the case of HE, Student Unions) had made efforts to raise awareness about the wellbeing and mental health support on offer. HE institutions also took efforts to monitor learner wellbeing via short questionnaires during their lectures or seminars.

“They were always asking, they always did like QR codes at the start of the lectures to check on wellbeing for their students, which was really nice.” (Learner FG participant, HE)

7.13 Additionally, ALC learners reported that their tutors were actively promoting access to counsellors during their lessons throughout the pandemic. They were encouraging their learners to come forward if they were struggling and provided signposting to counselling and/or other wellbeing services.

### Support used by learners

#### *Digital skills and blended/online learning*

7.14 Findings from the learner survey suggest that access to online learning materials was the most commonly used type of support, reported by nearly 90 per cent of learners who were offered this type of support. HE learners commented that this also included access to the recordings of their online lectures and seminars. As shown in Table 7.1, whilst more than a quarter of those responding to the learner survey indicated that their institution provided access to digital devices (96 out of 362), fewer than half of these learners had accessed them (44 of 96). At the same time, during the focus groups and interviews ALC learners underlined that this was a vital support for many of them.

**Table 7.1 Learner survey: Support used by learners<sup>46</sup>**

Type of support	Number of learners reporting support type was available at their institution	Number of learners who used available support	Proportion of learners who used available support (%)
Access to online learning materials	229	205	90%
Learning catch-up sessions	79	54	68%

<sup>46</sup> Survey Question: ‘During the COVID-19 pandemic (that is between March 2020 and July 2022), which of the following types of institutional support did you use?’

Type of support	Number of learners reporting support type was available at their institution	Number of learners who used available support	Proportion of learners who used available support (%)
Practical support (e.g., providing meals, financial support)	51	33	65%
Mental health and wellbeing	138	77	56%
Access to digital devices	96	44	46%
Support moving between different education levels	29	13	45%
Careers advice	64	27	42%

*Base: n=362; Source: Learner survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

- 7.15 Learners from across the post-16 sector reported that they were offered individual support when struggling with specific issues with digital software or accessibility. This support often took the form of drop-in sessions with IT support or other staff.

### **Additional academic and catch-up support**

- 7.16 In addition to the use of blended learning resources, learners participated in different types of interventions aimed at improving their study skills, academic attainment and/or providing catch-up for lost learning.
- 7.17 Findings from the learner survey, suggest that the most commonly used types of catch-up support were (online or in-person) tuition sessions, either in a group or one-to-one, revision classes and support with practical learning.
- 7.18 Some FE learners reported that their institution had implemented an ‘extended college day’ after returning to in-person teaching. This was a daily revision session intended to help learners to catch-up on lost learning. However, some of the learners also expressed their frustration with not being able to choose specific lessons or activities during this time to address their specific needs or areas of interest.

## **Mental health and wellbeing support**

- 7.19 Findings from the focus groups suggested the learners felt their mental health and wellbeing was prioritised by institutions and by staff, particularly those in wellbeing roles. However, results from the learner survey show that despite a large proportion of learners (62 per cent, n=224) needing or wanting mental health and wellbeing support during the pandemic (see Figure 7.2), that nearly half (44 per cent, n=61) of learners with access to institution-based mental health and wellbeing support did not use it (see Table 7.1).
- 7.20 In some cases, learners with complex mental health needs were already using support provided by other services (most often via the NHS) and did not want to duplicate support. However, there were also reports from some learners that they felt a stigma attached to accessing support provided by their institution.
- “Because I am with the whole special education stuff, I didn't really like feeling [...] different. So that's why I never really spoke to them (school wellbeing services).” (Learner interviewee, school sixth form)
- 7.21 Findings from the learner survey show that the most used types of mental health and wellbeing interventions were access to specialist resources (43 of 69 learners), one-to-one sessions with support staff (33 of 55 learners), and counselling sessions (31 of 56 learners) (see Table 7.). In the focus groups, learners reported that they had used online wellbeing sessions during periods of lockdown as they offered a space for learners to socialise and take part in different types of wellness activities.

**Table 7.2 Learner survey: Mental health and wellbeing support used<sup>47</sup>**

Type of support	Number of learners offered the support by their institution	Number of learners who used the support offered	Proportion of learners who used the support offered
Access to wellbeing/ mental health resources	69	43	62%
One-to-one sessions with support staff	55	33	60%
Counselling sessions	56	31	55%
Online wellbeing/ wellness activities	65	34	52%
Social activities, either online or in person	23	11	48%
In-person wellbeing events	12	4	33%

*Base: n=138; Source: Learner survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

- 7.22 FE and HE learners taking part in focus groups and interviews reported seeing their personal tutors or ‘personal coaches’ as their first point of contact when struggling with their wellbeing and mental health. Tutors/coaches signposted them to resources, including student services or other forms of support, such as online resources. Those directed to student services felt that the referral process took too long.
- 7.23 During lockdown periods, some learners accessed counselling support online via Microsoft Teams or similar software packages. Although learners appreciated being able to access support, some found the online mode challenging, finding it more difficult to open up and share their struggles via a screen. In some cases, this was exacerbated by a poor internet connection or a lack of privacy at home.
- “I find it difficult to talk to people on Teams [...] When I was having counselling sessions, it was the peak of people using the internet for that kind of thing and at times signal dropped for no reason.” (Learner FG participant, HE)
- 7.24 FE learners reported that their institutions used a range of approaches in terms of advertising and packaging the mental health and wellbeing support offer. For

<sup>47</sup> Survey question: ‘What mental health and/or wellbeing support services did you use?’



example, support was offered to learners through wellbeing days, wellbeing teams, or wellbeing hubs.

### **Additional learner transitions and career support**

7.25 Findings from the learner survey suggest that transition support and career services were some of the least used types of support during the pandemic (see Table 7.1). Learners reported that the type of support available to them was similar to prior to the pandemic, with open days, career fairs, university and college visits, drop-in sessions with career services, etc.

7.26 Although the services/activities like career support or open days were adapted to be delivered online, learners who used the support were unsure whether the mode of delivery was always effective for the type of support on offer (although appreciated the necessity of the change in mode).

### **Financial and practical support**

7.27 Learners taking part in focus groups reported that the different types of practical support they accessed most often included food banks set up at their college or school premises, additional FSM which were in some cases substituted by voucher or cash during the lockdown, as well as financial support.

7.28 HE learners highlighted the expansion of financial support in form of COVID-19 hardship funding. This was available to all learners in need of financial help (see 5.39). Many learners appreciated the support which helped them to cover the increased costs in relation to their accommodation or food deliveries.

### **Learner's perspectives on the impact of the support**

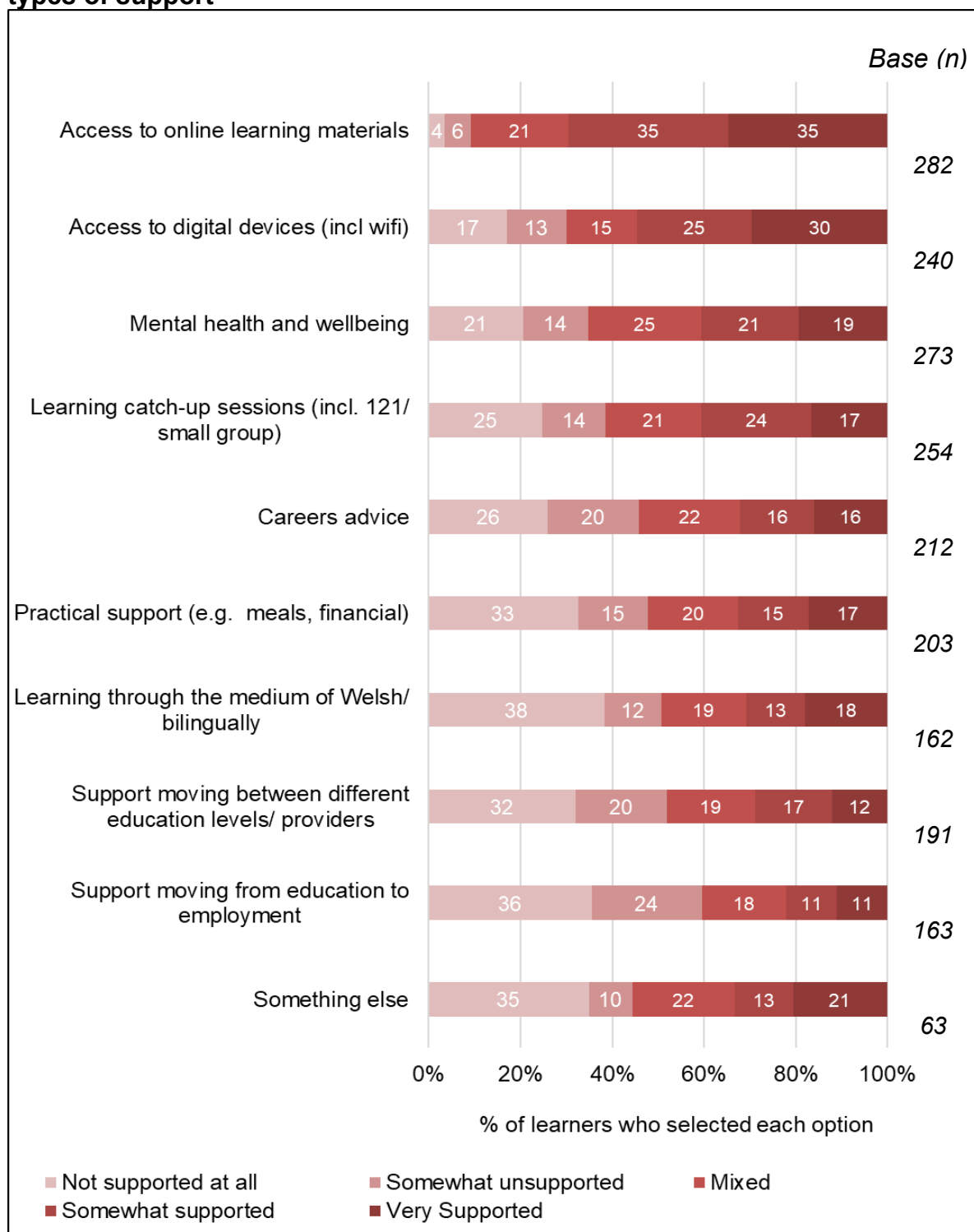
7.29 Data from the learner survey shows that 70 per cent of learners (n=196) felt supported in accessing online learning materials, more than half (55 per cent, n=131) of respondents felt supported in accessing digital devices, and 40 per cent (n=111) felt supported in accessing mental health and wellbeing support (see Figure 7.4).

7.30 In contrast, the areas where learners felt least supported were in transitions between different education levels, with career advice and with practical help (less than a third of respondents reported feeling supported in these areas). During the focus groups and interviews, learners across school sixth forms, FE and HE echoed

this finding, reporting that they did not feel sufficiently supported in transitions between levels and/or providers.

“It was really hard because I was a year one student who had to transition from A levels into uni and I didn't understand how to do uni [...] Uni just provided what the internet would.” (Learner FG participant, HE)

**Figure 7.4 Learner survey: How supported learners felt across different types of support<sup>48</sup>**



Source: Learner survey; note: excludes 'not applicable responses'

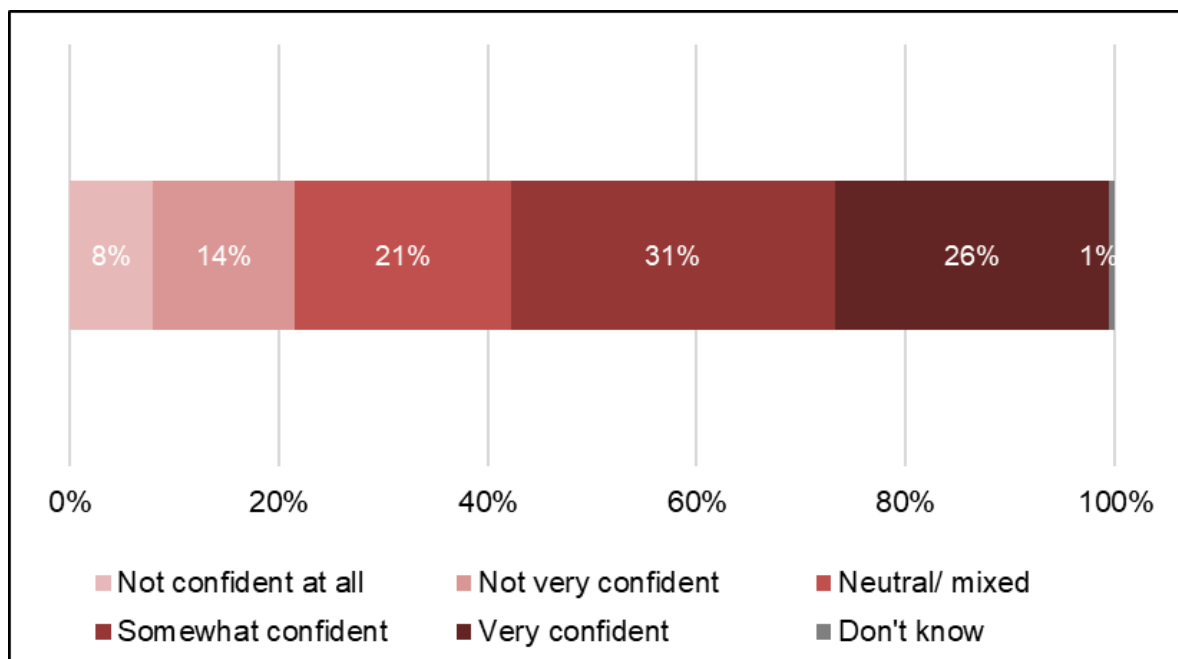
<sup>48</sup> Survey Question: "During the COVID-19 pandemic (that is between March 2020 and July 2022), how supported did you feel by your educational institution in terms of...?" The survey asked for responses on a scale from 1 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). These responses were grouped as follows: Not supported at all = 1-2, Not very supported = 3-4, Neutral/ mixed = 5-6, Somewhat supported = 7-8, Very supported = 9-10. The percentages displayed in the figure were rounded to the nearest integer.

## Digital skills and improved infrastructure for blended learning

- 7.31 During the focus groups, some mature HE and ALC learners reported having improved their digital skills during the pandemic. They saw this as a direct result of having to adapt to online learning. However other learners, predominantly those from school sixth forms and FE settings, already felt digitally confident.
- 7.32 Whilst it is difficult to indicate the impact of the support on learners' digital confidence, as many felt digitally confident before additional support was provided, learners across the sector reported that the digital infrastructure at their institutions had noticeably improved since the beginning of the pandemic.

“Now we've got the online infrastructure, we're much more used to it. We know what's gonna happen, what to expect [...] Now we're able to use online resources if we can't go in physically.” (Learner FG participant, FE)

**Figure 7.5 Learner survey: Confidence using digital tools for blended/online learning<sup>49</sup>**



*Base: n=362; Source: Learner survey*

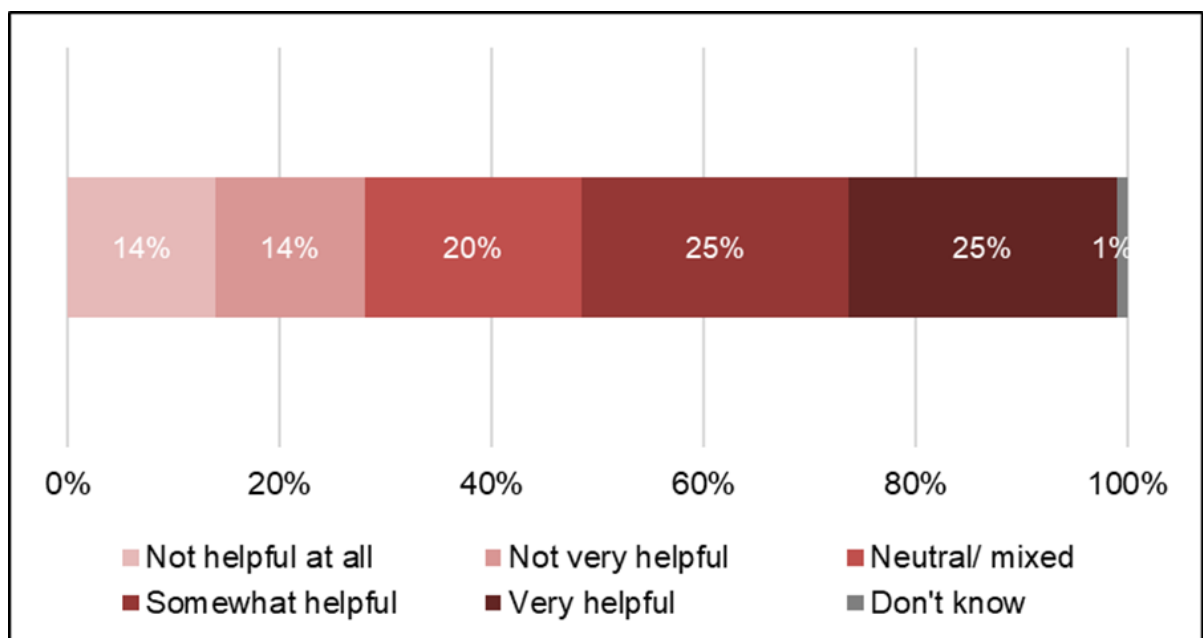
- 7.33 More than half of those responding to the learner survey (57 per cent, n=207) felt confident using digital tools for blended/online learning. Around a quarter of respondents reported a lack of confidence in their digital skills.

