

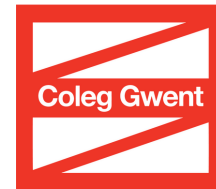


Access Insight Knowledge Transfer Project

Final Report

The Open University in Wales, January 2024

Partner institutions:



1. Access Insight Knowledge Transfer Project	4
Outputs and Outcomes.....	5
2. Introduction	6
3. Foreword.....	7
4. Summary of findings and recommendations	8
Provision across the sector	8
Learner "dispositions"	8
Welsh language provision.....	9
'Success'	10
Collaboration and competition across the sector.....	10
5. Access and Foundation provision	13
Learners and learning.....	13
Staff.....	14
Collaboration across the tertiary sector	15
Barriers and motivators.....	16
6. Mapping the sector	17
7. Research questions.....	19
8. Research findings	20
Learners in specific areas of disadvantage.....	21
COVID and the Pandemic effect.....	23
Recruitment	24
Finance and funding	26
Work/life/study balance.....	29
Face to face/blended/online provision	32
Mental health and other disabilities.....	36
Gender, family and parenting	37
Age	39
Welsh language provision.....	40
Place and space.....	40
'Success'	42
9. Collaboration and competition	45
Other providers.....	47
Other potential partners and stakeholders.....	48
10. Methodology.....	49
Project partners – a collaborative approach.....	49
Learner Voice	53
11. Conclusion	55

12. References	56
13. The project partnership.....	59
The research team:	59
Acknowledgements	60

(Ethical approval reference number: HREC/4796/Pilgrim/Thomas.)

To download a digital version of this report, please visit open.ac.uk/AIKT

Mae'r adroddiad hwn hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

1. Access Insight Knowledge Transfer Project

This project was funded by HEFCW's Strategic Investment Fund (SIF). It undertook mapping of the Access and Foundation provision in Wales and explored experiences of adult returners and post-16 transition learners preparing for higher learning. We particularly looked to identify firstly difficulties for students accessing Access and Foundation provision, and secondly information, advice and guidance provided, and action on the part of providers, which better enables learners to engage with appropriate provision.

The project was led by The Open University in Wales. It had 14 full partners among Welsh Further and Higher Education institutions providing Access and Foundation courses. Looking to build on the [Tertiary Education and Research Act \(Wales\) 2022](#) and the [Renew and Reform programme](#), it sought to support collaborative working through research design as well as recommendations.

Partner institutions:

- Aberystwyth University
- Bangor University
- Bridgend College
- Cardiff Metropolitan University
- Cardiff and Vale College
- Cardiff University
- Coleg Cambria
- Coleg y Cymoedd,
- Coleg Gwent
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai
- The Open University (in Wales)
- Swansea University
- University of South Wales
- University of Wales Trinity Saint David
- Wrexham Glyndŵr University (now Wrexham University)

This was a small-scale project, with a bounded remit. The initial remit was expanded in two ways on the proposal of Steering Group members to cover:

- Foundation Year 0 as well as Access provision, and,
- full-time as well as part-time provision.

Outputs and Outcomes

We proposed the following outputs:

- Produce an FE-HE sector map of Access/Foundation courses,
- Co-write (with input from all partners) an academic report with recommendations and proposed actions for FE and HE,
- Produce an academic article from the report,
- Hold a cross-sector knowledge convention to publish the project findings and promote further collaboration between FE and HE partners in Access and Foundation provision.

We supported an online pre-convention bringing stakeholders together to contribute to the latest working draft of the report before finalising it.

We proposed the following outcomes:

- The learner voice is actively included across partners and within project governance and has been reflected within and influenced the final report.
- Collaborative partnership is fostered through cross-sector knowledge transfer conversations on the coverage, availability and suitability of access courses that prepare learners for part-time and full-time learning (face-to-face and digital) so that agreed recommendations for future collaborative priorities and actions can support future joint-working.

2. Introduction

As the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) begins its work in spring 2024, 'collaboration' will surely be one of its watchwords. Indeed, making our tertiary education system more coherent requires a commitment to collaboration from all of us in the sector.

The Access Insight Knowledge Transfer project has been a perfect exemplar of how universities and colleges can work together for the benefit of learners, identifying the barriers to Access and Foundation provision and exploring how those barriers can be overcome.

Improving access to Access and Foundation provision is also critical to achieving the duty placed on CTER to encourage participation in tertiary education and promote equality of opportunity.

This project has found there is a wide range of provision across Wales, together with a good level of support from the Welsh Government. However, a number of challenges are also identified. This report explores these in detail, from the perspective of both the learner and the provider.

This work shows us that Access and Foundation provision remains a route out of poverty. In these times of significant financial challenge, both for the public purse and for families up and down Wales, this provision is crucial to the future prosperity of individuals, families, communities, and the whole of Wales.

On behalf of The Open University in Wales I offer my thanks for the funding this project received from the Higher Education Funding Council's Strategic Investment Fund, and to the other eight universities and the six colleges who participated in this project with us.

Ben Lewis, Director, The Open University in Wales

3. Foreword

There is a long and honourable history of provision aimed at preparing mature learners to access higher education. The first Access courses, offering supported pathways from further to higher education were presented in the 1970s. Foundation programmes, integrated with undergraduate degrees, were introduced in 2001. In Wales, there is a thriving, diverse range of Access and Foundation programmes, transforming lives, developing individuals' confidence and offering pathways out of poverty. However, the experiences of Access/Foundation students, and insights from colleagues teaching and promoting such programmes, remain an under-researched area, and consequently, provision for this critically important 'widening participation' group can too easily be relegated to sector margins.

I am, therefore, delighted to recommend this report as adding significantly to the national evidence base. This research has identified the difficulties adult learners and students from under-represented backgrounds face in accessing higher education. Just as importantly, the research has highlighted the importance of flexible provision, accessible financial support and impartial Information, Advice and Guidance – institutions and policymakers could instigate relatively small enhancements to mitigate those barriers.

Key findings include:

- Geographical gaps in Access/Foundation provision – providers struggle to reach all potential learners given transport challenges and reduced broadband in 'digital deserts'.
- Heterogeneous nature of potential students –obstacles of varied life circumstances impact on mental health and financial security, both affecting available time to study.
- The need for funding to support more flexible part-time and hybrid opportunities.

I hope this knowledge exchange project stimulates future collaboration, drawing on authentic voices to generate new insights into the Access/Foundation learning experience.

John Butcher, Professor Emeritus, The Open University

4. Summary of findings and recommendations

Provision across the sector

Participants from Further and Higher Education Institutions described a good range of Welsh Government funding supporting both themselves as providers and their learners.

There is a great variety of courses and many different sources of financial support for learners. All participants: agencies, FE and HE staff and learners described difficulty identifying the most appropriate pathway for individual learners, and most appropriate financial support. FE and HE staff struggle with recruitment and are not confident they are reaching all potential learners.

Recommendation 1: development of a resource (interactive map) supporting learners to identify appropriate learning provision and financial support.

- Explore the potential of an interactive resource (map): a website or app, showing Access and Foundation provision and also appropriate financial support. (This could be undertaken through ongoing collaboration between the project partners as discussed below – Recommendation 5.)
- Explore how best to support learner use of this resource with personalised information, advice and guidance from specialist advisors.
- Contribute to any upcoming discussion about raising awareness of the diversity of Welsh tertiary education provision for learners at all life stages.