<sup>49</sup> Survey Question: 'How confident do you feel using digital tools for online and/or blended learning?' The survey asked for responses on a scale from 1 (not confident at all) to 10 (very confident). Responses were grouped as follows: Not confident at all = 1-2, Not very confident = 3-4, Neutral/mixed = 5-6, Somewhat confident = 7-8, Very confident = 9-10.

## Learner confidence

- 7.34 During the focus groups, learners reported that once they returned to in-person learning and received additional academic support, they were able to start rebuilding their confidence. The return to in-person learning also helped them to feel less anxious about their academic performance and results. Those on vocational courses or with a large practical element (including WBL), reported that they felt more confident once their practical/lab-based sessions restarted.
- 7.35 Approximately half of those responding to the learner survey (50 per cent, n=148) indicated that they felt that support provided by institutions helped them to feel more confident in their studies (see Figure 7.).

**Figure 7.6 Learner survey: Whether academic and catch-up support improved learner confidence in their studies<sup>50</sup>**



Base: n=293; Source: Learner survey

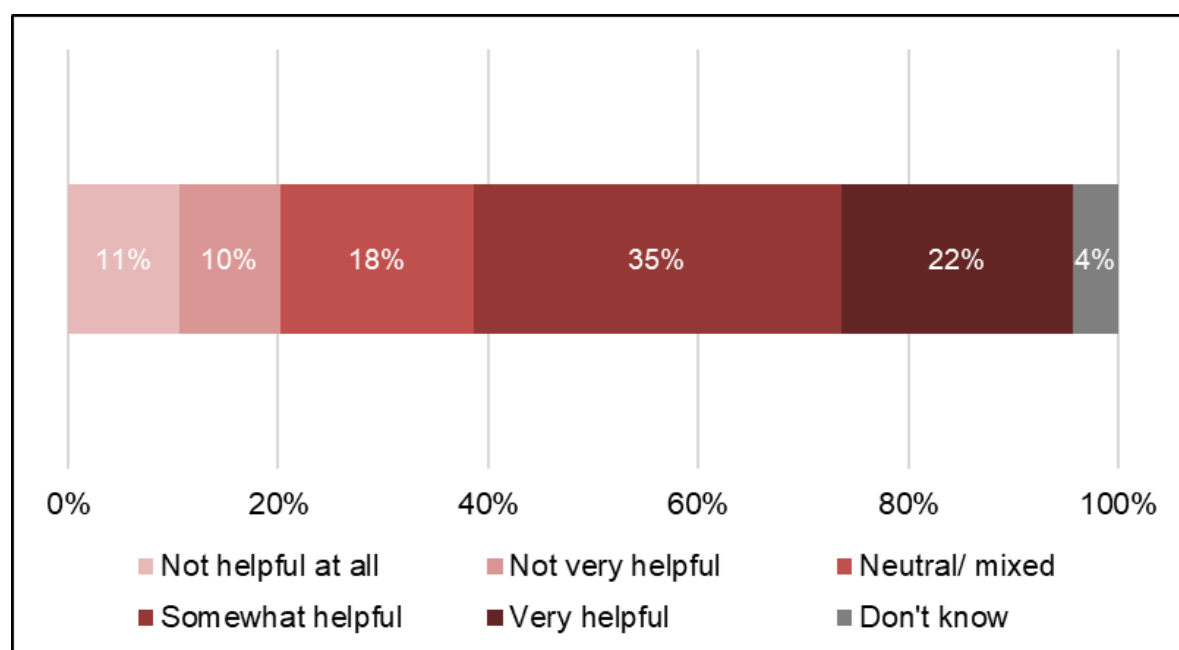
## Mental health and wellbeing

- 7.36 The learner survey indicated that more than half of learners (57 per cent, n=65) felt that support helped to improve their mental health and wellbeing and just 11 per cent (n=12) stated that support did not help at all (see Figure 7.7).
- 7.37 Regression analysis of data from the learner survey reinforced this finding and indicated that certain types of wellbeing and mental health support were particularly

<sup>50</sup> Survey Question: 'Did this support help you feel more confident in your studies?' The survey asked for responses on a scale from 1 (very unhelpful) to 10 (very helpful). Responses were grouped as follows: Not helpful at all = 1-2, Not very helpful = 3-4, Neutral/mixed = 5-6, Somewhat helpful = 7-8, Very helpful = 9-10.

effective in helping learners' wellbeing. The model showed that learners who had used counselling services were significantly more likely to report a positive impact on their wellbeing (this was equivalent to a 1.12 increase on the survey scale from 1=very helpful to 10=very unhelpful,  $p=0.05$ ). Whilst use of counselling services appeared to have the largest effect on learners' self-reported wellbeing, accessing wellbeing and mental health resources also showed a positive impact ( $\beta=0.89$ ,  $p=0.05$ ).

**Figure 7.7 Learner survey: Whether support helped learners with their mental health and wellbeing<sup>51</sup>**



*Base: n=114; Source: Learner survey*

7.38 The qualitative data from learner focus groups and interviews, also demonstrated the perceived positive effect of support on learners' wellbeing. For example, learners described the positive impact of wellbeing hubs set up across some of FE institutions.

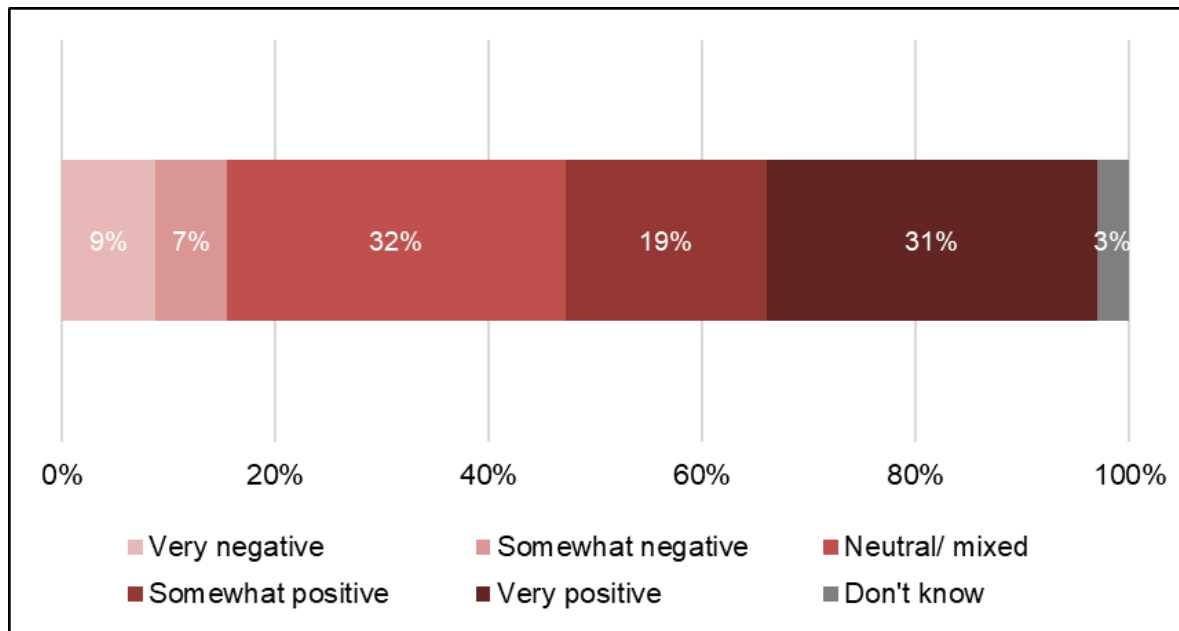
“Something that's helped me a lot is the 'wellbeing hub' which is basically a nice quiet area [...] where you can chill out. It's next to the safeguarding team's office so if you need to speak to anyone they're right there. The safeguarding team is absolutely wonderful as well. They hear you out on absolutely anything you need to talk about.” (Learner FG participant, FE)

<sup>51</sup> Survey Question: ‘Did the support provided by your institution help improve your wellbeing and/or mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic (that is between March 2020 and July 2022)?’ The survey asked for responses on a scale from 1 (very unhelpful) to 10 (very helpful). Responses were grouped as follows: Not helpful at all = 1-2, Not very helpful = 3-4, Neutral/mixed = 5-6, Somewhat helpful = 7-8, Very helpful = 9-10.

## Return to in-person teaching

- 7.39 Nearly a third of those responding to learner survey (31 per cent, n=112) reported that they felt 'very positive' and a further fifth (19 per cent, n=68) 'somewhat positive' about returning to in-person teaching. However, a considerable number of learners, around a third (32 percent, n=115), had mixed feelings about coming back to the classroom (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

**Figure 7.8 Learner survey: How learners felt about returning to in-person learning<sup>52</sup>**



*Base: n=362; Source: Learner survey*

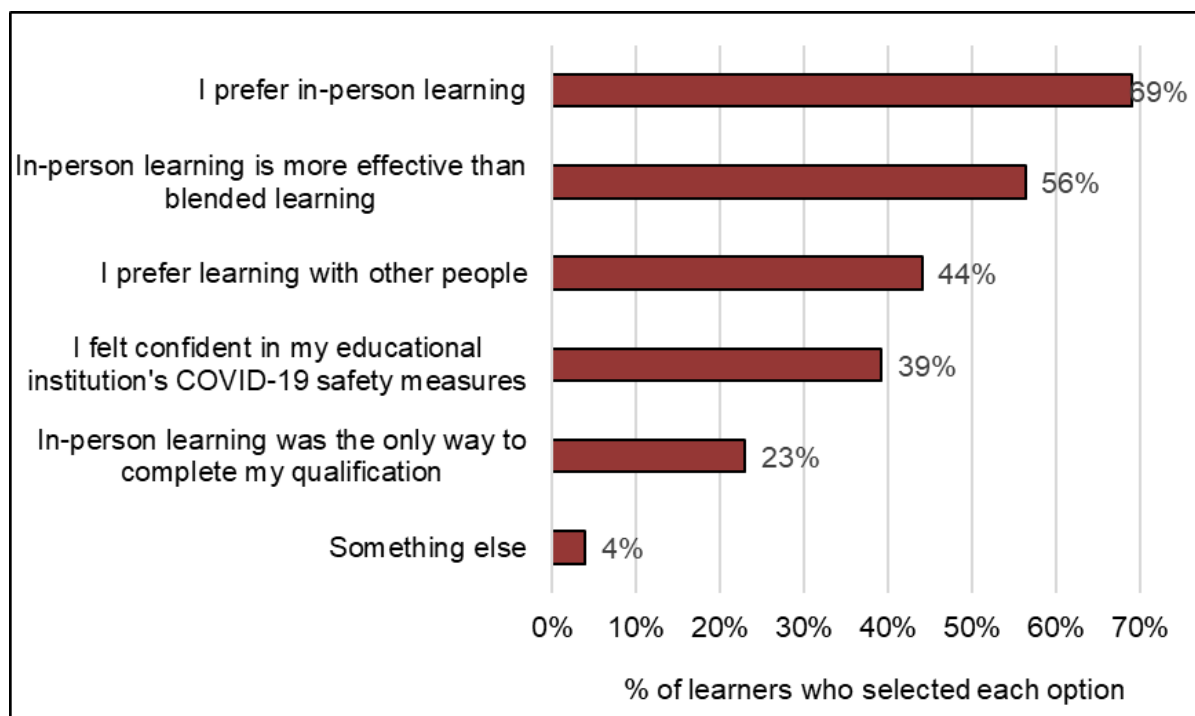
- 7.40 HE learners were particularly positive about returning to in-person learning, when compared to other parts of the post-16 sector, perhaps reflecting longer periods of blended learning over the pandemic period. Indeed, HE learners taking part in the focus groups and interviews explained that they felt frustrated about the continued reliance on online learning, when they had paid tuition fees for an in-person course. They emphasised that during the COVID-19 period they had not been able to experience a 'university life' which included in-person learning experiences, life on campus and socialising with peers.

<sup>52</sup> Survey Question: 'How did you feel about returning to in-person learning?' The survey asked for responses on a scale from 1 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). Responses were grouped as follows: Very negative = 1-2, Somewhat negative = 3-4, Neutral/ mixed = 5-6, Somewhat positive = 7-8, Very positive = 9-10.

“I couldn’t wait [to return to in-person learning] but was a bit nervous. I was fed up sitting in my house, like I’m paying to go to uni and I’m just sitting in my house on a laptop screen.” (Learner FG participant, HE)

7.41 When learners were asked why they felt positive about the return to in-person learning more than two-thirds (69 per cent, n=141) of respondents reported a preference for face-to-face delivery. Just over half of respondents (56 per cent, n=115) found in-person teaching more effective than blended/online learning, and 44 per cent (n=90) that they preferred learning with other people (see Figure 7.9). This social aspect of in-person teaching was highlighted during focus group discussions with learners, who placed considerable value on being able to learn with peers.

**Figure 7.9 Learner survey: Reasons learners felt positive about returning to in-person teaching<sup>53</sup>**



*Base: n=204; Source: Learner survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

7.42 Despite learners reporting the negative impact of the periods of lockdown on their mental health and wellbeing, a considerable number of learners were also worried about how coming back to in-person teaching might affect their wellbeing. When learners who had mixed or negative feelings about returning to in-person teaching

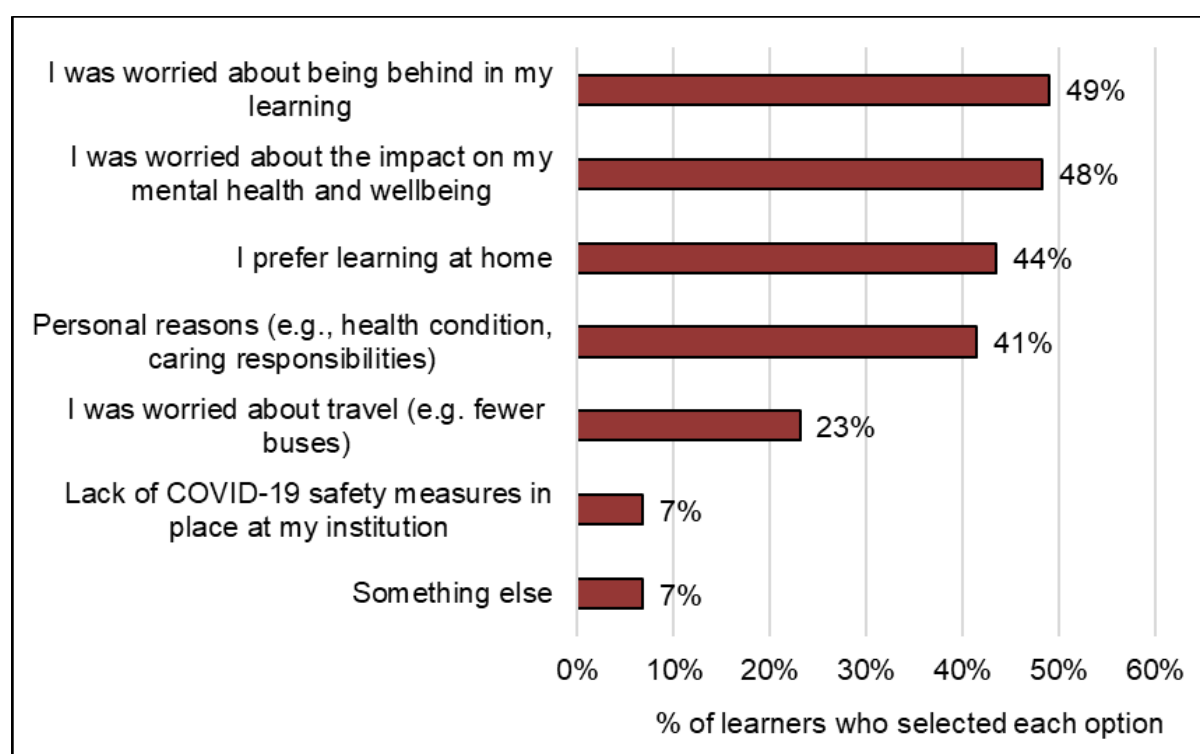
<sup>53</sup> Learners who selected 6 to 10 on a 1 to 10 scale when asked how they felt about returning to in-person teaching. The follow-up survey question asked: ‘Why did you feel this way?’



were asked for their reasons, the most commonly reported concerns were about being behind with learning (49 per cent, n=72), and mental health and wellbeing (48 per cent, n=71). A large minority of respondents (44 per cent, n=64) expressed a preference for home learning (see Figure 7.).

7.43 Learners who faced barriers to in-person learning such as those with caring responsibilities, learners with disabilities, or those living in rural areas expressed during focus groups and interviews a preference for remote or blended learning. These learners suggested education institutions should continue or even expand their remote learning offer to make learning more accessible.

**Figure 7.10 Learner survey: Reasons learners felt negative about returning to in-person learning<sup>54</sup>**



*Base: n=215, learners who felt who felt negative about returning to in-person teaching; Source: Learner survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

<sup>54</sup> Learners who selected 1 to 5 on a 1 to 10 scale when asked how they felt about returning to in-person teaching. The follow-up survey question asked: 'Why did you feel this way?'

## 8. Learning and sustainability of new practices

8.1 This chapter outlines key learning and the sustainability of new practices adopted during the pandemic, particularly in terms of planning and administering COVID-19 Recovery Funding. It also discusses the challenges faced by institutions and staff in using the funding as well as learners ongoing support needs.

### **Key learning from planning, set-up and implementation**

8.2 One of the most commonly reported successes of COVID-19 Recovery Funding approach was collaboration between the Welsh Government and between individual institutions. Institution leads reported that support from the Welsh Government created a strong collaborative approach from the beginning of the pandemic, with institutions encouraged to work collaboratively. This often took the form of sharing best practice around how to use the funding, and/or advice on which digital tools to use. Institution leads also highlighted the advantages of institutional collaboration for supporting student transitions. This led to a process of sharing learning across institutions that has continued beyond the pandemic.

“Most for us were in the realms of sharing of good practice and shared ideas. Those were the biggest benefits to us. We have had some involvement with schools. For example, one of our partner schools asked us to get involved with providing online learning for young people in their year 11 that would be coming to us.” (Setting lead, FE)

8.3 This strong collaborative approach allowed institutions to develop a good relationship with one another and with the Welsh Government. This empowered them to make decisions and ensured there were structures in place to help them to adapt and deal flexibly with future issues. Institution leads often discussed having one key contact within the Welsh Government they could get in touch with as needed for support, to answer queries or to clarify guidance. It was noted that there was less spending guidance to accompany the first tranche of funding than later in the pandemic. Senior stakeholders connected this to the need to distribute funding quickly in response to the crisis (see also 5.9).

8.4 Examples of lasting partnerships between institutions were regularly reported by staff and institution leads. These developed during the pandemic, and include partnerships between local FE colleges, between FE colleges and HEIs, and

between FE colleges and school sixth forms. In one such partnership, institution leads collated a best practice document to share with other colleges specifically focused on engaging employers and professionals to give online talks to learners during periods of lockdown.

- 8.5 Often, face-to-face termly meetings became virtual weekly or monthly meetings. These remote meetings continued beyond the pandemic and have served to firmly establish positive working relationships between institutions and with other organisations, such as teaching unions or county councils.

“We meet with the unions on a weekly basis. That whole...social partnership agenda has done wonders for our relationships with the unions because they weren't very good before and now, they are.” (Institution lead, FE)

- 8.6 Similarly, HE leads reported building stronger relationships with HEFCW, and school sixth form leads reported stronger collaboration between groups of local schools. For example, schools in mid-Wales met virtually once a week throughout the pandemic to share teaching and learning resources and best practice.

### **Challenges in planning and set-up**

- 8.7 Whilst setting leads recognised the need for swift, reactive funding in the face of such an unprecedented event as the pandemic, some felt it would have been beneficial if the Welsh Government also committed to longer-term funding. A longer-term funding commitment would offer financial security and allow settings to fully embed the new ways of working that COVID-19 Recovery Funding facilitated. Furthermore, whilst institution leads appreciated flexibility and autonomy in using funding from the Welsh Government, some felt they would have benefitted from more guidance and/or support regarding decision-making. Some reported that the funding was not set up in a way that facilitated a sustainable approach to the crisis and felt institutions could benefit from coming together to collaborate to tackle the longer-term outcomes of the pandemic.
- 8.8 Some FE, WBL and ALC setting leads reported concerns that not enough consideration had been given to employer engagement when funding was put in place. These institution leads called for Welsh Government support for better collaboration going forward, including incentives for employers to re-engage with education institutions.

8.9 For school sixth form leads, the implementation of funding specifically focused on post-16 learners helped to ensure school sixth forms received the financial attention they needed during the pandemic. Some now worried that removal of this funding would reverse some of the progress they had been able to make, particularly as schools continued to struggle with budgets.

### **Best practice**

8.10 When asked to consider examples of best practice, institution leads consistently commented on the networks, collaborations and partnerships that came out of the pandemic. As discussed above, institution leads saw collaboration with other setting leads as a key facilitator that enabled them to support their institutions well during the pandemic. A common theme was the establishment of partnerships between setting leads within the same setting type, where they established regular meetings to discuss how they were spending funding, resources used to support blended learning and other ideas and suggestions. For example, one college lead stated that their partnership with other local colleges was vital to implementing staff development ideas to help support their staff during the pandemic, whilst a HE lead highlighted how their more established communication with other university leaders gave them confidence in their ability to meet the challenges of a potential future crisis. Remote working made it much easier for setting leads to meet regularly and establish effective communication channels, which was key to the establishment of these partnerships. Some partnerships enabled learners across all the institutions involved to benefit from a shared pool of resources. For example, one college partnership shared a mental health and wellbeing network:

“We work very closely with one college, for example, on mental health and wellbeing, but particularly in the [region] of Wales, the five colleges in the [region] meet very regularly to basically share with one another [...] what we were using the funding for, so that's been invaluable then really in you know picking up ideas and likewise sharing ideas with colleagues, to ensure that we maximize this fund into the benefit of the learners.” (Institution lead, FE)

8.11 Furthermore, institution leads discussed the benefits of other networks and partnerships established with employers, unions and local councils, many of which they continued to benefit from. Colleges worked together with employers to secure guest speakers to deliver online talks across the college network. Some institutions

were able to partner with local job centres and some began partnerships with local volunteering agencies where they could direct learners on a more informal basis. Leads in HE and FE discussed establishing better partnerships with local schools which made transitions activities such as campus visits, where learners could meet teaching staff, much easier.

- 8.12 Stronger partnerships with local councils were also established as a result of the need for regular public health updates during the pandemic. These now facilitate things like collaborations with local job centres and other council services. One setting lead talked about a Covid Recovery Group that included representatives from the Welsh Government, their college and local trade unions as a good example of Social Partnership in action.
- 8.13 There was a strong consensus among institutional stakeholders that additional COVID-19 Recovery Funding enabled institutions to continue to deliver learning throughout the pandemic. Although setting leads did identify areas for improvement, they also fed back that the situation would have been untenable without the funding. Crucially, it enabled institutions to invest in their digital infrastructure in a way that ensured learning was still possible.
- 8.14 Not only was this funding essential to enable the continuation of learning online, in many cases it also accelerated plans for further digital provision. Institutions were able to invest in new digital platforms to offer easier access to learning for both staff and learners. Institutions/providers were also able to provide more learners with digital equipment, such as laptops and Wi-Fi dongles. This was particularly important for the ALC sector, where there had been less opportunity to invest in digital learning in the past. The funding also supported FE, HE, and schools to move forward any plans to enhance their digital provision under the Digital 2030 funding.

“If we didn’t have the funding it would have taken us 2-3 years to get to where we are in terms of digital.” (Institution lead, HEI)

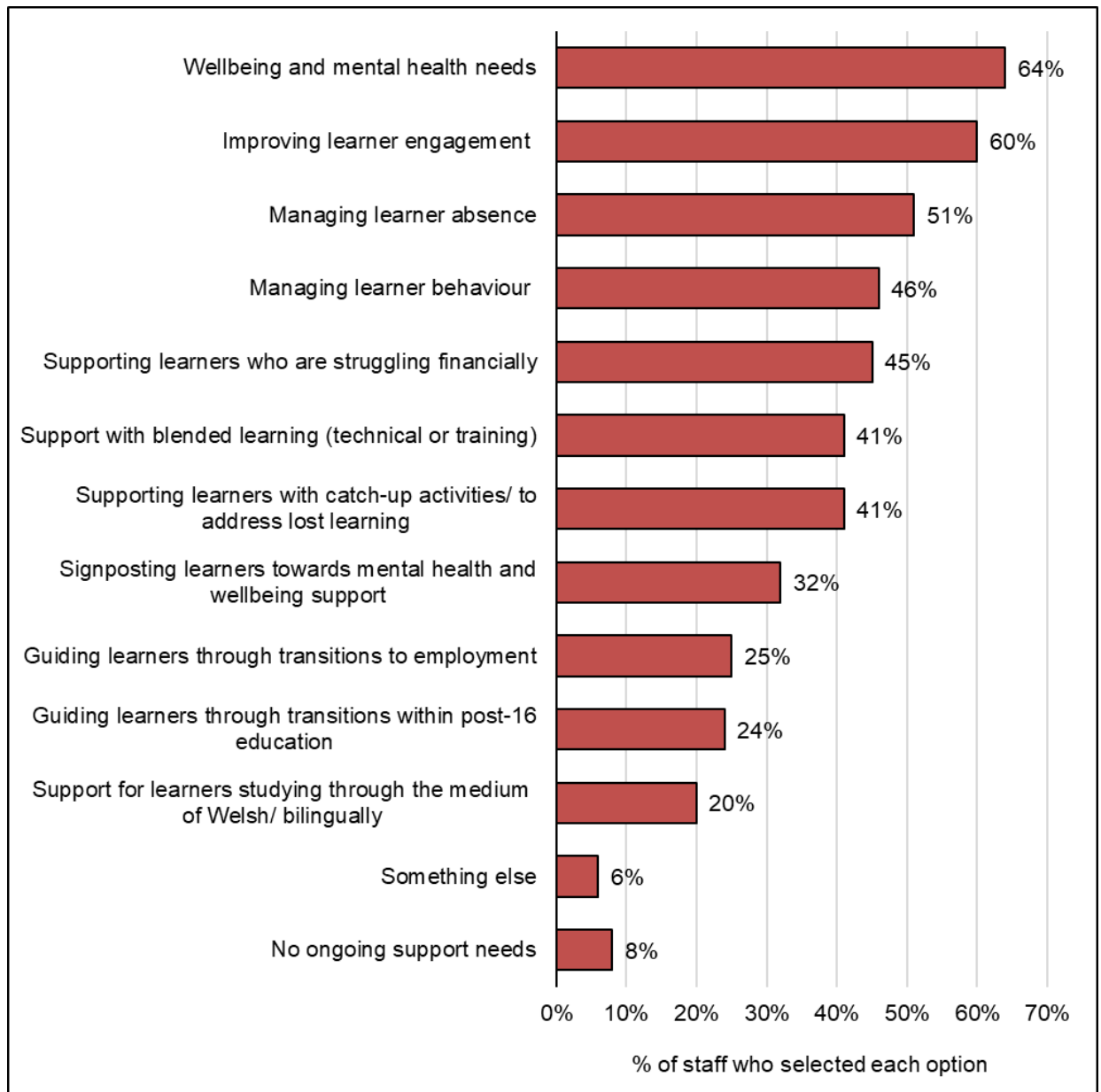
### **Addressing ongoing support needs**

- 8.15 The ongoing disruption to learning created by the pandemic continues to present a challenge to institutions. Funding provided during the pandemic and early in the recovery period allowed them to meet the additional costs of learner needs.

However, institution leads expressed concern that additional support needs will continue beyond the funding period, creating a needs gap.

- 8.16 Furthermore, some institution leads commented that services paid for using additional COVID-19 Recovery Funding came with ongoing costs. This includes additional mental health and wellbeing support staff and the additional costs of running and updating digital equipment and infrastructure. Likewise, staff highlighted the continued need for learning catch-up activities as learners move through the education system with gaps in their learning due to the pandemic. Institution leads in the ALC sector highlighted the need for continued funding to maintain the digital infrastructure put in place during the pandemic.
- 8.17 Concerns over learner behaviour and engagement were frequently raised in discussions with institution staff and leads. Staff reported ongoing concerns over learners' ability to concentrate and engage in class, poor resilience when offered constructive criticism and about behaviour in the classroom. All of these issues were particularly prevalent among younger learners, and therefore, in school sixth forms and FE.
- 8.18 Some staff also highlighted difficulties learners were experiencing in socialising with one another, which they felt exacerbated behavioural issues in the classroom. This resulted in staff having to spend more teaching time reinforcing behavioural expectations, and (re)building learners' study skills. This was seen as placing pressure on (already stretched) staff workloads.
- 8.19 Similarly, concerns about learner engagement (60 per cent, n=168), absence (51 per cent, n=142) and behaviour (46 per cent, n=128), were all commonly reported by staff responding to the survey. The need for more catch-up support was also commonly reported (41 per cent, n=114). However, the largest concern amongst respondents was supporting the ongoing wellbeing and mental health needs of staff (64 per cent, n=178).

**Figure 8.1 Staff survey: Ongoing support needs for staff<sup>55</sup>**



*Base: n=279; source: staff survey; respondents could select multiple options*

8.20 For focus group participants working in FE, ALC and WBL, a lack of engagement from employers represented an ongoing concern. Some felt that relationships between education providers and employers had suffered from the lockdowns and that there were fewer opportunities to connect learners with employers than there had been previously.

8.21 Additionally, institution leads across the sector expressed concerns over the ability to recruit new staff and learners into the sector moving forwards. Some felt that transitions funding had helped to mitigate challenges around the recruitment of

<sup>55</sup> Survey question: 'What do staff members at your institution still need support with?'

learners to the next stage of education during the pandemic, as it had helped institutions to move work online, and that a continuation of this funding would be beneficial to getting this back on track.

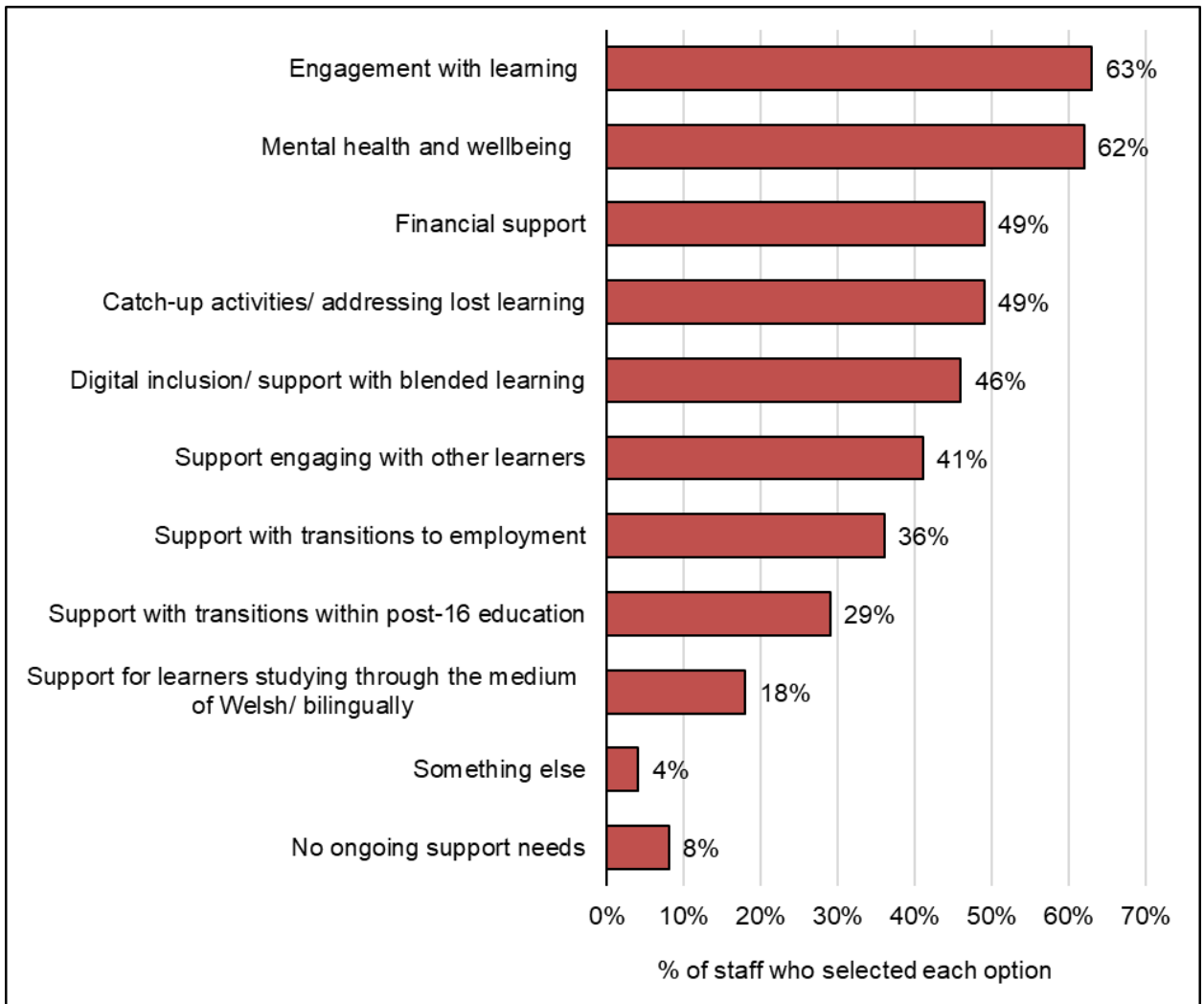
- 8.22 Staff perceptions of ongoing learner needs were focused on wellbeing and learner engagement. Focus group participants reported that learners' mental health was at an all-time low due to the social isolation brought about by periods of lockdown. Staff reported seeing a significant increase in the need for pastoral support and recognised that this was something they had needed to address with the return to in-person learning.

“What I'm seeing [...] is I'd say a huge wellbeing and health crisis in learners, especially sort of that 16 to kind of 19 bracket. I think they had so much stuff to put up with and so many hurdles to overcome. Things have been very challenging for them that we're beginning to see that now and how it's manifesting itself is a severe lack of confidence and severe levels of anxiety.”  
(Staff interviewee, FE)

- 8.23 Findings from the staff survey reflected this finding, with learner mental health and wellbeing reported by nearly two-thirds of respondents (62 per cent).