Learner "dispositions"

Learners and providers come up against barriers which are known issues across Wales: problems with public transport and road networks, pockets of low broadband provision. Some effects of the COVID pandemic continue to impact learners and providers, however innovative practice developed during lockdown also continues to support accessible learning.

Learners in Access and Foundation provision have extremely varied "dispositions": individual characteristics, life circumstances and geographic location. Many Access and Foundation learners are particularly impacted by mental health issues and by the 'Cost of Living' crisis, in which they are having to

commit to increasing levels of paid work (often to support families), threatening successful completion of their studies and their own career aspirations. Before studying Access, learners sometimes undertake small, certificated qualifications, giving them confidence and appetite to continue learning. A significant number of Access learners are mothers on healthcare courses. Foundation supports some mature learners retraining to switch career. Learners often had excellent online social skills e.g. using a mobile phone, but still lacked digital academic skills.

FE and HE staff are developing good provision sensitive to learner need:

- Online and blended provision, with continuing face to face provision,
- Digital skills development included in learning provision,
- Timetabling to fit school drop-off and pick-up,
- Timetabling to allow for Friday/weekend shift work,
- Providing kitchen facilities for Access learners,
- Offering free breakfast.

Lack of funding support meant that evening and part-time provision, which staff believed could help learners working longer hours, was difficult to offer.

Recommendation 2: evaluate financial support for learners, and funding for evening and part-time learning provision

- While preserving the good variety of funding which supports learners in highly varied circumstances, there may be points at which this is becoming insufficient to allow learners, especially those with family, to balance paid work and studies. (NB Many Access learners are on health and social care pathways, in a context where health and social care services are chronically understaffed.)
- Access providers could consider making a case for better funding and learner financial support for evening and part-time provision.

Welsh language provision

The mapping exercise showed that provision in the Welsh language may not be sufficient. Within the scale of this project, it was difficult to press investigation into what we knew was a specific area of concern.

Recommendation 3: further evaluate Welsh language Access and Foundation provision

- Specific work should be undertaken to explore learner experience of the provision of Access and Foundation learning in the Welsh language.

‘Success’

The project partners were interested in 'success', but not in a superficial sense of numbers going on to higher learning. They asked what learners see as 'success': this could be realising that something other than higher learning would suit them better. We were not able to explore this fully in this small project, however learners we spoke with thought their Access and Foundation learning might support them engaging with Higher Education studies better than those who had come straight in from A level. (These were mature students and it could be that once they had been supported into higher learning by Access or Foundation, other life skills were proving additionally useful to them.)

Recommendation 4: further explore ‘success’ for Access and Foundation learners

- A further piece of work could explore:
 - How prepared learners on Access and Foundation are as they move into higher learning,
 - How useful the Access and Foundation learning was in supporting them if they choose something other than higher learning,
 - How useful Access and Foundation are in providing learners with options in a rapidly changing employment landscape.

Collaboration and competition across the sector

Senior leadership in both Further Education and Higher Education were fully engaged from the earliest stages of this project, supporting it with their own and their staff time and effort. At the pre-convention (feeding into the working draft report), partners and stakeholders reflected on the value of the project as an opportunity to come together and expressed a wish for this to continue, and for ongoing work to include the six FE colleges who were not part of the original bid. Members described other committees they are part of, which could potentially

support an ongoing network of this kind, and suggested that links could usefully be forged with other work, particularly on tackling digital poverty. Collaborative/competitive networks can be measured using social networking analysis (see under Methodology) if an overview of the existing links between stakeholders is useful.

We found several existing instances of good collaborative partnership between institutions and also with other agencies. Some competition still means a coherent Wales-wide provision is not yet available to learners. There were several institutions doing outreach to ensure learners who needed it could access learning in their own area, however these seem isolated, without joined-up planning. Institutions think employers are increasingly developing their own training provision, sometimes using government training funds (Personal Learning Account - PLA). Teaching staff are not as well linked with local employers as they are to HE providers for whom they are feeders. There were some links with schools, but mainly through university research departments.

There are staff undertaking research into provision and practice. This is not well disseminated.

Recommendation 5: support ongoing collaboration among providers of education for post-16 transition and adult learners

- As the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research comes into being, it could support ongoing networking between institutions. (Agored Cymru run events at which Access providers come together.)
- A separate piece of work should explore what outreach provision plus online learning provision supports isolated areas (e.g. rural mid-Wales).
- A separate piece of work could explore training provided by employers using PLAs, and whether the curriculum for this is narrower than Access and Foundation curricula, supporting immediate employer need at the expense of providing the learner with broader skills and capabilities.
- A programme of events could be developed to support research into Access and Foundation provision which is currently being undertaken without collation or dissemination.

Recommendations 4 and 5 have been made with consideration of a rapidly changing employment landscape. Training towards specific employer needs may mean that if one set of workers become unemployed, they do not have the skillset to easily transfer into other opportunities. Access and Foundation provision support broad skills and capability development for a mobile workforce – offering “flexibility to enable greater participation” (Butcher, 2020). Learning and Work Institute (2022) and Holtom, Bowen and Pells (2021), also point to the broader importance of Adult Community Learning providing an enriching experience that builds confidence in mature learners.

“It’s about building a resilient workforce.”

5. Access and Foundation provision

“Access changes lives.”

Learners and learning

This project comes at a time of pressure on many and diverse disadvantaged communities across Wales. Issues of socio-economic and digital poverty were exposed during pandemic lockdown. This was followed by global and UK-wide economic uncertainty and a Cost of Living crisis. Some students from comfortable backgrounds also make good use of Access and Foundation provision, but for many these are pathways out of financial poverty: the desire to build a rewarding career from a low paid position is a strong motivator. However, increased financial and workload pressure – particularly in the healthcare sector which employs many Access learners, are becoming insurmountable barriers to some vulnerable learners.

Access courses have always attracted disadvantaged yet aspirational learners. Providers believe this cohort is becoming increasingly complex, and younger. Foundation traditionally attracts younger learners, with some older learners.

Many learners are having to switch career during their lives. People no longer work in the same job, for the same employer, over their whole career, they have a “crazy paving career”. As automation and Artificial Intelligence further alter the employment landscape, people in Wales from all backgrounds will need diverse training and education provision continuously in life.

Access and Foundation learners come from a great variety of backgrounds. Many are from disadvantaged rural, coastal and urban areas, young people disaffected in schools education, parents (particularly single mothers) seeking to improve their own and their family’s circumstances, those in mid-career and refugees and asylum seekers with existing qualifications who need to retrain.

During our research we struggled to recruit individual learners as participants. We had more success recruiting Student Reps to talk about their own and fellow students’ experiences. Reps are proud of the work they do, telling us of local solutions they negotiate for fellow students. This is an example of ‘learner voice’ as part of a democratic process: the Reps are concerned to help providers understand learner needs and provide appropriate resources. Staff sometimes

represent learner needs as advocates for learners, and are sometimes heard and sometimes not.

(Student Rep) “There's students with language barriers who we've taken the time to help out and it's a real sense of, a good sense of community and bringing everybody in, no matter this disability or... no one really gets left behind.”