**Figure 8.2 Staff survey: Ongoing support needs for learners<sup>56</sup>**



*Base: n=279; source: staff survey; respondents could select multiple options*

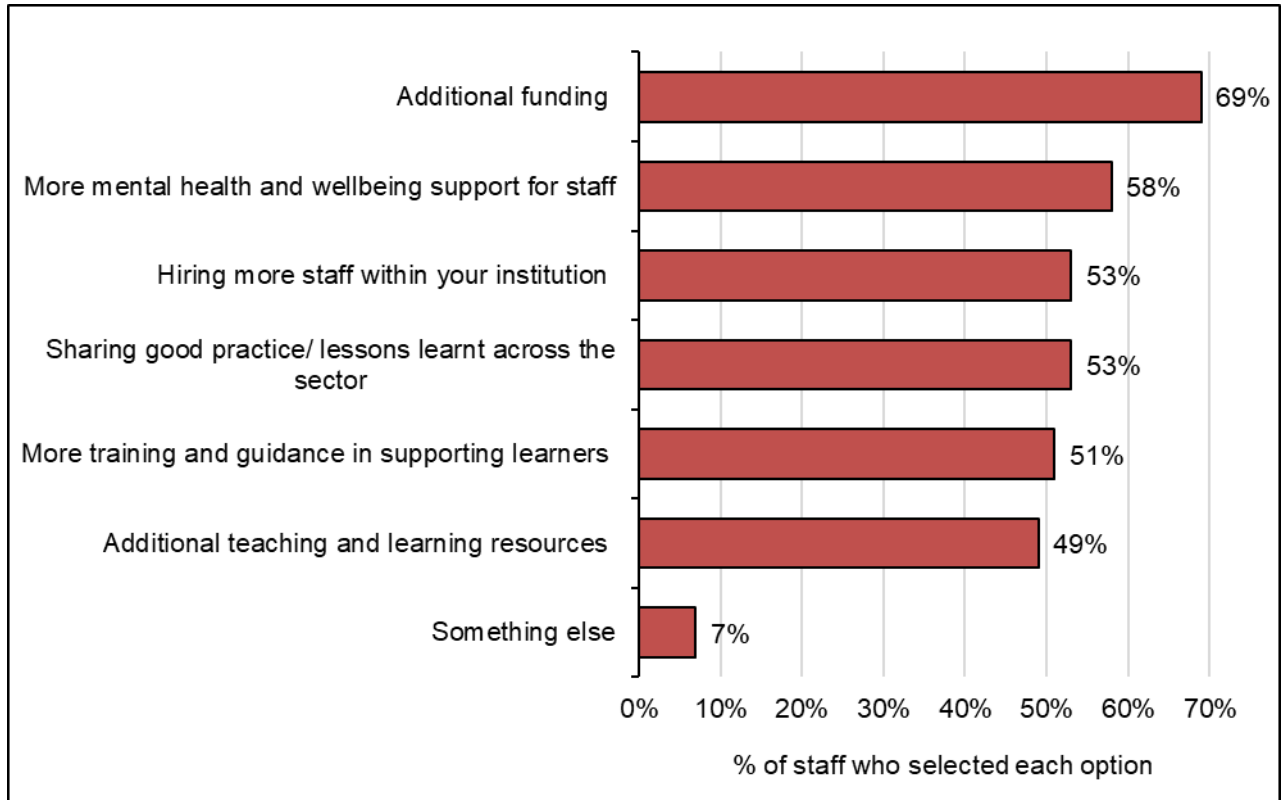
- 8.24 Focus group participants highlighted the need for continued catch-up support for learners due to gaps in study skills, writing skills and learner confidence following the last 2-3 years of disrupted learning. This was further supported by findings from the staff survey where nearly two-thirds of respondents selected 'engaging with learning' (63 per cent, n=176) and almost half 'catch-up with lost learning' (49 per cent, n=137).
- 8.25 The staff survey also highlighted the need for financial support for learners (49 per cent, n=136). This was mentioned in both staff focus groups and setting lead interviews as they highlighted the emerging significance of the cost-of-living crisis and the need to redirect resources to support learners.

<sup>56</sup> Survey question: 'What do learners at your institution still need support with?'

## How to meet ongoing needs

- 8.26 Discussions with staff also explored what needed to happen to address ongoing needs. Overall, institutions agreed that sustaining the same level of support, mainly across catch-up learning and the wellbeing/mental health offer, would be extremely challenging without additional funding. Interviews with institution leads, and discussions with staff, stressed the importance of continued financial support and of sharing best practice. These views were reflected in the staff survey, where more than two-thirds of staff selected 'continued funding' (69 per cent, n=177) and more than half identified 'sharing good practice/ lessons learnt across the sector' (53 per cent, n=136) as ways of addressing ongoing needs. This was also mentioned in conjunction with support needs resulting from the emerging cost-of-living crisis, which staff felt could impact retention rates as financial difficulties put pressure on learners to leave education for paid work.
- 8.27 Staff taking part in focus groups stressed the need to offer ongoing opportunities for catch-up learning. Again, this finding was reinforced by the staff survey, where 49 per cent (n=125) recognised the need for additional teaching and learning resources to support ongoing needs.
- “Post-COVID I think one of the challenges for a lot of our students is that return to face-to-face... We're seeing learners that need that additional support to fill in gaps of either knowledge or skills.” (Staff interviewee, FE)
- 8.28 For some staff, these additional catch-up needs went hand-in-hand with the provision of further transition support. This was a particularly pressing need for learners struggling with learning gaps resulting from the pandemic, and keen to move into further education.

**Figure 8.3 Staff survey: How staff felt ongoing staff needs could be addressed<sup>57</sup>**



*Base: n=255; Source: Staff survey; Respondents could select multiple options*

<sup>57</sup> Survey question: 'How do you think ongoing staff needs could be addressed?'

## 9. Outcomes and perceived effectiveness

9.1 The following section begins by exploring the ways in which institutions monitored the outcomes and effectiveness of funding. It includes institutional perspectives of improving methods for monitoring and measuring outcomes in the future. It then considers views on the perceived effectiveness of different funding streams and differences across the learner population. The section draws on findings from interviews with institution leads, discussions with staff and learners and data from the staff survey.

### Information gathering and outcomes monitoring

9.2 Institutions typically monitored the same (basic) numeric indicators as before the pandemic, recognising that they had a certain level of flexibility in terms of the requirements of COVID-19 Recovery Funding. Metrics highlighted in interviews with institution leads and staff focus groups included:

- **Retention:** numbers (remaining) on each course
- **Completion:** numbers completing each course
- **Attainment:** learners' academic outcomes/ qualifications obtained, and
- **Drop-out:** numbers leaving each course.

9.3 One HE lead reported that HEFCW funding requirements included monitoring metrics for recruitment, retention, completion and employability of graduates. In addition, HE stakeholders monitored student satisfaction and destination data, noting that national surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) allowed for benchmarking with other institutions.

9.4 Likewise, some FE, WBL and ALC institutions had taken part in Jisc's Digital Experience Insights Survey to explore how their learners and staff were using technology.<sup>58</sup> They were able to compare their results with institutions in the same part of the post-16 sector.

9.5 Flexibility afforded in terms of monitoring outcomes, meant that institutions did not need to undertake additional, resource-intensive data collection efforts. One FE and one WBL lead noted that no additional monitoring had taken place to explore the impact of funding. However, one FE lead reported using COVID-19 Recovery

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<sup>58</sup> Jisc (2022) Digital Experience Insights Survey, accessed at: <https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/digital-experience-insights-wales-post-16-providers/>

Funding to extend an existing learner activity tracker to include student engagement with interventions.

- 9.6 Despite reports from some parts of the post-16 sector that little additional outcomes monitoring had taken place, there were efforts from some institution types to capture information connected to specific funding streams (which in some cases was a condition of funding). For example, FE and WBL stakeholders reported monitoring numbers accessing/using digital devices through applications and servicing, which allowed them to assess how many learners were continuing their studies as a result of the funding.
- 9.7 There was recognition from interviewees across the sector (and noted explicitly by WBL and FE), that monitoring outcomes and effectiveness was considerably more challenging in some areas, for example, wellbeing and mental health, than in others. Likewise, they acknowledged that it was more straightforward to connect the use of funding with positive learning outcomes in aspects, such as digital support and retention, than in others.

“I think the digital exclusion stuff is simpler to measure because you can literally say how many learners are accessing that. Without that access, would they have stayed on the programme or still engaged [during] the pandemic? Probably not.”  
(Institution lead, WBL)

- 9.8 Interviewees noted the core monitoring data goes through the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR)<sup>59</sup> and that data is analysed by key demographic variables, such as age, gender and ethnic group. This means that most institutions have been able to see how different groups of learners are doing on a small number of indicators.
- 9.9 Whilst separate data collection systems are in place for schools, part of the monitoring process adopted by school sixth forms included comparison of key data over time, and by the same demographic variables, as well as household deprivation level. However, it was noted by another school sixth form lead, and echoed by FE staff, that changes in assessment methods necessitated by COVID-19 complicated, and likely invalidated, longitudinal comparisons of attainment data.

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<sup>59</sup> Data on learners in post-16 education and training, excluding those at schools and HE institutions, but including those at FE Institutions, other Work-based Learning providers and Community Learning provision collected via the Welsh Government’s Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR).

“I’m not sure whether we could then go and compare this current cohort to the COVID cohort. I think it would be an unfair comparison because of the distinct change in the assessment methodology for those students.” (Staff interviewee, FE)

- 9.10 Some school sixth form and ALC leads referred to learners setting their own goals and self-monitoring their performance. Institutions supported this self-assessment process, ensuring goals were realistic and that learners were helped to work towards them.

### **Gathering feedback from staff and learners**

- 9.11 Interviews with sector stakeholders stressed the necessary speed of response which limited opportunities to consult with staff and/or learners in the early stages of the pandemic. Instead, stakeholders made use of high-level networks, for distribution and use of funding (see 4.6).
- 9.12 Opportunities for consultation opened as the initial disruption of the pandemic eased. FE leads referenced consultation (often online surveys) with learners, and sometimes with staff, for example, one college ran a survey with staff every 6 weeks. The frequency of surveys with both staff and learners was reported to have increased since the early stages of the pandemic.
- 9.13 Stakeholders in ALC and WBL referenced annual surveys. In one case the survey of work-based learners had been running for several years, including before the pandemic, and achieved an extremely strong response rate. Examples of the type of learner consultation (in FE) included: digital awareness and skills, opinions of online (versus face-to-face) learning, experiences and opinions of materials to support transitions, such as videos on college websites. Examples of staff consultation included (staff) wellbeing and ongoing support needs. One ALC provider conducted an annual survey with their learners but felt this did not provide the personal accounts they needed to evidence success.
- 9.14 One school sixth form lead noted that part of the monitoring process involved gathering feedback from learners, however, focus groups with students suggested this may not have been a widespread practice. Indeed, the small number of learners consulted as part of the evaluation suggested that they had not felt listened to whilst in a school setting.

- 9.15 Interviews indicated that HE and FE institutions were increasingly moving towards 'real time' feedback systems, such as 'TellUsNow'.<sup>60</sup> This gave them greater insights into the issues that affected learners and staff and allowed them to manage that feedback in a dynamic way. These systems were not explicitly connected to COVID-19 Recovery Funding, rather part of a wider effort to improve learner (and staff) voice.
- 9.16 Some institution leads referred to conducting case studies with learners. In one example, an ALC provider conducted case studies with all those who had received digital equipment paid for using additional COVID-19 Recovery Funding. Other ALC providers referred to anecdotal evidence from staff, for example, they had been told that staff had improved their digital skills and confidence in delivering lessons online.
- 9.17 FE leads referenced 'exit' interviews for those transitioning out of the setting, as a way of gathering personal (qualitative) accounts of learners next steps. An ALC provider also referred to exit feedback forms, coupled with learner self-assessment. These methods provided retrospective feedback and a real time snapshot of outcomes at point of transition.
- 9.18 There was also a targeted effort by some education providers to connect with more vulnerable learners. For example, one FE lead talked about weekly calls with those with ALN and young carers to ensure their needs were being met. Moreover, staff from FE highlighted the value of end of the day catch-ups with learners for understanding the value of support on offer in real time:

"We looked at what we did each day with our end of day catch ups to see what impact that was having, how many learners were attending and had it made a difference to those individual learners." (Staff interviewee, FE)

### **Reflections on monitoring and measurement**

- 9.19 Most stakeholders appreciated the speed of the COVID-19 response but stressed that in the future the most important thing would be for clarity about the monitoring requirements at the outset. There was an appreciation that no one was aware of the

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<sup>60</sup> TellUsNow is a feedback management platform which allows organisations to collect, collate and analyse feedback see <https://tell-us-now.com/>

full significance of COVID-19 in the early days of the pandemic, and therefore the importance of monitoring outcomes.

“We never set out to really measure what we were trying to achieve because we didn’t really know what we were dealing with.” (Institution lead, FE)

9.20 Institution leads from across the sector noted that measuring outcomes and effectiveness could be very challenging, and (as above) more difficult in some areas/funding streams than in others. Some had made efforts to improve systems, for example one WBL lead noted that they had changed the point at which they were capturing outcomes data, from 3 months post course completion to during the transition. This made data collection easier and led to a more complete transitions dataset. Likewise, FE staff highlighted efforts the institution had made to improve the accuracy and accessibility of learner outcome data by investing in a new software package.

9.21 One HE stakeholder noted that staff capacity did not allow for comprehensive and robust evaluation, but usual practice included basic monitoring of use and outcomes. For example, the institution collected self-reported data on whether hardship funding influenced the student’s decision to stay at university.

9.22 Other HE stakeholders echoed the message about limitations in terms of capacity, and an absence of comparable/baseline data, regretting lost opportunities to monitor longer-term outcomes for those supported by additional funding (e.g., transitions into work resulting from the Graduate Support Fund).

“One thing we’ll never know is the community impact, the knock-on of multiplier effect of benefits... for the [institution] in particular that’s quite a marked difference in impact from this funding that we’ll never truly know.” (Institution lead, HE).

9.23 One lead stressed the importance of timing for measuring impact: Not too soon to be able to demonstrate change, or too late to gather data and for it to be meaningful. The optimal time might differ depending on the type of support being offered, for example (and as discussed above), providing digital resources might lead to an immediate improvement in retention, whilst wellbeing support might take longer to demonstrate real change.



9.24 Institution leads also stressed the importance of ensuring that monitoring forms were comprehensive yet manageable, were shared in a timely manner and had clear completion instructions. Moreover, the importance of recognising that smaller institutions have less capacity to invest in monitoring and analysis.

### **The extent to which funding met staff and learner needs**

9.25 Institution leads from across the sector were extremely positive about the funding and what it facilitated, specifically to continue teaching and learning and start to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic.

“The funding that we had in those specific pots definitely achieved its aims.”  
(Institution lead, ALC)

9.26 Stakeholders in ALC noted that learning would have stopped without the funding, and FE leads reported that without the funding there would have been fewer learners completing courses/achieving qualifications and therefore not able to move into HE or work. One FE lead commented:

"We would have really struggled [without the funding]. We would have struggled to deliver online; we didn't have the necessary skills or equipment to do that... We wouldn't have been able to adapt our environment and deliver a safe environment for those learners to complete their courses for 2020/2021... We would have seen learner outcomes decrease and morale amongst staff and amongst our communities, as they would have had less confidence in what we were doing." (Institution lead, FE).

9.27 This was echoed by WBL and ALC providers, who felt the funding allowed them to stop learners disengaging. Likewise, HE stakeholders commented on the generosity of funding and how that had allowed institutions to start to tackle issues with learner engagement, although recognised that this was a notable challenge, and one they had not been able to overcome completely. One HE lead noted that whilst it was difficult to talk about the causality “financial support at the right moment can make a difference.” (Institution lead, HE)

9.28 These sentiments were reflected in other parts of the sector with institution leads reporting that the level of funding was “spot on” (institution lead, FE) and that the institution was “able to do everything that we thought was a good idea through one of the funding pots” (Institution lead, school sixth form).

9.29 In contrast, and less prevalent, were views that the funding did not go far enough. For example, one WBL lead felt that the funding had not been adequate to allow them to support all their learners and providers, meaning that they had to prioritise particular groups of learners. This was especially true in the early stages of the pandemic (i.e., Round 1 funding), where they felt WBL got somewhat lost within activities to support other parts of the sector. Likewise, one school sixth form lead felt that decision-making about how to use funding was tempered by an awareness of cost, and a need to avoid overspend. In this instance decision-making was also complicated by an initial misinterpretation about how much funding the institution was going to receive.

“I think the thing was that at the beginning, when we thought we were having so much money and then quite quickly we realised it wasn't going to be quite as much. You started then to only find things that you knew you could afford.”  
(Institution lead, school sixth form)

9.30 However, this was often simply a recognition that with more funding institutions would have been able to improve the reach of support.

“If there was more money available, we would have been able to spend it and provide better support for our learners and our staff. But at the same time, I think we did very well with what we had.” (Institution lead, FE)

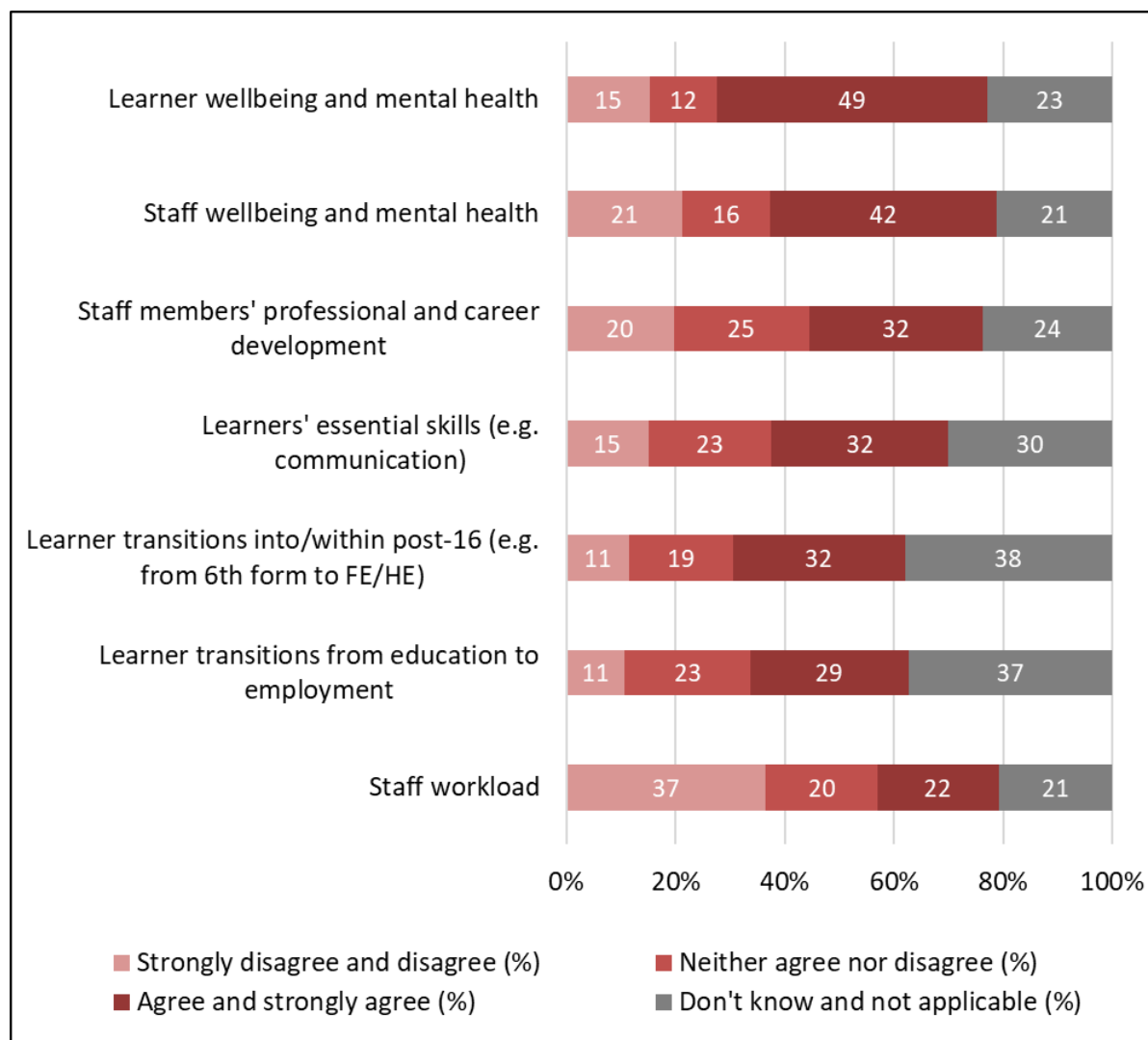
9.31 Other less positive comments focused on the timeliness of funding, for example, FE and WBL leads noted that the funding (in this case digital funding) came too late to be as helpful as it could have been. And that COVID-19 meant that institutions were simply not able to connect with some learners during lockdown to support them.

9.32 Additionally, it was noted that institutional staff played an important role in ensuring that learners' needs were met, irrespective of COVID-19 Recovery Funding. This meant an ongoing reliance on “goodwill” and “collective spirit” from staff, which had taken a toll on wellbeing. One school sixth form lead commented:

“We were minimizing their lost learning but that didn't come about because there was extra money around. It became about because morally as a collective workforce here, we felt that was the right thing to do.” (Institution lead, school sixth form)

9.33 The positive feedback gathered from interviews with setting leads was less evident in findings from the staff survey as well as feedback from learners. When asked in the staff survey whether COVID-19 Recovery Funding had mitigated the effects of the pandemic across several key areas, responses were mixed. Whilst nearly half of those responding to the staff survey (n=138) agreed or strongly agreed that the funding had mitigated the negative impacts of the pandemic on learner wellbeing and mental health, less than a quarter (n=62) felt positively towards the effect of funding on staff workload. Notable proportions of staff selected ‘don’t know’ or ‘not applicable’ responses reflecting limited awareness of how funding was used (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

**Figure 9.1 Staff survey: Whether COVID-19 funding mitigated the negative impacts of the pandemic<sup>61</sup>**



*Base: n=279; source: staff survey.*

<sup>61</sup> Survey question: ‘To what extent do you agree COVID-19 recovery funding helped to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on the following?’

### **Extent to which funding met objectives**

- 9.34 Stakeholders struggled to comment on the effectiveness of COVID-19 Recovery Funding against objectives, as these were not always explicit, and awareness was generally low among interviewees.
- 9.35 However, institution leads and staff were typically able to reflect on the effectiveness of funding across specific streams/broad areas, for example, mental health and wellbeing or digital, although, as discussed above, it was easier to comment on effectiveness in some areas than others.

### **Effectiveness: digital access and inclusion**

- 9.36 Indeed, funding for digital access and inclusion is one area where there was clear evidence of progress against objectives. There was a consensus from across the sector that digital funding had been effectively used to support learners and staff, allowing learning to continue. For example, one ALC lead was clear that “digital inclusion goals were definitely achieved” (Institution lead, ALC). A sentiment that was echoed in FE and WBL, where one lead commented that the move to blended learning had been a very significant positive change. Likewise, institution leads (most notably in HE) highlighted the speed of digital development enabled by COVID-19 funding. They saw this as a significant positive investment for the future of blended learning (see 8.14).

### **Effectiveness: mental health and wellbeing**

- 9.37 Other funding priority areas, like mental health and wellbeing, were more difficult to assess. Institution leads from across the sector were able to offer examples of the kinds of expanded support paid for using COVID-19 Recovery Funding. One FE lead commented that the demand for mental health and wellbeing services had expanded considerably since the pandemic and remained an ongoing challenge.

“The numbers of people presenting with mental health issues are increasing exponentially. [...] It's our biggest challenge, mental health and behaviour.”  
(Institution lead, FE)

- 9.38 Whilst it was clear that the funding had enabled the expansion of wellbeing and mental health support services across the sector, institution leads stressed the importance of continued commitment to this type of support.

9.39 One school sixth form perceived impacts from expanded wellbeing services, specifically between services established at their institution for post-16 mental health support (extending services available to Year 11 learners) and learner retention. The lead also commented that this had indirectly benefited staff by reducing their need to provide pastoral care.

“[Funded provision] created a space within the school in the sixth form where we could have discreet and confidential conversations with learners... it allowed the teachers... to focus more on the academics and less on crisis management... and focus on getting the learning back up to speed.” (Institution lead, school sixth form)

9.40 Staff support and wellbeing was also an area where positive impacts were tempered by ongoing concerns around sustainability. For example, one FE lead felt that their institution had invested significantly in staff development and CPD (Continuing Professional Development), equipping staff to deliver in a digital environment. However, they also highlighted issues with retention and recruitment, particularly for lower grades, indicating that low pay was part of the issue.

#### **Effectiveness: learner catch-up**

9.41 Learner catch-up was a greater priority for some parts of the sector than others. For example, WBL (and ALC) primarily used funding to purchase equipment and deliver mental health and wellbeing services rather than catch-up.

9.42 Institution leads from across FE commented on the difficulties they faced using funding for learner catch-up. This was primarily an issue with staffing, and difficulties recruiting new/additional staff. In most cases, FE institutions were able to at least partially resource catch-up activities by remunerating existing staff but noted that catch-up continues to be a priority and a challenge.

9.43 One school sixth form lead commented on the value of one-to-one and small group tuition sessions for catch-up learning, highlighting the importance of being able to run sessions outside of the school day and to remunerate teachers. The institution also found online materials developed with support from COVID-19 Recovery Funding a worthwhile investment, and a resource its learners continued to access. Investments were reflected in positive feedback from learners and in results. Whilst other institutions had used a similar model (e.g., offering extra sessions to learners), it was noted that this had taken a toll on staff wellbeing.

9.44 Institution leads noted that changes to assessments necessitated by the pandemic had created specific issues for learners. This included a lack of practical exam experience, a particular problem for learners moving to qualifications with exam-based assessments (such as A levels). Some institutions sought to address this gap, introducing training for students on exam techniques and reported finding it valuable.

“A lot of young people wouldn't have been able to get the qualifications they needed to get to university... and I think you would have had an even bigger issue of young people coming through that weren't job ready, which I think we've been able to mitigate quite well.” (Institution lead, FE)

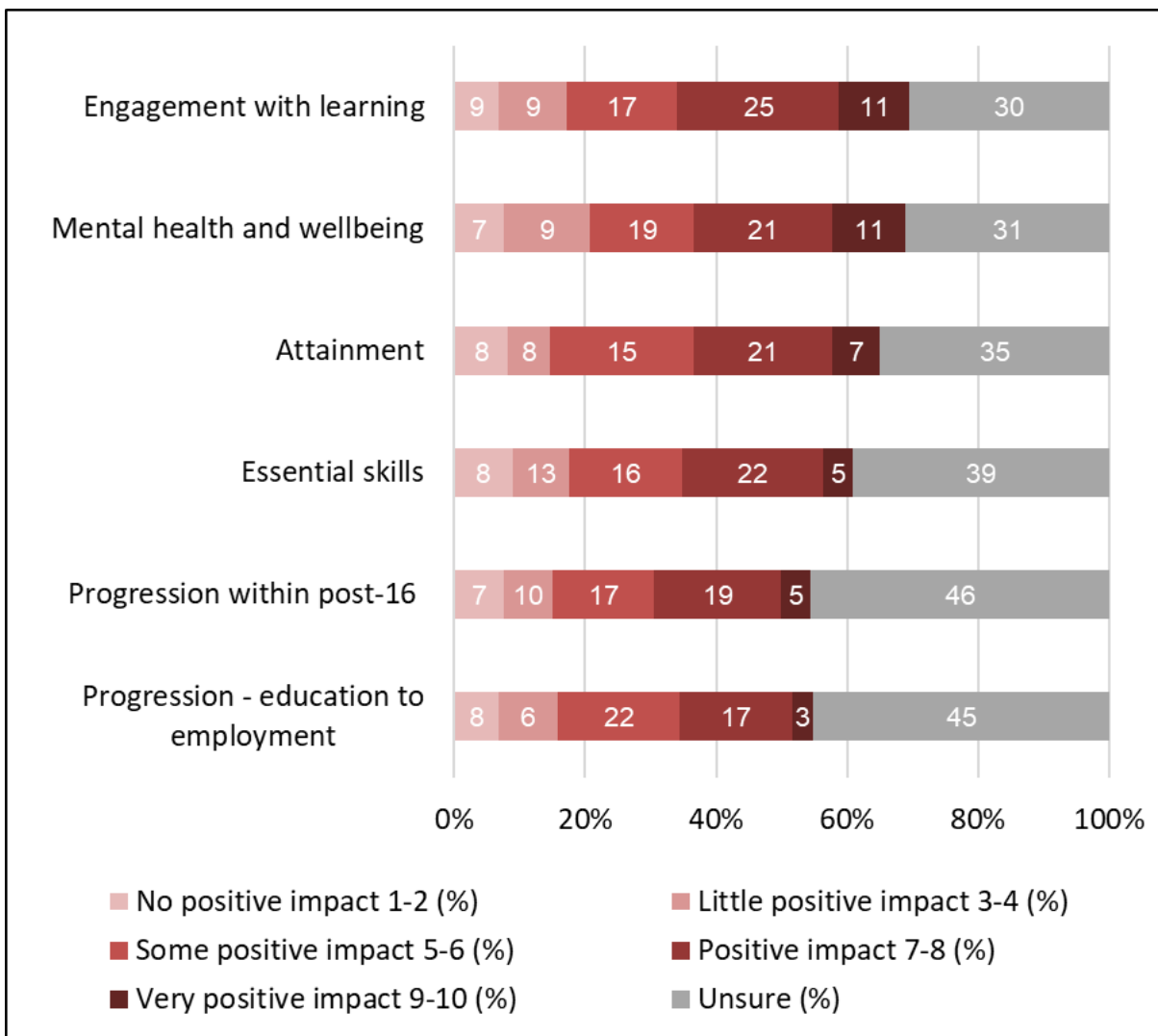
### **Effectiveness: learner transitions**

9.45 Transitions was another area with more mixed feedback in terms of effectiveness. Institution leads were generally positive about what they had been able to do with COVID-19 funding, offering examples of best practice, such as mentoring and online resources (including open days) for applicants, and noting that changes had been adopted into business as usual. In contrast, learners' views tended to be less positive. While they appreciated the need to move resources, such as careers support, campus tours and open days online during periods of lockdown, learners who used this type of support did not feel it fully addressed their needs.

9.46 Some institution leads felt that learning gaps, coupled with changes in assessment methods, had left a cohort of learners in a weaker position at the point of transition. One HE lead reported that learning gaps were more pronounced in some areas, such as lab-based STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), than in others. This was something institutions continued to manage but noted that the situation would have been worse without COVID-19 Recovery Funding.

9.47 Differences are reflected in findings from the staff survey. These differences are evident despite the very large numbers of staff selecting the 'unsure' response option, where proportions ranged from 30 per cent ('engagement with learning') to 46 per cent ('progression from education to employment'). Staff reported the strongest positive impacts for 'engagement with learning' and learners' 'mental health and wellbeing' and the smallest for learner transitions/progression, particularly to employment.

**Figure 9.2 Staff survey: The impact of COVID-19 funding for learners<sup>62</sup>**



*Base: n=279; source: staff survey.*

### Differences in impacts and effectiveness

9.48 Interviews with institution leads indicated differences in impact and effectiveness across the post-16 sector. Vocational courses with a practical curriculum proved challenging to move online. Even with innovative approaches such as inviting industry speakers to deliver online events, it proved difficult to keep vocational learners engaged. This was a particular problem in the construction and health and social care sectors. Another institution lead noted that vocational learners were the first group to return to in-person learning, but that it proved challenging to mitigate gaps in learning. This was reflected in discussions with learners and staff, who highlighted a gap in learning activities for art and design students.

<sup>62</sup> Survey question: 'To what extent did the funding have a positive impact on the following outcomes for learners?'

9.49 Moreover, early gaps in financial support for vocational/WBL providers meant that it was necessary to target funding on those most in need but leaving gaps in support amongst the wider body of learners. One WBL lead reported that younger learners (aged 16-24) were completing their assignments on mobile phones, indicating that this was a digital learning need they were unable to address. In contrast, more mature learners were seen to need greater support with digital skills. This seemed to be a particular issue among ALC learners, who also struggled with digital access.

9.50 Moreover, one ALC stakeholder commented that more vulnerable learners had needed to be supported with their wellbeing before they were able to progress with learning. This often meant reaching out on an individual basis.

“For the more vulnerable learners we have, it changed to more wellbeing support rather than learning, and that's what we had to move to because they just weren't in a place to learn... There's no point trying to get a learner on a course because all we were doing was adding stress to their lives and that's the last thing they needed.” (Institution lead, ALC)

9.51 HE institutions were also able to provide financial support for individual learners in the form of hardship payments, which they saw as providing invaluable economic support. One institution used the hardship application process as a platform to provide students with mental health support (recognising the negative impact of financial hardship on wellbeing). Although HE institutions were unable to directly connect hardship payments to learner retention, they recognised the importance of being able to offer this (and other forms of support) to their students.

“19,000 students received additional cash. Would we have lost those learners? It's difficult to know, but I would suspect so. I think just being able to say to students 'we're here for you'.” (Institution lead, HE)

9.52 One FE lead reported that some of the transition funding was used to support learners with underlying health conditions and extend some periods of their study and support transitions:

“Looking at the transition side of things for learners that [...] would have originally come to the end of their program, but because of restrictions and [...] some quite serious levels of underlying health conditions, worked with us then to extend some of the periods of study [...] and we could use some of that funding creatively to support an extended transition out process.” (Institution lead, FE)



- 9.53 There was some evidence of geographical differences in the use and effectiveness of funding. As one ALC lead noted:
- “Every local authority's different... you can't just have 'here's your pot of money, here you go' and it's fixed, because every area needs to do their own thing for their own learners, their own communities.” (Institution lead, ALC)
- 9.54 Thus, institutions and providers faced different challenges depending on the local area. For example, more rural local authorities/institutions serving rural communities noted the logistical challenge of distributing digital equipment to learners. Reports from learners taking part in focus groups highlighted the issues they had faced with transport, which was scaled back during the pandemic, and in some cases had not gone back to a ‘full’ service and with connectivity, specifically a poor/unreliable internet service, in rural areas.
- 9.55 Whilst support for Welsh medium learners was not discussed at length in stakeholder interviews and focus groups (despite prompting), some institutions had offered targeted support to its learners. One FE institution continued to support learners through their “Welsh language champions”, and one HE institution made sure that counselling services were available in languages other than English. School sixth form leads noted particular issues in terms of recruiting Welsh language providers/staff, with demand outstripping supply and making it difficult to use COVID-19 funding effectively. Where institutions had successfully moved learning through the medium of Welsh online (creating a blended learning resource), they were keen to maintain it.