Staff

We interviewed a number of staff members supporting the delivery of Access and Foundation learning. They were universally passionate about the learners they work hard to support, speaking proudly of the commitment of disadvantaged yet aspirational learners. Often performing a variety of roles: recruitment, counsellor, advocate, financial advisor ... lecturer, staff were willing to go out to learners in remote areas, teach in unsocial hours and give up office space in order to provide for learners.

“I call myself Lassie. You will at some point come to the well of despair in your studies. At that point, Lassie comes and pulls you out.”

FE and HE staff values in delivery are strongly aligned to the [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#).

Access and Foundation providers face two points at which barriers for their learners must be scaled: recruitment and retention.

Some staff reported feel under-supported in **recruitment**. The work reaching out to often hidden and poorly connected communities is difficult and complex.

Many pressures including the need to work, pressures of placement requirements and family life events lead to the issues with retention which learners and their learning providers face. In communities experiencing high levels of economic poverty, staff feel under pressure to **retain** learners, and the funding which goes with learners, but also conscious of protecting learners from running up debts unnecessarily.

During the project, we found staff with unpublished research in the field, written up in Masters and PhD dissertations. The emphasis on international excellence

in academic research can mean that local social policy work gets missed in traditional academic networks. We recommend looking to develop opportunities for staff to come together, build on collaborative partnerships, share good practice and find support. Journals such as *The Wales Journal of Education* or *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* may be able to offer special issues to collate work. Agored Cymru already provide opportunities for Access staff to come together. The incoming Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) may be able to support ongoing events to disseminate research findings and good practice.

Staff are focused on improving future opportunities for learners through education, however their perception is that management are focused on institutions as businesses. In a difficult economic climate, with a corporate vision in UK-wide Higher and Further Education, financial survival must be a high priority for management. However a collaborative rather than competitive approach between Welsh institutions, supported through both management and teaching staff networks exchanging knowledge, has the potential to develop better provision for a mobile skilled workforce in a rapidly changing employment landscape. Rather than an education aiming at developing the workforce in line with what (current) employers need, this could be a diverse set of pathways with learners able to skill themselves towards employment they can visualise in the future. Butcher and Clarke (2021) note how Access can enhance learner confidence and cultural capital, rather than simplistically offering 'economic value'.

Collaboration across the tertiary sector

Several organisations and education providers in Wales's tertiary sector are formed out of bringing together institutions, therefore there is an existing drive towards collaboration. Staff have a strong and committed sense of social mission. Increasing participation is part of institutions' civic mission. However staff in some universities felt that research and degree level teaching was prioritised above Foundation and outreach work. In FE Colleges, Access was sometimes perceived as undervalued compared to other qualification pathways. In a tight funding climate, university work bringing in higher income has to be supported. The regular attendance of senior management on this

project's Steering Group suggests they have high regard for Access and Foundation provision, which are substantial feeders into core HE degree courses.

Nevertheless, there seems to be variability across institutions in whether staff feel listened to. At some smaller institutions, staff seemed better able to advocate 'learner voice' to management and get resources. There may in some cases be a communication gap between staff delivering 'on the ground' and management. Providing opportunity for teaching as well as management staff to come together and share knowledge may help here.

Barriers and motivators

Research has identified three layers of 'barrier' to widening participation in education: situational, institutional and dispositional (see e.g. Gorard et al 2006). Here we have reversed their usual order to put dispositional and the perspective of learners first and have chosen 'structural' rather than situational. Working with Foundation year 0 and Year 1 students in Wales, Elmi-Glennan (2013) has suggested that barriers can also be motivators: needing childcare is a barrier to taking up studies, however learners are motivated by their children. In a report for Addysg Oedolion Cymru/Adult Learning Wales, Holtom, Bowen and Pells (2021) add that barriers alone will not explain why some people become learners, others don't: motivation is a key factor.

Barriers/motivators may be:

- Dispositional: individual character, experience or circumstances.
- Institutional: where the learning provider could or has taken steps to recognise and provide support helping learners scale barriers.
- Structural: issues which come under higher governance.

6. Mapping the sector

There is a diverse range not only of qualifications to support learners into Higher Education, also of financial support for learners. This diversity is valuable for learners with many and variable needs.

There is low awareness of some routes into HE: BTEC is not thought of as an access route, and of some requirements – such as Maths and English GCSEs or equivalent (Access qualification is not always sufficient on its own).

Providers are responding to learner need with diverse delivery: online and blended learning as well as face to face provision. Different learners in different locations have different preferences for these.

Both providers and agencies were interested in an interactive accessible tool offering better and up to date information to support learner engagement. This could be made available direct to learners to help them identify suitable courses. However it may be necessary to support learners with a discussion with a personal advisor. We found that learners sometimes sign up to studies which are not suitable to support their intended aspirations. There is need to ensure learners consider qualification pathways holistically, without being overly influenced by immediate financial need. Some applications are too easy for learners to click through: signing up to commitment of fees and time which they might not be able to afford, while by-passing more suitable learning pathways. (Butcher and Curry (2022) note the need for pre-registration advice to alert learners signing up to online study to the requirements of digital learning.) Learners looking for Access and Foundation pathways often have a vague sense of what they want to do, with little understanding of the broad and varied tertiary education sector. They may not have family networks with previous tertiary learning experience to advise them, they often lack confidence and they are usually unaware of academic skills they need support with to fully unlock potential.

Under Welsh Government's approach bringing the tertiary sector together, an interactive resource could showcase more qualifications and provide learners with a holistic picture of financial support and training provision, leading to good quality employment. There is need to de-mystify terminology around learning provision, and for a clear framework so that learners can fully

understand the value of different qualifications. Schools and teachers were thought to highlight the direct route into university so that those disaffected by schools learning may not realise there are ways to return to higher learning later in life.

An existing example of a website presenting local adult learning opportunities, including Access and Foundation, is the Adult Learning Partnership database for the Swansea (and Neath) area: <https://www.learningswansea.wales/home>. This is updated by learning institutions themselves. Other local providers are thought to be developing similar resources.

Careers Wales is interested in supporting an interactive map of the sector, which could build on their own tool: available at <https://careerswales.gov.wales/courses-and-training>. There are other stakeholders in Wales who could also be involved to develop this resource. However Careers Wales's budget is currently uncertain: they may have to cut back rather than expand provision for adult learners and those returning to employment or needing to change career. There was concern about who would be responsible for maintaining and updating a resource of this kind, which would need continuous work to keep it current. The resource and engaging with post-16 transition and adult learners to use it appropriately, would need a sustainable budget allocation.

7. Research questions

The initial research question formulated at the start of the project in the bid documentation was:

How does Access provision in Wales prepare learners for higher learning, exploring coverage, availability and suitability of courses (considering the support available) to post-16 transition and returning adult learners?

Year 0 Foundation was added to the remit and the project scope was expanded to include full-time as well as part-time provision.

This research question was refined in operational and steering group meeting discussions with the research team to include two additional sub-questions:

Can learners in diverse situations easily access the Access and Foundation [Year 0] provision in Wales into Higher Education? Including:

- Adult returners to learning;
- Post-16 transition learners;
- Learners in areas of socio-economic deprivation;
- Learners in areas of digital poverty;
- Welsh language provision;
- Learners in coastal strips and rural areas.
- How flexible is existing provision, for learners with diverse needs?
- Geographic location;
- Course design;
- Timetabling.