### **Unintended or unexpected consequences**

- 9.56 There was some difficulty from stakeholders in identifying unintended or unexpected outcomes of COVID-19 Recovery Funding, as well as disentangling this from the wider impacts of the pandemic. For example, one interviewee commented that the pandemic had created a greater awareness of the accessibility of buildings (brought into focus when trying to manage maintaining physical distance within institutions). However, they recognised that this was not directly connected to funding.
- 9.57 Likewise, there were several unanticipated outcomes resulting from the expansion in blended learning, triggered by the pandemic, but facilitated by COVID-19 Recovery Funding. For example, it was noted from interviewees across the post-16 sector that wider opportunities for blended learning had advantages for staff and for

learners. Being able to work or learn from home was seen as being particularly advantageous for those who struggled with travel as a result of disability and/or had caring responsibilities. Similarly, notable improvements in digital skills among ALC learners, had impacted on attainment rates in digital/IT courses.

“We are achieving something like a 90 per cent success rate on our ICDL (International Computer Driving Licence)<sup>63</sup> courses, etc. which I would never have predicted before we had that funding.” (Institution lead, ALC)

9.58 Less positively, institution leads from FE and ALC commented that they had seen a higher level of staff turnover since the pandemic and the move to blended learning, particularly through retirement. Although this created disruption for institutions as well as staffing issues, and tended to be seen a negative change, one ALC lead presented it as a positive in the longer-term because it created a more resilient workforce:

“They want to be there, have upskilled themselves in digital teaching and are more resilient to change.” (Institution lead, ALC)

### **Sustaining positive outcomes**

9.59 Investments made using COVID-19 Recovery Funding were expected to lead to longer-term impacts, for example, that the increased availability of digital equipment, and blended learning platforms, offered a safety net for the future.

“We continue to hand out digital devices even though the majority of teaching now is back face-to-face, these learners need it to be able to complete assignments and obviously as a contingency, if we have to move any learning back online in the future it’s ensuring they’ve got the skills to be able to do that.” (Institution lead, FE)

9.60 Likewise, institution leads considered that investments in training to support wellbeing would have a sustained benefit to institutions.

“We now have a huge resource of qualified people available to young people or adults who may need that. Even something simple just of recognising when someone is struggling and being able to signpost them. That training will have a long-lasting impact for our provision.” (Institution lead, WBL)

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<sup>63</sup> The International Computer Driving Licence (ICDL), previously the European Computer Driving Licence (ECLD) is an internationally recognised digital literacy qualification.

9.61 However, and as noted by interviewees from across the sector, expanded services required an ongoing commitment, for example, ensuring digital equipment and online platforms were maintained and updated, and training refreshed. There were also significant concerns about the ongoing pressures created by COVID-19, as well as new risks, such as the cost-of-living crisis.

“I think it's been very effective [...] but I think there's going to be a 5-to-10-year tail [...] I don't think we fully appreciate the scale of the issue.” (Institution lead, FE)

9.62 Across all parts of the sector there was a strong view that even though there has been a return to something approaching normal, staff workloads remain high leaving little space to reflect on/think about embedding some of the positive changes resulting from the pandemic. This meant that despite there being an appetite to reflect on experiences and learn lessons from the pandemic, there was a wider question about whether institutions had the capacity to do that.

9.63 Leads also noted that the timeframe for using COVID-19 Recovery Funding was tight, and that led to an underspend for some institutions. Institutional stakeholders stressed that this was not down to a lack of need. Similarly, one HE lead felt that hardship funding could have been more effectively used had it been distributed to learners over a longer time period, and with more carefully shaped eligibility criteria.

“Some of the funding perhaps could have been more impactful with less of an urgent time window in which to spend it.” (Institution lead, HE)

9.64 Stakeholders from across the post-16 sector stressed the importance of the funding to support learners but would have welcomed greater flexibility and opportunity to reallocate any underspent funding. The ability to reallocate funding would allow them to make use of the lessons they had learned during the pandemic, in particular, learning on how to make better spending decisions. Indeed, interviewees from across the sector advocated for flexibility in how and when they were able to use funding, some noting that spending timelines were particularly tight for those working within local authority bureaucracy.

“As lovely as the funding is, it needs to be a bit broader for longer and a bit more flexible in how we can use pots of money.” (Institution lead, ALC).

- 9.65 There was also considerable discussion about ongoing contextual challenges and the importance of sustained/longer-term funding, to allow post-16 institutions to continue to support learners going forward.
- 9.66 Overall, however, feedback was positive, with the response and level of funding felt to be appropriate to meet the needs of the sector:

“I don't think [the Welsh Government] could have been any more supportive... I wouldn't criticise them at all, I think they dealt with it really well, and I think the funding was fair and appropriate for what we needed.” (Institution lead, FE)

## **10. Recommendations**

- 10.1 This section presents the key recommendations from the evaluation of the Welsh Government Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding evaluation to inform the design of future funding models. The recommendations are based on evaluation findings and our review of what a future evaluation framework could encompass (see Appendix A).

### **Clarity of information (on funding streams and distribution)**

- 10.2 Recommendation 1. Clearer, simpler information about the amount of funding available within, and the aims of, distinct funding streams would improve the transparency of its distribution across the post-16 sector and specific settings within the sector. Specifically, there is a need to ensure that this information is consistently presented and communicated across all channels and products, including digital formats. We recommend providing clear information about available funding that maps distinct funding streams, their aims and monetary value.
- 10.3 Recommendation 2. In this evaluation, it was difficult to establish a comprehensive list of institutions that had received funding. A master list should ideally include an official identifier (e.g., UKPRN) and geodata (e.g., LA) to facilitate linkage across multiple data sources. Such a list will provide the reference point for the study population, ensure that any subsequent data collection comprehensively includes all institutions, and facilitate easier identification of missing data at the institution level. It could also be used as the starting point for a database to collate all MI data. We recommend compiling a master list of all institutions that will receive the funding at the outset.

### **Monitoring and management information**

- 10.4 Active consideration of the following aspects of MI data processes, guidance and instructions, as well as design of tools and mechanisms for MI data collection, will improve the Welsh Government's capacity to assess the effectiveness and impact of future funding. Recommendations in this section have been categorized either as 'process' (for those related to overarching Welsh Government processes) or as 'collection' (for those which focus on more technical aspects of the MI data collection required in future).

- 10.5 Recommendation 3 (Process). Findings from the evaluation suggest that MI data collection expectations could have been more explicitly linked to specific objectives for distinct funding streams (e.g., where multiple funding streams are part of an overall package of support). Likewise, the evaluation evidence suggests that expectations of MI data collection need to be proportionate to the level of funding allocated to institutions. Introducing closer links to objectives and streamlining data requirements would focus MI data collection on the priorities for the Welsh Government and support more accurate assessment of the progress achieved, whilst avoiding the risk of overburdening institutions with smaller, or no, administrative support teams/functions. We recommend establishing the monitoring requirements attached to any future funding at the outset of the design of funding models. In particular, providing greater clarity and cohesion between eligibility criteria for funding support and the instructions for how this spending should be monitored, and reported on, by post-16 institutions.
- 10.6 Recommendation 4 (Process). Accurate assessments of effectiveness and impact rely on having a robust baseline against which to measure change. This may include collecting additional information for specific initiatives which goes beyond standard data collections or undertaking further analysis of specific learner or staff characteristics, experiences and views. We recommend requiring all post-16 institutions in receipt of funding to report on all outputs and outcomes of interest to the Welsh Government, relevant to the distinct post-16 institutions and the selected evaluation design, at the start of the funding period.
- 10.7 Recommendation 5 (Process). Greater clarity on how any changes to the funding guidance or parameters subsequently affect existing monitoring requirements, and instructions, would be welcomed by post-16 institutions. This was noted in the context of increasingly prescriptive eligibility criteria for the Welsh Government Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding and concerns about the need to incorporate such changes in monitoring data collection and returns. We recommend reviewing monitoring requirements, and associated instructions, whenever a change is made to the eligibility criteria for funding support.
- 10.8 Recommendation 6 (Collection). A key challenge in compiling the MI database was distinguishing 'expected missing data' (i.e., data was anticipated to be missing as the institution was not eligible for a particular funding stream) and 'unexpected

missing data' (i.e., data was not anticipated to be missing as the institution was eligible for a particular funding stream). This was linked to difficulties in establishing which institution types were eligible for specific funding streams. We recommend clearly defining which types of post-16 institution are entitled to specific funding streams at the outset. Establishing this earlier in the research process will allow a future evaluation to identify 'unexpected missing data' and target subsequent data collection to be as effective and resource efficient as possible.

- 10.9 Recommendation 7 (Collection). In this evaluation, MI data for school sixth forms was supplied to Ecorys at the local authority level, rather than institution level. This meant that resource was invested in engaging with the Welsh Government and LAs to access the same data at the institution level, which was the level of interest for the analysis. Future data collection, collation and processing should take place at the level of interest, which will likely be the institution level with regards to MI data. We recommend collecting, collating and processing data at the institution level.
- 10.10 Recommendation 8 (Collection). In this evaluation, MI data collected already was provided to Ecorys in a combination of formats including Excel spreadsheets, Word documents and PDFs. Future data collection could helpfully be undertaken using data collection tools with as many hard or soft validation checks as possible. Hard validation checks would force institutions to provide data in a particular format using pre-specified response options or restrictions. For example, a list of approved responses could be provided within a data collection tool which institutions would select from a dropdown, rather than having to input the information themselves. Soft validation checks would not force particular responses through restrictions, but rather provide guidance on how responses should look. For example, when a response is provided, an automated warning message could be generated to ask respondents to check whether their response has been provided in the right format. Data collection tools with such validation properties could be achieved by using validated Microsoft Excel spreadsheets or using online survey tools such as Microsoft Forms. Utilising such tools will ensure that collected data is consistent across institutions and achieves a minimum level of quality. We recommend designing data collection tools that minimise the scope for data entry errors and avoid using data collection templates or tables in Microsoft Word.

- 10.11 Recommendation 9 (Collection). In this evaluation, we sought to fill missing data by engaging with institutions and asking them to provide information about funding provided and spent at least a year prior. Future data collection should seek to achieve flexible, (near) real-time data collection. This will minimise the risk of incorrect submissions and can allow for missing data to be addressed on an ongoing basis. This kind of data collection mechanism could be achieved, for example, by providing institutions with their own secure cloud-based site where they can upload the required data on an ongoing basis. We recommend encouraging institutions to collect and provide data in (near) real-time wherever possible.
- 10.12 Recommendation 10 (Collection). In this evaluation, we found it difficult to engage some of the institutions from whom we were seeking to collect missing MI data. To maximise engagement from institutions, key organisations or bodies, regular communication with institutions should be utilised (e.g., LAs for school sixth forms, Universities Wales for HE and ColegauCymru (Colleges Wales) for FE institutions). We recommend engaging relevant organisations early in the data collection process.

### **Collaboration and information sharing**

- 10.13 Recommendation 11. Sector organisations cited multiple, beneficial effects of the groups/forums which supported their closer communication/collaboration with the Welsh Government during the pandemic, some of which were set up at its outset while others were already in existence. These positive effects included more open and effective dialogue with the Welsh Government regarding funding priorities and challenges, as well as more timely decision-making. An exploration of the feasibility to extend these closer communications and relationships with sector representative organisations, for example through ongoing sector stakeholder groups, could maintain these reported benefits. We recommend identifying potential approaches to sustain the more collaborative relationships between the Welsh Government and post-16 sector bodies and organisations necessitated by the pandemic.
- 10.14 Recommendation 12. Evaluation findings highlight the ongoing need to offer mental health and wellbeing support for staff in post-16 institutions, alongside a continued pressure on staff workload and 'churn' in staff. Support from the Welsh Government could facilitate the sharing of learning and evidence of effective approaches in providing such support, including any particular needs in different post-16



institutions. Identifying appropriate approaches to facilitate this exchange across the post-16 sector could improve approaches to address ongoing challenges and foster greater use, and generation, of evidence relevant to the sector and its range of institutions. We recommend exploring options to collate and share best practice and learning on providing mental health and wellbeing support for staff in post-16 institutions.

- 10.15 Recommendation 13. Findings from our evaluation indicate that one of the areas in which learners, especially those in school sixth forms, FE and HE settings, felt least supported was in relation to transition support in moving between different education levels. In order to inform ongoing work in this area we suggest sharing these evaluation findings with relevant Welsh Government teams; for example, with those working in partnership with ColegauCymru to pilot related support as part of the Renew and Reform Programme (under the category of 'Learner Transitions and Pathways'). We recommend ensuring evaluation findings on learners' perceptions of support for transitions between different education levels are shared with relevant Welsh Government programme teams.
- 10.16 Recommendation 14. 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 e.g., HE institutions. We recommend ensuring any future funding decisions require collaboration where relevant and known to be effective.
- 10.17 Recommendation 15. A common finding in our evaluation was that post-16 institutions positively perceived and valued their collaboration and shared learning partnerships with other institutions and settings, particularly the sharing of learning around practical topics which were applicable across post-16 institutions. Additionally, there is interest across the post-16 sector, in reflecting on, and learning from, their individual and collective experiences during the pandemic. Many recognise that there is limited capacity and time for doing so, hence opportunities for such reflection are limited. The Welsh Government could further encourage and support these ongoing collaborative approaches by recognising the commitment post-16 institutions have made to share their learning and develop good practice, for example through some form of celebratory event for the sector or through

regular recognition of the outputs from these partnerships and collaborations. We recommend celebrating the good practice in collaborative work across post-16 institutions during the pandemic, supporting institutions to reflect on their experiences and draw learning from them.

### **Process and implementation**

- 10.18 Recommendation 16. A common finding across all post-16 settings was a call for greater flexibility in the timescales for funding activities and resources which were eligible for funding support. This is perceived to be an important factor in reducing the complexity of decision-making at local authority level and improving the effectiveness of how funding is allocated and managed. We recommend offering enhanced flexibility in how funding can be used at an institutional/setting level, for example to repurpose and/or redistribute any underspend, within the parameters of eligible support and funding allocations.
- 10.19 Recommendation 17. Following the initial period of emergency response to the pandemic, post-16 institutions encountered challenges due to the use of the financial year as the timeframe for planning and spending Welsh Government Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding, as well the introduction of some shorter periods in which to spend their allocated funding. Whilst they acknowledge this as a recurring issue in the wider operation of Welsh Government funding, post-16 institutions consider alignment of funding distribution with the academic/school year cycle, rather than the financial year cycle, would help them improve the effectiveness of their planning and use of the funding. We recommend exploring the potential for greater alignment between the academic/school year and the timelines for funding allocation, distribution and spending.

### **Future/ongoing workforce and learner needs**

- 10.20 Recommendation 18. There was a substantial shift towards blended learning during, and since, the onset of the pandemic. This placed greater demands on staff and learners' digital skills to enable them to design and deliver learning in this way. Our evaluation findings also reflect that some staff left their employment in the sector, this was perceived to be partly due to an increased emphasis on, and requirement for, digital skills in the delivery of post-16 learning. Given the increased importance of staff digital competence, the Welsh Government could consider any associated workforce training and development needs as part of the mid-term

review of its Digital 2030 strategic framework aims. Consideration should be given to setting-dependent needs; for example, specific support from LAs for those working in ALC to support learners experiencing additional barriers to digital learning. We recommend highlighting and prioritising the ongoing need for professional training and development in digital skills for staff in the post-16 sector.

- 10.21 Recommendation 19. Options to participate in learning remotely or through blended learning were highly welcomed by learners who reported experiencing various barriers to in-person learning such as: those with caring responsibilities, learners living with disabilities, or those living in rural areas. We recommend the Welsh Government review the extent to which post-16 institutions publicise the availability of remote or blended learning options and explore whether learners are aware of such options.
- 10.22 Recommendation 20. Overall staff in post-16 institutions had a good understanding of the support available for learners as a result of the Welsh Government Post-16 COVID-19 Recovery Funding. However, our evaluation findings also revealed that a notable minority of staff (including just over a fifth of staff survey respondents) had reduced awareness of what support was available for learners, related specifically to the funding. In that context, 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, in some or all institutions within the post-16 sector. We recommend assessing 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.

### **Future evaluation framework**

- 10.23 Recommendation 21. A feasibility study was not undertaken as a precursor to this evaluation. Rather, a detailed mapping of key counterfactual impact evaluation (CIE) and VfM assessment considerations for future similar funding was undertaken as part of the wider study. We recommend that in the future a feasibility study is undertaken in parallel with, or shortly after, the design of future funding models. This feasibility study will assess whether or not a CIE and VfM assessment of the funding can be undertaken. It will also assess the various options for CIE and VfM assessment, and ultimately identify the most robust and appropriate approaches for doing so.

- 10.24 Recommendation 22. Feedback on some of the outcomes and impacts in the current ToC suggests that there may be difficulties defining and measuring them. For example, the impact “The system as a whole has a stronger infrastructure and resilience to future disruption” could more clearly define (and subsequently measure) ‘resilience’. We recommend reviewing outcomes and impacts in the ToC to ensure that they are measurable.
- 10.25 Recommendation 23. In order to facilitate high-quality research and evaluation activity in the future (for example, through including a control/comparison group) data collection should ideally span the entire population (i.e., all post-16 institutions), even if ultimately some institutions are not eligible for funding/do not actually receive funding. This could be weaved into existing data collection (e.g., PLASC, post-16 collection, SWAC) or form a new series of data collection (e.g., an annual staff/learner survey). We recommend considering regular, population-wide data collection for key outcomes and impacts in a programme’s/funding streams’ ToC.
- 10.26 Recommendation 24. The outcomes framework has made a strong start in identifying key administrative datasets that could be utilised for future research, but there may be others. The Welsh Government could proactively consult with internal departments and external data controllers (e.g., HESA) to ensure that as many outcomes and impacts in the ToC can be measured with administrative data. This will also ensure that any primary data collection in the future minimises burden by focussing only on those outcomes and impacts where data is not already available. We recommend the Welsh Government continue to identify administrative data that could be utilised for future research.
- 10.27 Recommendation 25. In this evaluation, we have recommended that all data should ideally be matched across data sources by a combination of official identifiers (e.g., UKPRNs) and other direct identifiers where necessary (e.g., name, date of birth). If new data collection tools are devised in the future, careful consideration should be given to how these data will be matched to existing datasets as smoothly as possible. We recommend considering data linkage in all future data collection activities.

## **Appendix A Future evaluation framework**

- 11.1 This chapter sets out the data that the Welsh Government require to undertake a counterfactual impact evaluation (CIE) and Value for Money (VfM) assessment of additional funding provided in the future. It also presents findings of a mapping exercise to highlight the data needs for a future CIE and VfM assessment of similar funding.

### **Counterfactual impact evaluation**

- 11.2 CIE is a method used to estimate the impact of a particular programme, intervention, policy or funding stream by comparing the actual outcome observed (in the intervention group) with what would have happened in the absence of the intervention (in the control or comparison group, the counterfactual scenario). By comparing the observed outcome with the counterfactual outcome, researchers can determine the causal effect of the intervention on the outcomes and impacts of interest.
- 11.3 There are two main types of CIE: randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental designs (QEDs). RCTs randomly assign individuals (e.g., learners, staff) or groups (e.g., post-16 providers) to either receive an intervention or not, creating a control group that is ideally identical to the treatment group except for the receipt of the intervention itself. However, random assignment in many contexts is not ethically justifiable and/or logistically feasible. For example, randomly assigning emergency support for post-16 institutions at the start of the pandemic would not likely have been ethically justifiable due to the significant challenges COVID-19 posed, nor feasible due to the speed at which the pandemic altered society, e.g., lockdown. QEDs, on the other hand, do not utilise random assignment. Instead, QEDs rely on statistical methods to construct a comparison group that is as similar as possible to the treatment group. Commonly-used QEDs include difference-in-differences (which estimates the average difference between the intervention and comparison group before and after the intervention took place), regression discontinuity designs (which exploits eligibility criteria associated with interventions, comparing individuals/groups just below/above the intervention eligibility cut-off) and propensity score matching (which uses statistical techniques to match treated units to untreated units based on their probability of receiving the intervention given relevant background characteristics).

11.4 From a data perspective, there are two key requirements for programme effects on outcomes and impacts in the Theory of Change (ToC) to be tested using a CIE. These are that outcomes data are:

- Available for the intervention and control/comparison groups
- Available before and after the introduction of the intervention.

11.5 In this section we will assess the availability of data to quantifiably measure outcomes and impacts in the programme ToC, to provide steer on the potential feasibility of a CIE of future funding with similar intended outcomes and impacts (including the extent to which data meet the above criteria for CIE where possible).

### **Outcomes of interest**

11.6 Using the ToC for post-16 COVID-19 recovery funding, this section will map the availability of key datasets that could be used for a future CIE by measuring key outcomes and impacts. **Error! Reference source not found.** highlights outcomes and impacts from the ToC that we have excluded from this exercise and the reason for exclusion. The main reasons for exclusion are:

- The outcomes and impacts are time-critical (i.e., strongly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic) and future measurement would not be possible or appropriate. For example, the institution-level outcome 'Institutions feel equipped to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on exam delivery'.
- The outcome/impact is not central to the logic of the funding for post-16 education providers. For example, the system-level outcome 'More effective communication and collaboration between the sector and the Welsh Government, and between different parts of the Welsh Government.
- Difficulties measuring the outcome/impact. For example, the system-level impact 'The system as a whole has a stronger infrastructure and resilience to future disruption'.

11.7 Table 11.2 shows a comprehensive mapping of the potential data sources that could be used to measure key outcomes and impacts in the ToC as part of a future CIE. For each outcome and impact, the framework maps:

- How each outcome and impact could be measured ('Measure(s)' field).
- Whether data is already collected for specific outcome measures, or if it would require primary data collection, for example, via a new survey ('Primary or secondary data?' field).

- The specific data source(s) that could be used to measure the outcome or impact ('Data source(s)' field).
- At which level(s) data is available or could be collected ('Level(s) of data collection or availability' field).
- The level at which the outcome or impact is most ideally measured ('Ideal level(s) of outcome measurement' field). This may be different from the actual level of measurement.

11.8 Where relevant, we have undertaken this activity for the different post-16 provider types: school sixth forms (SSF), Further Education (FE), Higher Education (HE), Work-based Learning (WBL) and Adult Learning in the Community (ALC).

**Table 11.1 Outcomes and impacts excluded from outcomes framework with reason for exclusion**

Type	Target group (System; Institutions; Staff; Learners/ students)	Description	Reason for exclusion
Outcomes	Post-16 education system	Improved understanding of the ways learners/students have been harmed and/or disadvantaged by the pandemic	Outcome is time-critical (i.e., not able to collect reliable data on this retrospectively)
		More effective communication and collaboration between the sector and the WG, and between different parts of the WG	Outcome is not central to the logic of the funding
	Post-16 institutions	Institutions across the sector have been enabled to work together more closely, particularly in relation to transitions	Outcome is not central to the logic of the funding
		Institutions are better equipped to support learner/student and staff emotional and social wellbeing/mental health	Outcome is time critical and already covered at other levels

		needs in the wake of the pandemic	
		Institutions feel equipped to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on exam delivery	Outcome is time-critical
	Staff	Staff have access to the digital resources they need and feel confident to deliver blended learning	Outcome is time-critical
Impacts	Post-16 education system	The system as a whole has a stronger infrastructure and resilience to future disruption	Difficulties measuring this impact
		Organisations are supported to deliver apprenticeships despite COVID disruption	Impact is time-critical
	Post-16 institutions	Institutions feel stronger and better able to respond to future disruption	Difficulties measuring this impact.
		Institutions were supported to mitigate against disrupted learning	Impact is time-critical
		Institutions are supported to maintain sufficient capacity during the pandemic	Impact is time-critical. Overlap with recruitment and retention impacts
	Learners/ students	Learners/students perceive that negative impacts on learning due to the pandemic have been mitigated	Impact is time-critical



**Table 11.2 Outcomes framework**

Type	Target group (System; Institutions; Staff; Learners/ students)	Description (as stated in the programme ToC)	Measure(s)	Primary or secondary data?	Data source(s)	Level(s) of data collection or availability	Ideal level(s) of outcome measurement
Outcomes	Staff	Staff feel better equipped to respond to learner mental health/wellbeing needs as a result of the pandemic, and to direct them to the right support	Staff self-reported confidence to respond to learner mental health/wellbeing needs Staff self-reported confidence to direct learners/students to the right support for mental health/wellbeing needs	Primary	Staff survey	Individual	Individual
		Staff feel supported in their social and emotional wellbeing needs	Staff self-reported level of support from their setting for social and emotional wellbeing needs	Primary	Staff survey	Individual	Individual
		Staff feel positive about their work	Staff self-reported job satisfaction	Primary	Staff survey	Individual	Individual

		and workload feels manageable					
Learners/students	The impact of the pandemic on learner confidence and motivation has been mitigated through learning support provided	Learner self-reported confidence in learning Learner self-reported motivation in learning	Primary	Learner survey	Individual	Individual	
	Funding has enabled learners to have the opportunity to prepare for employment or further education	Learner self-reported preparedness for employment or further education	Primary	Learner survey	Individual	Individual	
	Learners are better able to access support for mental health needs	Learner self-reported ability to access support for mental health needs	Primary	Learner survey	Individual	Individual	

		Learners/students have a better understanding of progression pathways	Learner self-reported understanding of progression pathways	Primary	Learner survey	Individual	Individual
Impacts	Post-16 education system	Steps have been taken to ensure the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on future learners'/students' attainment and outcomes were mitigated	<p>SSF: Consistent performance measures for post-16 learning: achievement (completion rate; % 3 A* to Es)</p> <p>FE: Consistent performance measures for post-16 learning: achievement (completion rate; % 3 A* to Es)</p> <p>FE: Proportion of successful completion of FE vocational courses</p> <p>FE: Graduate employment rate (i.e., proportion of leavers from Welsh FEIs who were working or working and studying 6</p>	<p>SSF: Secondary</p> <p>FE: Secondary</p> <p>HE: Secondary</p> <p>WBL: Secondary</p> <p>ALC: Secondary</p>	<p>SSF: WED, Post-16 Collection</p> <p>FE: WED, LLWR</p> <p>HE: HESA data</p> <p>WBL: LLWR</p> <p>ALC: LLWR</p>	<p>SSF: Individual</p> <p>FE: Individual</p> <p>HE: Individual</p> <p>WBL: Individual</p> <p>ALC: Individual</p>	LA, system

			<p>and / or 15 months after graduating)</p> <p>HEI: Graduate employment rate (i.e., proportion of leavers from Welsh HE institutions who were working or working and studying, who were working in a managerial/professional job 6 and/or 15 months after graduating)</p> <p>WBL: Proportion of learners successfully completing apprenticeships</p> <p>ALC: Proportion of successful completion of Adult Learning activities</p>				
	Post-16 institutions	Institutions were supported to maintain recruitment of staff and learners/students	Staff recruitment rate: Number of staff at institution i at time t that were not at institution i at time t-1 as a proportion of all staff in the school.	SSF: Secondary FE: Primary HE: Secondary	SSF: PLASC or SWAC FE: Staff survey	SSF: Individual FE: Individual HE: Individual	Institution, LA, system

		during the pandemic		WBL: Primary ALC: Primary	HEI: HESA data WBL: Staff survey ALC: Staff survey	WBL: Individual ALC: Individual	
			<p>SSF: Number of sixth form admissions as a proportion of the total number of sixth form places<sup>64</sup></p> <p>All others: Number of admissions as a proportion of the total number of institution places.</p>	<p>SSF: Primary</p> <p>FE: Secondary</p> <p>HE: Secondary</p> <p>WBL: Secondary</p> <p>ALC: Secondary</p>	<p>SSF: None identified</p> <p>FE: HESA data</p> <p>HE: HESA data</p> <p>WBL: LLWR</p> <p>ALC: LLWR</p>	<p>SSF: N/A</p> <p>FE: Individual &amp; Institution</p> <p>HE: Individual &amp; Institution</p> <p>WBL: Individual &amp; Institution</p>	Institution, LA

<sup>64</sup> Welsh Government have advised that, for all institution types outside of HE institutions, while data on the number of admissions is collected, the number of places is not necessarily fixed. Calculating an admissions rate (i.e., number of admissions divided by the total number of places) in this way may therefore not be feasible or appropriate, given that the number of places is the denominator when calculating the rate. Any future evaluation would therefore need to establish whether it is feasible or appropriate to construct and utilise this outcome measure for an impact evaluation including these institution types.

						ALC: Individual & Institution	
	Staff	Staff are more easily able to access mental health support for their wellbeing needs	Staff self-reported ability to access support for mental health and wellbeing needs	Primary	Staff survey	Individual	Individual
		Staff want to stay in the sector. Retention issues that might have arisen as a result of the pandemic are mitigated	All-staff retention rate: Proportion of staff in sector $s$ at time $t-1$ still in sector $s$ at time $t$ as a proportion of all staff in the sector  Teacher retention rate: Proportion of qualified & unqualified teachers in sector $s$ at time $t-1$ still in sector $s$ at time $t$ as a proportion of all qualified & unqualified teachers in the sector	SSF: Secondary  FE: Secondary  HE: Secondary  WBL: Primary  ALC: Primary	SSF: PLASC or SWAC  FE: HESA data  HE: HESA data  WBL: Staff survey  ALC: Staff survey	SSF: Individual  FE: Individual  HE: Individual  WBL: Individual  ALC: Individual	Institution, LA, system

			Staff self-reported expectations to remain in the post-16 sector	Primary	Staff survey	Individual	Individual
	Learners/students	Learners/students leave education with the essential skills they need for future success	Learner self-reported view on having the essential skills they need for future success upon leaving education	Primary	Learner survey	Individual	Individual
	Learners/students (and parents) have an improved understanding of progression pathways		Learner self-reported knowledge about sources of information about available progression pathways  Learner self-reported understanding of progression pathways	Primary	Learner survey	Individual	Individual
			Parent self-reported understanding of learner progression pathways	Primary	Parent survey	Individual	Individual
	Funding has met additional learner needs in regard to		SSF: Average point score per A level entry (individual)	SSF: Secondary	SSF: WED, Post-16 collection	SSF: Individual	Individual, institution, LA, system

		attainment, course completion and mental health and wellbeing concerns that arose as a result of the pandemic	<p>SSF: Consistent performance measures for post-16 learning: achievement (completion rate; % 3 A* to Es; Welsh Bacc pass rate)<sup>65</sup> (institution and above)</p> <p>FE: Success in further education (individual)</p> <p>FE: Consistent performance measures for post-16 learning: achievement (completion rate; success rate) (institution and above)</p> <p>FE: Graduate employment rate (institution and above)</p> <p>HE: Degree classification per learner in higher education (individual)</p> <p>HE: Graduate employment rate (institution and above)</p>	<p>FE: Secondary</p> <p>HEI: Secondary</p> <p>WBL: Secondary</p> <p>ALC: Secondary</p>	<p>FE: LLWR</p> <p>HEI: HESA data</p> <p>WBL: LLWR</p> <p>ALC: LLWR</p>	<p>FE: Individual</p> <p>HEI: Individual</p> <p>WBL: Individual</p> <p>ALC: Individual</p>	
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<sup>65</sup> If the future impact analysis is to utilise individual level data (which would boost sample sizes and statistical power), then average point score can be used as the outcome measure. If institution level data is used, then the consistent performance measures for post-16 learning: achievement can be used as the outcome measure.



			WBL: Qualification classification per learner in Work Based Learning Apprenticeships ALC: Qualification classification per learner in Adult Learning activities				
			Completion rate: Proportion of learners / students in institution <i>i</i> that have completed relevant courses as a proportion of all learners taking those courses in the institution	SSF: Secondary FE: Secondary HE: Secondary WBL: Secondary ALC: Secondary	SSF: WED, Post-16 collection FE: LLWR HEI: HESA WBL: LLWR ALC: LLWR	SSF: Individual FE: Individual HE: Individual WBL: Individual ALC: Individual	Institutions, LA, system
			Learner self-reported mental health and wellbeing	Primary	Learner survey	Individual	Individual
		Learners/students who may have been at risk of	SSF: Proportion of learners/students in sustained education or	SSF: Secondary	SSF: Career Wales data	SSF: Individual	Institution, LA, system

		becoming NEET as a result of the pandemic are supported to stay in learning or to progress into employment	employment (including apprenticeships) for at least 6 months <sup>66</sup> after 16+ study. <sup>67</sup>	FE: Secondary  HE: Secondary  WBL: Secondary  ALC: Secondary	on pupil destinations  FE: LLWR HE: HESA data from the Graduate Outcomes Survey  WBL: LLWR  ALC: LLWR	FE: Individual  HE: Individual  WBL: Individual  ALC: Individual	
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<sup>66</sup> The appropriate amount of time after study for measurement of this impact may vary by post-16 institution type.

<sup>67</sup> The Young Person's Guarantee in Wales commits to providing all 16-24 year-olds in Wales with support to gain a place in education or training, help to get into work or self-employment. This will likely influence this outcome measure. Prior to any impact analysis, the outcome measure would need to be tested for feasibility in terms of undertaking robust analysis. For example, if the proportion is low, the outcome measure may be too 'noisy' or volatile for robust and reliable impact analysis.

- 11.9 This activity reveals all key outcomes and impacts in the ToC can be measured using either: (i) primary data collection in the form of staff and learner surveys, or (ii) a range of secondary datasets. Key secondary datasets include:
- The Welsh Examination Database (WED)
  - The Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC)
  - The Post-16 data collection
  - The School Workforce Annual Census (SWAC)
  - The Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR)
  - Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, including the Graduate Outcomes Survey (and prior to this, the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey)
  - StatsWales data tables
  - Career Wales data.
- 11.10 With regards to the secondary data sources identified in Table 11.2, it is worth noting that while data is publicly available for many of the outcomes and impacts in the ToC (mainly via StatsWales), it is available only in aggregate form (e.g., at local authority level, or overall figures). To access data at the optimal levels for outcome measurement (usually individual or institution), engagement with relevant departments of the Welsh Government and other relevant agencies (e.g., HESA) will be required. It is also worth noting that HESA data is available by request at the individual level but requires payment.
- 11.11 While primary data collection in the form of surveys allows for some of the key outcomes and impacts to be measured and included in a future CIE, it carries a number of additional risks and limitations compared to utilising secondary datasets. These will be covered in more detail in the Risks section, but Table 11.311.3 highlights the key advantages of utilising secondary data over primary data collection. We therefore recommend that, where possible, the Welsh Government prioritise the use of secondary datasets for CIE. However, we envisage that primary data collection will be crucial for measurement of some key outcomes and impacts given that they are not currently collected in secondary datasets.