What other routes may also be supporting learners into HE?

- Foundation Year 0 courses (are foundation courses the main provision for post-16 transition learners, with Access being mainly for adult returners to learning);
- Non-traditional short courses and non-accredited options.

8. Research findings

The research questions included some about already known disadvantaged locations. To support choosing data on this, we generated a code for “Learners in specific areas of disadvantage”.

We looked out for data on Welsh language provision, however this was not raised as a topic by participants.

The remaining codes were generated directly from the data collected in the workshops with staff and interviews with learners. They are:

- COVID and the pandemic effect
- Recruitment
- Finance and funding
- Work/life/study balance
- Face to face/blended/online provision
- Mental health and other disabilities
- Gender, family and parenting
- Age
- Space and place
- ‘Success’

‘Success’ came partly from the project partners’ wish to understand how this was experienced by learners, however there was also data relating to learners succeeding as they moved on from Access and Foundation provision.

These codes were supported in the conceptual framework: dispositional, institutional and structural, developed from one widely used in researching widening participation (see e.g. Gorard et al 2016). We also sought to acknowledge Elmi-Glennan’s (2013) finding: barriers are also often motivators.

A further code which came out of interviews with FE and HE staff was ‘collaboration and competition’. This related only to the ‘institutional’ level of the conceptual framework, to the relationships between institutions and agencies across the tertiary sector.

Learners in specific areas of disadvantage

There were a number of factors which the research questions identified related to potential geographic and topographical issues:

- Learners in areas of digital poverty,
- Learners in coastal strips and rural areas,
- Geographic location.

Here we have developed two indicative maps, which show that institutions offering Access and Foundation courses are located on the coast and border of Wales, with populations in mid-Wales often far from a physical college location. The maps show that this central area is also one of low broadband provision.

There is a spread of physical college and university locations around the coastal strips, which has been identified as experiencing hidden poverty (see e.g. Corfe, 2017). A swathe of coastal and neighbouring inland areas from Aberystwyth (which does not have Ultra fast broadband) round to Swansea (which does have Ultra fast broadband) experiences lower internet access.

Rural mid-Wales is sparsely populated, however Education Wales (2018) recognise the education needs of communities and the importance of supporting sustainable development through maintaining schools in the area. Following the pandemic, many in mid-Wales may have missed out on a full education due to digital poverty.

“Digital exclusion, linked to data poverty, poor connectivity, lack of digital equipment and digital literacy, is an increasingly important barrier.”

(Holtom, Bowen and Pells, 2021, p.31).

NPTC group maintain some delivery in Newtown, and some other institutions offer outreach provision in schools and community centres, in particular Addysg Oedolion Cymru/Adult Learning Wales. The Open University distance learning is also available to learners in mid-Wales, although learner engagement may be impacted by WiFi connectivity issues.

Distribution of FE college and HE campuses by postcode

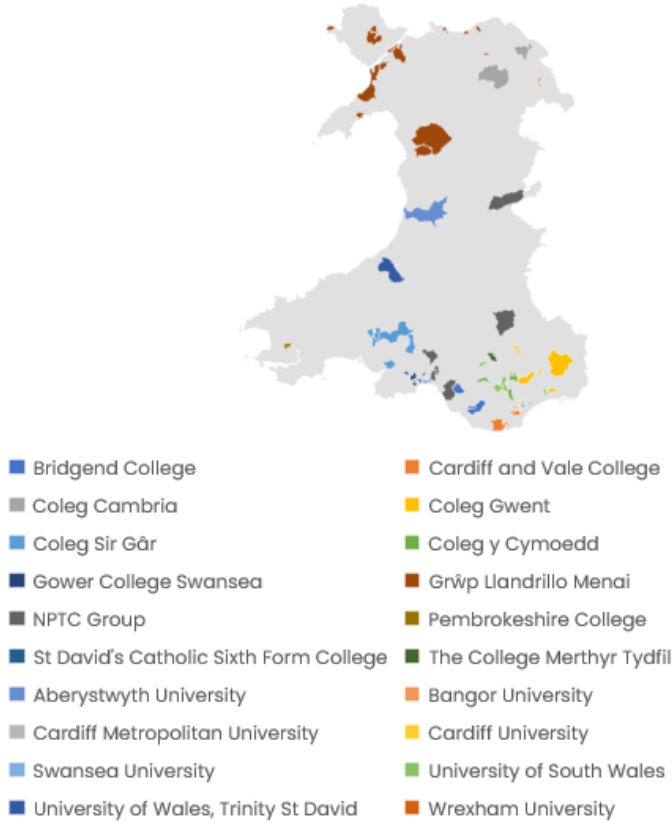


Fig 1: Physical locations for FE and HE institutions across Wales

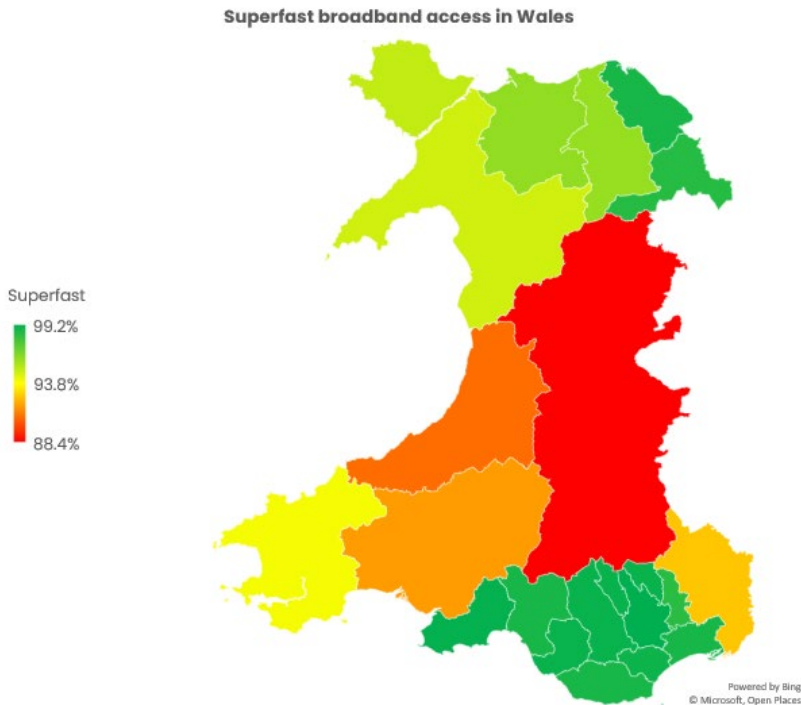


Fig 2: Broadband provision across Wales

COVID and the Pandemic effect

- Dispositional

Education across the world was disrupted by lockdowns in 2020/21. Access and Foundation providers found that some learners gained qualifications appropriate to their skills level with predicted grades, but not the full knowledge they needed for Higher Education studies. Some did not get the grades they needed. In the isolated conditions of home learning, some learners missed opportunity to develop social skills needed for face to face education provision.

Our learner participants described the importance of group learning, supported by WhatsApp chats and studying together in the library. (Group learning is known to lead to better comprehension and therefore achievement.)

“We all help each other and we've got a little bit of a family group going on.”

Welsh institutions told us they had seen a drop in numbers, when learning moved completely online. This was due to lack of digital skills and issues of digital poverty. Healthcare learners were also under pressure at work during the pandemic, unable to get time to study.

However, some learners who were furloughed seem to have had time for reflection, and decided to look for a pathway into a fresh career.

- Institutional

Education settings are known to be subject to viral infection (“freshers’ flu”). Even during this small research project we had participants who were unable to attend workshops because they had tested positive for COVID; we interviewed one participant online who was joining from home, after a second round of COVID this year.

Institutions had to develop online capacity, in ways which some have been able to continue to develop following the pandemic.

While some institutions reported learners keen to return to face to face spaces – particularly older learners, others found that learners had become used to working in isolation, and now do not make use of group spaces or group learning opportunities.

- Structural

[The Renew and Reform Programme](#) is Welsh Government recognition and commitment to ensuring that those who were not able to look for work or training during the pandemic period do not become a 'lost generation', overtaken by those who came after them once employment and education opportunities became available again.

Recruitment

- Dispositional

One learner described looking for a degree to study, and seeing information about Access support into the degree pop up. As this looked useful (and was free), the learner signed up. When learners start a degree programme then struggle, it's hard for providers to persuade them to take what they see as a backwards step into Access. There is less financial support for Access than on a degree programme; this also makes it an unattractive backwards step.

Some learners mentioned doing Open University certificates then getting into an Access programme. One learner had attended Technical College and was able to use those qualifications as proof of maths abilities. Learners attended Open Evenings and filled in the application form there with staff help. However providers also see young people who feel overwhelmed by Open Days.

Providers see some learners coming to Access and Foundation because they haven't made the A level grades they need for Higher Education. Foundation students get good experience at an institution they plan to study with in this way.

It can be too easy for learners to click through online applications to study. There is value in personalised conversations to identify best opportunities in the diverse array of learning provision.

There were instances where learners were not properly informed, and might even be sent back after spending considerable time studying already because they did not have the full set of qualifications they needed. In particular, learners might think Access alone would be sufficient for university, not realising they needed Maths and English GCSE or equivalent. (Institutions are able to provide Maths/English GCSE free alongside Access.)

- Institutional

Staff were frustrated with a lack of institutional support for recruitment. They believed potential learners were lost unnecessarily. Institutions use social media campaigns, but staff felt that the learners they wanted to reach were unlikely to 'follow' or 'like' accounts and posts relating to educational institutions. University websites are difficult to navigate even for those who are already IT literate.

Staff saw personalised messages as key and Careers Wales also described learners as having diverse needs, and needing personalised support. Staff used many diverse ways to reach out and inform potential learners about provision. One staff member put a post on her personal Facebook page and recruited five learners. Learners bring in friends; one mother who had done Access brought her daughter to sign up. There is loyalty towards an institution which has supported a learner. Providers went out in the community to give information, advice and guidance, inviting potential learners to "come and have a cup of coffee". They supported tours of campus.

With colleges partnering universities, there is growing awareness of Foundation provision. Universities will sometimes refer learners not yet ready for the degree programme to Access or Foundation study.

Some institutions were looking to reach out into schools, but with a small team this was not felt to be sustainable. University advisors doing outreach with schools commented that Primary Schools were asking not just for presentations on research, but for academics to talk about kinds of careers in their field.

There was debate about the best way to support learners in recruitment. It was felt that while teachers know their subject matter, and the new curriculum is steering them towards identifying job opportunities, teachers mainly understand how to become a teacher better than other career pathways. Lecturers and tutors believed they could give good advice about course provision, and often found that while the learner had an idea in mind about what they wanted to study, a personal conversation could point to more suitable provision.

Careers services in institutions are geared towards supporting existing students into employment, rather than advising potential learners about the best

education provision to sign up to, in order to position themselves for better employment.

- Structural

(HE staff member) “Who manages the signposts?”

There is a plethora of signposting available – which is still not reaching learners in a variety of disadvantaged situations.

Careers advice online tends to be aimed at younger people. There is a perception that careers services are not provided for adults: low awareness of the work of Working Wales and Addysg Oedolion Cymru/Adult Learning Wales.

Careers Wales advisors based in secondary school prioritise Year 11 learners who are not sure what direction to go in, and also support their parents. Opportunities potentially exist to reach out wider, particularly through Primary Schools. Parents whose children have started Primary Schools might welcome information, advice and guidance at a time when they have gained some time back.

Further support may be needed to encourage learners down specific pathways. Providers thought there were not enough learners coming through health and social care education to support under-staffed services. It was noted that while Healthcare is the most popular Access course, some subjects: e.g. Law, Engineering, see few students come through Access. This may reflect a continuing belief that these are “not for me” on the part of disadvantaged learners.

Finance and funding

- Dispositional

Financial problems in restricted socio-economic situations and a growing Cost of Living crisis were regarded as one of the main barriers for both Access and Foundation learners, forcing many Access learners in particular to choose between working longer hours to support families and studying. Holtom, Bowen and Pells (2021) identify financial barriers as one of the top reasons people don't engage in learning late in life. At the same time, the wish to improve their own and families' financial situation through career change and progression is one

of the strongest motivators for learners. There is a tipping point at which a motivator/barrier becomes so much of a barrier that it no longer motivates the learner. There was a strong impression that finances in a Cost of Living crisis were becoming too much of a barrier for many learners to climb.

Foundation learners from lower income families could struggle because they are debt-averse. These learners often have no family finances to tide them through even a short-term problem. Access and Foundation learners from care backgrounds could be particularly vulnerable, having no family support at all.

- Institutional

In Access, timetabling sometimes has to be organised so that learners can access full grant funding, reduce travel costs and fit in work. Two full days, or three days at times that allow for school drop-off and pickup, allow learners to keep both their funding and paid work. Disadvantaged learners are both time-poor and debt-averse (Butcher and Curry, 2022). As can be seen under *Work/life/study balance* below, staff are concerned that the demands on Access and Foundation learners are becoming ever greater.

Staff at one institution in an area of high deprivation will immediately get students to fill in extenuating circumstances forms on arrival, in order to identify and access support for the many who were known as a child to social services, or had family serving in the Armed Forces, or are in other ways identified as high priority.

Some FE colleges offer support such as food vouchers, free hygiene products, food bank supplies. Some offer a free breakfast to learners – this can be a motivator, giving learners a chance to chat over a coffee. A couple of institutions have funds for students in serious need. One described being able to advocate to get students' local authority to release support, which can be refused if the student approaches the authority as a private individual.

Staff are going to multiple agencies (including Student Finance Wales, the Department for Work and Pensions, Citizen's Advice) to get financial guidance for learners. Learners themselves often have more up-to-date knowledge. Student Services financial advice is available, but geared towards enrolled learners rather than advising learners prior to application.

- Structural

Funding for Access and Foundation students is provided in completely different ways. There was confusion about the full detail of what is available for students, and one institution acknowledged that the information shared among learners themselves was more up to date than that of staff.

The differences in funding may impact particularly on mothers looking to gain access to nursing degree qualifications, against a background of healthcare providers chronically short of staff.

Providers agree that it is vital for learners to have access to different kinds of funded provision. Access courses which are free at the point of delivery suit some learners better than taking a loan for Foundation course fees and getting a maintenance grant. However in a Cost of Living crisis, FE and HE staff were very concerned about dropping rates of recruitment and retention, and learners taking on more paid work than they can reasonably balance with their studies.

Broad overview of Foundation vs Access funding:

Foundation learners apply for a student loan for fees (across the four or five years of their study), and maintenance grants for living costs. These would be topped up for those with dependents.

Access learners over 19 do not have to pay a fee: they can access a Personal Learning Account, however they usually need to work, and also often to claim Universal Credit. Learners have to be "strong" with DWP if questioned about whether they are on a Full Time or Part Time course. (Having to defend their right to financial support while trying to progress on an appropriate education pathway must be demeaning and stressful.) The Assembly Learning Grant is available to some learners, but not if joint marital income takes them over the threshold.

One provider had seen numbers nearly half because it was not possible for the learners to get by on the maintenance grant. However others see increased support enabling learners to stay engaged. A number of funding sources were mentioned by providers in interviews, including Reaching Wider and Flying Start, as well as the Assembly Learning Grant and bursary for healthcare learners. Cheaper part-time provision in Foundation was attractive to learners wanting to

avoid debt, although learners can be in a hurry to complete and take the full time route while juggling full time work. (Parents on degree programmes are sometimes thought to compromise achievement by taking on full time study – with a full time maintenance grant over three years for the family finances, rather than a part time maintenance grant over six years.)

An issue in supporting adult learners has been the halving of Careers Wales core funding. Additional support for adults through Working Wales has not made up what was cut beforehand. There is uncertainty about the budget for Careers Wales going forward: this threatens the provision of information, advice and guidance particularly for older learners. In this time of economic difficulty, with particular issues for some getting into employment or training, increasing numbers of people will need support at a point in time when this is being cut.

Work/life/study balance

- Dispositional

One Student Rep said the main question learners ask is whether they can study while working. Careers Wales concurred. Holtom, Bowen and Pells (2021) add lack of time to financial issues as one of the top reasons adults hesitate to become learners. Learners may move to part time work to gain study time, but many juggle full time work and even two or three jobs, with family and study. Access and Foundation providers find some students working beyond what they can cope with, while still achieving to a reasonable level. If they can manage this at Foundation/Access level, they often struggle in the First or Second Year of their degree.

At the same time, the work experience learners gain alongside their studies is valuable to them. Many healthcare students start in a low paid role, perhaps as a care assistant, and study because they aspire to progress in the same sector. Work is a barrier and a motivator; the concern is that it is becoming more barrier than motivator.

Providers felt that learners did not always realise what they were signing up to. At one institution, this may have led to learners not doing the asynchronous work on a blended learning course, and checks and monitoring having to be put in place to ensure they are kept up to speed. Employers, too, may have initially agreed to time off for study then rescinded the offer.

Students don't always realise support for learning is different in college and at university. Class tasks might not be compulsory. If students had not managed a small task, they sometimes didn't show up, missing a whole session of help.

[Student Rep] "Trying to get past hating studies from school days."

There was particularly low confidence in maths.

(HE staff member) "I don't do maths. Where does that come from?"

Both a learner and a provider suggested we have become an 'Amazon society': you can order online and get delivery on the same day. This is reflected in expectations of learning provision, learners may want to sign up and quickly receive a certificate enabling them to move on. Learners don't always appreciate the full breadth of skills and capabilities which they are being provided with in an immersed learning experience over time.

Providers said that healthcare students are sometimes able to take on night shift work: doing their assignments in the early morning hours.

Some Access students found the number of assessments over the course of study overwhelming, one described breaking down and feeling unable to cope (although successfully supported to complete).

"I think within those 8-9 months, we had about 33 assignments."

Part time provision was thought to be rising in popularity, but many learners and their providers can't get sufficient financial support or fee funding for this.

- Institutional

Staff offer a range of personal support from tutors and wellbeing services. They try to plan monitoring and formative as well as summative assessment, although the students report already feeling heavily loaded on Agored Cymru Access courses where they are writing short assignments nearly every week. (Agored Cymru assessment does measure how much the student has engaged with materials, but because it counts towards the final mark, it is too late at this stage to help a student who has fallen behind. Institutions are therefore looking at earlier monitoring and checks, but trying not to add to the assessment load, or staff workload.)

Staff felt pressure from management to teach to employability and outcomes. Although subjects like Criminology and Psychology could be popular, students often come on broad-based Access or Foundation programmes then realise they are more interested in other subjects.

If the Access or Foundation course didn't specifically mention covering a subject, learners might think it wasn't suitable even if it eventually could lead to studies in that subject. One provider also mentioned changing module content to ensure better specific subject support as learners progressed to degree level.

As with fitting learning around childcare, some institutions were looking to use timetabling to support learners in different work patterns. When one institution moved to a single long day of provision, though, attendance dropped.

Evening classes could allow students in work to engage and might be particularly suitable for those wanting to change career.

Part time courses are popular, although there is double the chance of life events leading to learners not being able to complete. (These could help support learners struggling halfway through and then failing to complete with no recognition of effort. They could be transferred to a part-time course.)

One provider will teach one Access group over three longer days in college, and a second group over four shorter days.

Access and Foundation usually had a fixed timetable through the year, this supported learners establishing shift patterns in work. However degree timetabling was more variable, this creates ongoing problems for the learners.

Learners found it unhelpful if a big stretch of time was made available in the middle of the day for independent study.

There was considerable logistical work needed to ensure that staff, who might be teaching across Access, Foundation and A level, and also rooms, could be timetabled to support appropriate delivery.

Staff were very concerned about a significant and growing number of students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds, sometimes having to pay high rents or face other rising living costs. They could see these students not

managing to submit assignments because of needing to work long hours, and starting to lose touch with their studies.

The Open University Case Study: Assessment

The Open University undertakes continuous assessment on all its modules. Access courses have four Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) and five interactive Computer Marked Assignments (iCMAs) during a 30 week study period. At the end of each week of study, there is also a formative set of activities. There is a final larger End of Module Assignment (EMA) at the end.

Students have an Associate Lecturer (AL) who marks and provides feedback on all the TMAs, which are designed to continuously support and develop learners' skills. The AL can also refer students, or they can self-refer, to Student Support Teams for pastoral support.

- Structural

Evaluating whether funding for part-time and evening provision is being equitably supported across Access as well as other qualification pathways, might allow for broader provision and particularly support students in growing financial need to work and study. This might also be attractive to mid-career learners needing to re-train.

Face to face/blended/online provision

- Dispositional

The flexibility of online distance learning allows many students to juggle work, family and study. While the Open University remains the main provider of online learning across the UK, many in Wales are developing more flexible delivery.

Some learners find online learning unsympathetic, and the requirements for students to engage in online delivery are easily under-estimated. In most areas of society, working face to face and working online are no longer completely separable. Access and Foundation providers need to offer some digital experience to prepare learners for materials provided online in higher learning. Similarly, the campus experience and facilities are important to students. One online provider brings learners onto campus at the start of the course, so that they understand library and other resources available for them to use. Another

face to face provider offers 24/7 study skills support via telephone (service bought in from outside the institution).

The need for appropriate equipment for online learning (laptop and reasonable WiFi speed) is advertised on course information, however learners can miss this guidance. Many learners access studies on a mobile phone, although they are unable to write assignments on the phone.

Learners in all courses use WhatsApp groups for support, however using mobile phones for academic study requires a different set of digital skills, which learners have to be supported to develop.

Digital poverty remains a significant barrier for learners in Wales, both in terms of affording appropriate equipment, and accessing sufficiently high speed WiFi connections. Institutions have loan schemes for laptops, and in some cases dongles. However the waiting lists for these can be long. When learners take a computer out of the institution, they don't always have the resources at home to use it properly.

Other kinds of socio-economic disadvantage also impact on ability to engage in online learning. Learners need a quiet space and a table on which to put laptop and materials. In some families someone may be sleeping on the living room sofa. Some learners have no study space unless this is provided on campus.

- Institutional

Several institutions are using or exploring both online and blended provision. This offers flexibility for learners who can access teaching from any location (work or home), and also supports better access to a range of learning materials. A case study of Coleg Cambria's three kinds of provision is provided here. Another provider is bringing two Access groups together online on a Wednesday.

It is Access rather than Foundation course providers who tend to develop these modes of delivery. They do not simply record lectures, they provide short study skills tutorial recordings, or a recording explaining how to approach an assessment task. Providing a recording allows students to access the advice

multiple times and at a time which suits them. Providing some online delivery also supports learners transitioning into university provision.

Institutions which have developed blended and online learning have done so using:

- Investment in technology,
- Investment in staff training,
- Valuing what academic practitioners do.

Digital literacy is often embedded in the curriculum. However one learner described sitting online for a lengthy period while tutors at a distance tried to advise another learner struggling to set up a laptop. Learners may need to be supported in face to face learning first, to develop the digital skills for online learning.

Butcher and Curry (2022) describe how the Open University Access modules start with printed course material, only introducing online study in the final two blocks. This allows learners to orientate themselves to online learning: they have time to identify equipment and/or digital skills they need. (The Open University routinely provides comb-bound and printed material to replace online material for students with accessibility needs, and Students In a Secure Environment.)

Some of the Agored Cymru Diploma work is practical and can't be delivered online. Learners of Science qualifications need hands-on experience in some skills.

One or two institutions are based in areas of low broadband provision, and will have a day or two per month when there is poor or no connection in the institution itself.

- Structural

Government funding supports learners to buy a laptop, but participants told us learners often buy a cheap one which will not last for the whole of their studies.

Pre-pandemic, there were some library facilities which would allow registered students privileged access to computer facilities. However, Butcher and Curry (2022) warn that libraries and community centres are not accessible to learners needing to write assignments at unsocial hours.

Bridgend College Case Study: Face to face and blended Provision

Bridgend College signed up to Google for Education some years ago and before the pandemic. This gave them access to a suite of online tools, such as Google Classroom, and also Chromebooks to support teaching and learning.

During the pandemic they were able to rely on this existing provision, and increase staff skills in online delivery. The teaching team did four days of intensive training and have been supported continuously with training since. Some staff do further training, and cascade knowledge to colleagues. (For example, some staff use Loom to record presentations for teaching.)

Learners also gained experience through the pandemic and lockdown. However coming out of lockdown, the college found that learners need to be face to face to explore academic concepts. The college offer a choice between face to face and blended delivery, adapting the best parts of online teaching delivered during the pandemic.

Coleg Cambria Case Study

Coleg Cambria offer three modes of study:

- Face to face: 16 hours on site, in four days, 9.30–2.30 Mon–Thurs (times allow for school drop-off and pickup).
- Blended programme: 16 hours in 1 long day on site 9.30–6.30, 8 further hours of asynchronous study online.
- Online programme: 16 hours in 1 day synchronous online and 10 further hours of asynchronous study online.

The provision of more flexible alternatives to face to face learning has led to increased recruitment. 67% of the current cohort of learners choose blended learning.

Coleg Cambria uses a variety of technology and a dedicated Virtual Learning Environment. A video suite supports timetabled delivery of online or recorded lectures. Staff can choose preferred modes of delivery: either via the technology, or in front of a background, with slideshow presentations running alongside the technology used.

Video lectures aim to be no more than 20 minutes to keep learners engaged, then exercises are done by students. The technology monitors students accessing and viewing the lectures, this allows staff to monitor participation.

Coleg Cambria seeks to be proactive, using applicant evenings to meet learners who have signed up to study and ensure they are prepared. Coleg Cambria use these sessions to check that learners:

- Have internet at home;
- Have equipment;
- Will employer support learner attending campus if their mode of study requires.

Mental health and other disabilities

- Dispositional

Mental health was widely identified by both learners and providers as a major and growing issue for Access and Foundation learners. The problem was in existence before the pandemic, although providers believe it has been exacerbated by pandemic and lockdown conditions.

School, home and family influences can lead students to lack confidence and feel unworthy. Some Foundation students were known to be escaping from issues such as addiction, homelessness, domestic abuse and childhood sexual abuse. Mental health issues for learners are also thought to be rising due to factors such as financial worries and long working hours.

Health and social care courses are sometimes attractive to students because of their own experiences – this is a motivator as well as a barrier to study for this career pathway.

As well as mental health issues, many learners have learning disabilities which were previously unsupported in school. They can be enabled to access support for the first time at Access or Foundation level.

- Institutional

Institutions offer a range of wellbeing and disability support. The process of applying and putting support in place, and of familiarising themselves with

available support, can be helpful – especially to Foundation students who will continue to study in the same institution.

- Structural

Additional funding is available to support wellbeing work in FE and HE institutions. Students are able to access a Disability Student Allowance, to cover technical and personal support. The DSA process can be slow: waiting for necessary support to be funded holds back students at this early stage from full achievement and progression.

With the Personal Learning Plan now following a student up to age of 25, Access providers can meet with the student earlier to organise support.

Gender, family and parenting

- Dispositional

The quantitative data collected as additional in the project show that it is predominantly women who are in Access training, most on healthcare courses. We were only able to interview a small number of learners, however it was striking that in contrast male learners we spoke with were in Arts and Humanities education, this may merit further investigation.

Providers suggested women often had a lower paid, low skills job such as care assistant in a nursing home, and were looking to qualify as nurses. Alternatively they might have been at home looking after children, and have lost confidence – concerned that the labour market had moved on and left them behind. Single mothers were thought to be at higher risk of isolation and loss of confidence, not having left the house for a while.

Female learners often have an “it’s my time” moment (Elmi-Glennan, 2013), usually when children come of school age. In some cases, they came into Access after separation or divorce. Undertaking studies could lead to changes in confidence, with the financial independence of a grant or loan, women sometimes move out of relationships during their studies. Working class women experience particular issues of shifting identity and tensions as they transform themselves and their lives through study and aspire to improve their families as well as themselves (Bassett, 2022).

Partners and older children are also significant supporters and champions for Access learners. Older children might take care of young siblings to allow a parent to focus on studies.

While childcare issues are a significant barrier for female and some male learners, learners also aspire to career progression to improve their whole family's chances not just their own. Anecdotal evidence suggests that seeing their parents study encourages children to engage better with schoolwork.

- Institutional

A number of institutions spoke of wanting to offer crèche facilities to support staff and students. One pointed to childcare students in the institution, who could provide this as part of their training – with appropriate supervision.

“One inconvenient day per week can usually be accommodated but no more.”

Several institutions timetable classes to fit with school drop-off and pickup times. With students who are parents, it is also important to factor in half term and school holidays. Some institutions also look to fit provision so that learners whose children are starting school in September are not overwhelmed, they offer a January intake, or a pre-Access course in June, to help learners settle in before the school start date.

There are schemes to encourage men into caring professions as well as women into engineering. Teaching staff are quite focused on supporting single mums as the learners in need immediately before them. There is a broader story here about equal opportunities and gender pay disparities. Further work might be done to look at gender and Access/Foundation healthcare learning provision.

- Structural

[The Social Partnership and Public Procurement \(Wales\) Act 2023](#) mandates close working with trade unions in Wales. TUC Wales and specific unions have developed training and resources to support equalities work. There may be valuable resources available from these organisations which could help institutions support women (and other minoritised groups) in Access provision.

Welsh Government supports a [free school breakfast scheme](#), although learners do not appear to be using this. One provider explained that travelling through

rush hour traffic (in an area currently notorious for roadwork delays) meant learners had a choice between setting off too early for breakfast club on a long journey, or later on for a shorter journey to college after school drop-off.

Age

- Dispositional

While the majority of students studying Access are over 25, the majority of students studying Foundation are 24 and under. The needs of younger and more mature learners were perceived by providers to be different, there could be tensions for mature learners in a mainly younger group.

Mature learners are more likely to want face to face provision. “Middle mature learners” with young families, also working, are thought to prefer blended provision.

Access students can go straight to University, so some learners are looking to get to Higher Education through this route either because their A level results weren't sufficient, or in order to avoid the heavier exams on other routes.

Access students are getting younger, but Foundation students are not thought to be getting older.

- Institutional

There is no funding for fees to cover students under 19, although technically 18 year olds can study Access and occasionally slip through – being educated without the institution receiving a full fee, along with peers who have a Personal Learning Account. One institution will advise 18 year olds to get experience working in the area they want to study in, then come back to study Access.

Access learners, who tend to be older, sometimes ask the institution for a social space separate to younger students doing other qualifications. Where this was provided, it was well used and offered a sense of identity and community. In one college, staff had given up their hot desking room with five desks to the students. However, what learners needed were some basic kitchen facilities. There had been a kettle and microwave made available to a similar cohort on another campus, where retention had been higher.

“The feedback they give me is they feel that they don’t have an identity.”

Good car parking availability is also vital for Access students, where there are poor public transport links.

In contrast, Foundation students were uninterested in separate facilities. Many were living on campus together with other students. They enjoyed using the same facilities and being part of university life.

- Structural

Mature learners returning to Access and Foundation after having a family or looking for a career change need information, advice and guidance about the most appropriate learning provision and the financial support they could get on specific education pathways.

Welsh language provision

- Dispositional

There is need for further research exploring the needs of Access and Foundation learners whose first language is Welsh.

- Institutional

See mapping information for institutions which support Welsh language provision.

- Structural

Welsh Government provides a [Main Grant](#) for students learning in Welsh.

Place and space

- Dispositional

For some learners it was important that providers came out to them, to a “safe space” such as a local school or community centre. Universities were places where learners were invited in, but might feel “stranded”. Some providers knew of free or cheap community spaces in which to offer localised delivery.

For others, campus was a “safe haven” – asylum seekers may be living in a hostile environment and welcome coming in to campus buildings.

A college located in an area of social deprivation attracts local learners and provides institutional support more generally to the area. Learners and providers confirmed that Access students tend to choose a local college provider – healthcare students in particular; the younger Science and Humanities Access cohorts are more willing to travel.

‘Local’ provision can become less accessible due to transport issues. Rush hour traffic can lead to students signing up at an institution further away, rather than cross town to a nearer provider. Some learners struggle to get to a campus because of the expense of travelling long distances in rural areas. One or two institutions will provide college transport if sufficient learners can make use of it.

Foundation students come from farther afield (including international students – who are sometimes directed to Foundation provision if their national qualifications don’t quite match the UK requirements).

Foundation students were often living on campus, just like other students. Being on campus sometimes led to better attendance, they did not need to travel to get to lectures and university facilities.

Online provision can support recruitment from wider areas, but may be compromised by poor broadband speeds.

- Institutional

Some provision in heavily built-up areas could be “bursting at the seams” and finding it difficult to timetable space to meet demand. Access and Foundation learners need smaller class sizes to ensure they get personalised support, although this could sometimes mean they were not fully prepared for the large numbers in degree level lectures.

- Structural

Good public transport connections and clear roads are not needed solely by Access and Foundation learners, but it was evident that issues with these were significant barriers in the way of accessing education, particularly with the rising cost of fuel.

'Success'

When asked 'what do you want to know' from the research, project stakeholders were keen to find out about 'success'. They were not only interested in how successful their provision is in supporting students through to Higher Education. They wanted to know what students think of as 'success'. Do some students gain confidence through doing an Access or Foundation programme of study, and then decide to study an alternative qualification or go into employment rather than go on to Higher Education?

This was not in this current project remit, however further work about this would support good 'learner voice' inclusion and further collaboration across the tertiary sector.

- Dispositional

Both learners and providers see that Access and Foundation students do better as they move up into degree studies.

"I thought I was gonna be completely overwhelmed at university, but I was underwhelmed. In a positive way."

"You know the feeling of, you know, being organised, you know, when your timetable, having a good sort of attitude and discipline to get on with the work that's got to be done rather than leave it to the last minute."

Some learners had to aim high in order to ensure they would be able to meet the grades institutions set. However, in clearing the grades might drop. This creates additional perhaps unnecessary pressure as teaching staff can't suggest they could get through without aiming so high. However, feedback from the universities suggests this helps them manage better in their first year of study.

- Institutional

Providers were immensely proud of learners, whom they described as more able, dedicated and working hard to remain engaged in their studies. Monitoring data as well as learner perceptions show Access and Foundation students doing better. Although institutions see some students thrive in Access

but then struggle at university, they thought there were not many who did not go on to university from Access.

Some staff were concerned about ongoing support – that Access and Foundation learners went on to institutions where the language/terminology was different and confusing and it wasn't clear what was needed to progress. (Although the evidence suggests learners succeed well as they go on.)

Foundation providers felt that some learners could probably have gone straight into their first year and still done well, however they had positive feedback from mature students that the Foundation year gave them reassurance and support in learning time management and academic skills.

One FE college was overwhelmed by the response when they asked past students to come and speak with their current cohort. They had students in all years of study and those who had gone on to work in the profession, in some cases 10 or 20 years after doing Access.

“It can be a slow burn, it can take 8 years. Students come to an English for Speakers of Other Languages class, then move on to a nursing qualification. They just keep going. They gain that sense of belonging.”

- Structural

These findings chime with research on