**Table 11.3 Comparison of primary and secondary data for CIE**

	<b>Primary data collection</b>	<b>Secondary datasets</b>
Availability of data in the intervention and control/comparison group	Risk of low survey response rates producing a small and biased sample and, by extension, underpowered analysis and biased estimates from the CIE. The risk of lack of data is typically higher in the control/comparison group, who do not receive the intervention and thus the incentive to participate in evaluation surveys may be lower.	Secondary data collection usually covers most/ all of the population of interest, so the risk of lack of data availability in the intervention or control/comparison group tends to be lower compared to primary data collection.
Availability of data pre- and post-intervention	Primary data collection for CIE often involves at least two data collection timepoints or waves: once at baseline (i.e., immediately before the intervention) and once at endline (i.e., shortly after the intervention). Midline data collection (i.e., during the intervention) may also be undertaken if appropriate. For data to be useable, respondents must participate across data collection timepoints, and the data must be linkable. This is not always the case, e.g., due to survey non-response, incomplete information.	Secondary data collection is often routine and regular (e.g., annual, quarterly), offering multiple data points before and after an intervention has been introduced.

## **Data sources and linkage**

- 11.12 To facilitate a future CIE, linkage of a range of datasets will likely need to be undertaken, including:
- Evaluation data
  - Monitoring Information (MI) data
  - Administrative data (publicly available or by-request).
- 11.13 We anticipate linkage being undertaken at three main levels in a future CIE:
- Individual (learners; staff)
  - Institution (SSF; FE; HE; WBL; ALC)
  - Local authority (LA).
- 11.14 Regardless of the level at which linkage is required, we recommend collecting/using official unique IDs to facilitate linkage. These might include, for example:
- Individual: Unique Pupil Numbers (UPNs); Unique Learner Numbers; HESA unique student identifiers; SWAC Teacher Reference Numbers; HESA Staff identifiers; LLWR Unique Learner Identifiers (ULIs).
  - Institution: Unique Reference Numbers (URNs); UK Provider Reference Numbers (UKPRN).
  - LA: LA codes.
- 11.15 These official unique IDs, in combination with other direct identifiers (e.g., name, date of birth, institution name and postcode, local authority name), will ensure a higher matching rate.
- 11.16 Collecting official unique IDs for individuals and institutions as part of primary data collection may be difficult as participants are unlikely to know this information. Where possible, we recommend validating data collection tools to ensure alternative matching data are collected in a robust way. For example, rather than allowing learners/staff to input their institution name and postcode manually, we recommend utilising a harmonised drop-down list that can then be matched to a list containing URNs or UKPRNs for subsequent matching.

## **Value for money assessment**

- 11.17 VfM is comprised of a suite of methods that are used to evaluate whether resources have been used effectively and efficiently in achieving desired outcomes and impacts. In general, VfM assessments involve comparing the benefits of an

intervention to the costs incurred in implementing it. Common methods for undertaking VfM assessments include:

- Cost benefit analysis: To provide estimates of the value of the outcomes against cost inputs.
- Cost effectiveness analysis: To assess outcomes against cost inputs.
- Cost efficiency analysis: To assess delivery efficiency – programme outputs against cost inputs.
- Social Return on Investment (SROI): A form of cost benefit analysis that emphasises social outcomes and stakeholder engagement.
- Econometrics: Statistical approaches to assessing economic problems.

11.18 There are several commonly used frameworks for undertaking VfM assessments, including:

- The National Audit Office's Value for Money '4 E's' approach
- New Economy Cost Benefit Analysis
- HM Treasury's Green Book
- Department for Work and Pensions Cost-Benefit Analysis Framework.

### **Design considerations and data needs**

11.19 Some of the key considerations when designing a VfM assessment are listed:

- What is the rationale and economic case for a VfM assessment?
- What are the outcomes and impacts of the intervention as defined in the ToC, including primary and secondary outcome measures?
- Are there comparators, benchmarks, existing research or models to compare the intervention with and provide context? E.g., other forms of similar funding that the Welsh Government have distributed to post-16 providers before?
- What are the direct and indirect costs of the intervention? Where will information about these costs be sourced (e.g. budget information, external actors, qualitative research)?
- What are the benefits of the intervention for government, the economy and wider society? Where will information about these benefits be sourced (e.g., internal management information and/or publicly available quantitative data)?
- (If relevant) How will the benefits of the intervention be monetised (e.g., New Economy Database, PSSRU Unit Costs of Health and Social Care)?
- Are benefits of the intervention 'cashable' (i.e., able to be realised)?

- Who are the beneficiaries of the intervention (e.g., post-16 education providers, staff, learners, local authorities, Welsh Government departments)?
- What adjustments and/or sensitivity analysis needs to be made to the costs and/or benefits to allow for deadweight (what would have happened anyway), substitution (funding displacing other funding or economic activity), leakage (funding that does not impact as intended), drop-off (outcomes that diminish over time), etc?
- What is the time period for the data to be analysed, and how does this align with the timing and duration of costs/benefits of the intervention? Are costs/benefits expected to last more than a year? (If so, the HMT Green Book annual discount rate is usually applied). Are any projections of future costs/benefits or future modelling required?
- Are there any data lags that may limit the analysis?
- What are any key gaps in data and how could they be filled?
- What other information have you collected directly or indirectly could be helpful?

11.20 The general data requirements for implementing a VfM assessment are listed (we specify where data are required only for specific types of VfM assessment):

- Direct costs incurred through delivery of the intervention, via for example budgets, financial data or management information.
- Indirect costs incurred through delivery of the intervention, via for example external partners, qualitative consultations, secondary research.
- Outputs (for cost efficiency analysis), via for example primary or secondary research, management information or statistical data – at project, programme, local, regional, national or international levels.
- Outcomes or impacts (for cost effectiveness analysis or cost benefit analysis, including SROI), via for example primary or secondary research, management information or statistical data – at project, programme, local, regional, national or international levels.
- (If relevant) Unit cost data to monetise outcomes (e.g., New Economy Database, PSSRU Unit Costs of Health and Social Care).
- Comparators, benchmarks, existing research or models to compare with and provide context, via for example qualitative consultations or secondary research.
- Research and understanding into deadweight, discount rate, etc. For example, the HMT Green Book, DWP research papers.

## **Risks**

11.21 Table 11.411.4 outlines key risks to any future CIE or VfM assessment of similar funding, given the information collated in this exercise. For each risk, the likelihood

of the risk occurring, and its implications are noted, and suggested mitigation actions are outlined.



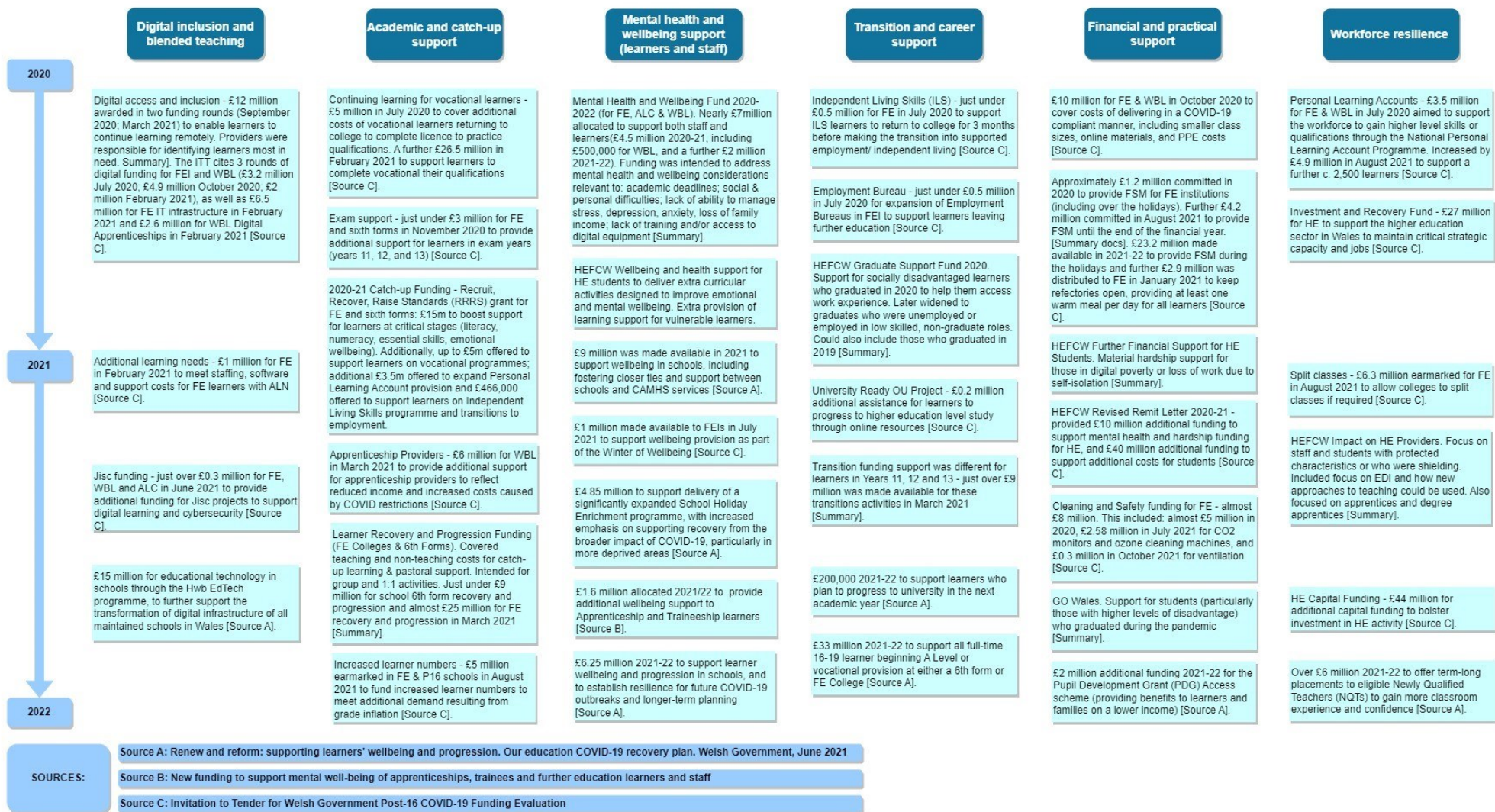
**Table 11.4 Assessment of risks to a future CIE/VfM assessment of similar funding**

Risk	Likelihood and impact High/Medium/Low	Suggested mitigating actions
<p>Low response rates where primary data collection for CIE/VfM assessment is required (particularly in the control/ comparison group)</p>	<p>Likelihood: M Impact: H</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Construct surveys in collaboration with staff and learners where possible (e.g., via unions and other representative groups)</li> <li>▪ Pilot the data collection process to identify and address any drivers of survey non-response</li> <li>▪ Clear and concise guidance on how to participate in data collection activities, in written form and/or via a Q&amp;A session if feasible</li> <li>▪ Design primary data collection tools (e.g., surveys) to be as concise as possible (10-15 minutes ideally)</li> <li>▪ Offer an appropriate incentive to complete surveys where possible (to be provided following completion of the final survey to maximise participation)</li> <li>▪ Keep surveys live for at least 4 weeks to provide as much flexibility as possible</li> <li>▪ Time survey administration to avoid bottlenecks for post-16 providers (e.g., holidays, existing in-house data collection activities) where possible (e.g., by integrating survey items into existing in-house data collection activities already being undertaken by institutions, Welsh Government or some other actor to minimise burden).</li> <li>▪ Undertake power analysis regularly to monitor statistical power given response rates</li> </ul>

Risk	Likelihood and impact High/Medium/Low	Suggested mitigating actions
Inability to match data across collection timepoints, where primary data collection is required	Likelihood: L Impact: H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Design surveys to collect relevant matching information at the individual (e.g., full name, date of birth, location) and institution level (institution ID, name and postcode) at both timepoints</li> <li>▪ Ensure that survey questions for matching are mandatory</li> <li>▪ Where possible, validate responses to questions for matching information (e.g., use a dropdown list to ask respondents to input institution information)</li> <li>▪ If possible, use unique survey links for individuals, rather than open links which require cascading</li> </ul>
Where secondary data is used, access cannot be provided (or cannot be provided in time)	Likelihood: L Impact: H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Engage with relevant data controllers early in the process, to leave sufficient time for application process</li> <li>▪ Time allocated to identify comparators, benchmarks, existing research or models to compare with and provide context, preferably early in the study</li> </ul>
Uncertainty in analysis or drawing conclusions (e.g., duration of outcomes, data lags inhibit accuracy or validity of data)	Likelihood: H Impact: L	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A range of estimates should be provided, where relevant</li> <li>▪ Implement sensitivity analysis (varying assumptions) to value for money analysis</li> <li>▪ Apply HMT Green Book annual discount rate to outcomes estimated to last more than one year</li> </ul>

# Appendix B Funding streams diagram

## Welsh Government COVID-19 Recovery Funding Across the Post-16 Sector





## Appendix C Theory of Change

**Background:** WG Post-16 recovery funding sought to address the following

1. Identify and address the impacts of the pandemic on learners/students, learning settings and staff
2. Target the most effective interventions, with the aim of mitigating long-term, continued and unequal impacts on learners/students and opportunities to achieve their learning potential
3. Use learning from the pandemic to make the sector more resilient to future challenges.

### Notes:

1. The phrase 'Post-16' is used here to refer to: school 6th forms, Further Education (FE) Colleges, Higher Education (HE) Institutions, Work-Based Learning (WBL) and Adult Learning in the Community (ALC) providers.
2. Blended learning refers to learning via electronic and online media as well as traditional face-to-face learning

### Context

The pandemic has created additional support needs for learners in Post-16 education 2020-22 and the staff members who support them

The pandemic has accelerated a move towards blended learning, securing its importance in the delivery of Post-16 education going forward

This has exacerbated the digital divide and accelerated the need for digital support

Disruption to learning has had an ongoing impact on learners'/students' mental health, behaviour and discipline as they move into the Post-16 sector from 2022/23 onwards

The pandemic has changed the ways of working within the Post-16 sector - this has led to some positive changes, particularly around communication between institutions and the WG

High levels of diversity within the Post-16 sector highlights the importance of a tailored approach to support. This tailoring is important at both the institutional and individual level

### Inputs

Over £294m of Post-16 COVID recovery funding and repurposed and funds, delivered across different streams

Welsh Government staff (analysts, policy) and sector membership bodies to support the allocation and delivery of funding

WG guidance on use of funding across streams

Equality impact assessment - systems and institutions able to support learners with protected characteristics

### Activities

Collaboration across the sector.

Funding distributed to providers for:

- Digital support/ blended learning

- Mental health and wellbeing support for staff and learners/students

- Learner/students transitions

- Progression and catch-up

- Practical adjustments to delivery e.g. social distancing, safety measures

- Guidance on use of additional funding

- Working groups to develop guidance and good practice as part of Resilience Plan

### Outputs

#### System-level:

- Improved collaboration and communication across the sector - between learning settings and with the WG

#### Institutions:

- Learning settings have provided mental health and wellbeing support for learners/students and staff in response to needs created by the pandemic  
- Learning settings have provided catch-up activities to those who need them

#### Staff:

- Staff have access to the digital equipment they need to continue blended learning  
- Staff feel confident enough in their digital skills to deliver blended learning as needed  
- Staff have access to the mental health and wellbeing support they need

#### Learners/students:

- Learners/students have access to the digital resources and connectivity they need to engage in blended learning  
- Employment funding to support apprenticeship employers reduces risk of learners and employers losing out on opportunities because of the pandemic, e.g. via careers advice  
- Learners/students have access to additional teaching time where needed  
- Learners/students have access to mental health and wellbeing support they need  
- Learners/students have access to the transition and progression support they need  
- Learners/students have access to employability support and the practical learning

### Outcomes

#### System-level:

- There is an improved understanding of the ways learners/students have been harmed and/or disadvantaged by the pandemic  
- There is more effective communication and collaboration between the sector and the WG, and between different parts of the WG

#### Institutions:

- Institutions feel better equipped to support learner/student and staff emotional and social wellbeing/ mental health needs in the wake of the pandemic  
- Institutions feel equipped to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on exam delivery  
- Institutions across the sector have been enabled to work together more closely, particularly in relation to transitions

#### Staff:

- Staff feel better equipped to respond to learner/student mental health/ wellbeing needs as a result of the pandemic, and to direct them to the right support  
- Staff feel supported in their social and emotional wellbeing needs  
- Staff have access to the digital resources they need and feel confident to deliver blended learning  
- Staff feel positive about their work and workload feels manageable

#### Learners/students:

- The impact of the pandemic on learner/student confidence and motivation has been mitigated through learning support provided  
- Funding has enabled learners/students to have the opportunity to prepare for employment or further education  
- Learners/students are better able to access support for mental health needs  
- Learners/students have a better understanding of progression pathways

### Impacts

#### System-level:

- The system as a whole has a stronger infrastructure and resilience to future disruption  
- Steps have been taken to ensure the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on future learners'/students' attainment and outcomes were mitigated  
- Organisations are supported to deliver apprenticeships despite COVID disruption

#### Institutions:

- Institutions feel stronger and better able to respond to future disruption  
- Institutions were supported to maintain recruitment of staff and learners/students during the pandemic  
- Institutions are supported to maintain sufficient capacity during the pandemic  
- Institutions were supported to mitigate against disrupted learning

#### Staff:

- Staff are more easily able to access mental health support for their wellbeing needs  
- Staff want to stay in the sector. Retention issues that might have arisen as a result of the pandemic are mitigated

#### Learners:

- Learners/students perceive that negative impacts on learning due to the pandemic have been mitigated  
- Learners/students leave education with the essential skills they need for future success  
- Learners/students (and parents) have an improved understanding of progression pathways  
- Funding has met additional learner/student needs in regards to attainment, course completion and mental health and wellbeing concerns that arose as a result of the pandemic  
- Learners/students who may have been at risk of becoming NEET as a result of the pandemic are supported to stay in learning or to progress into employment

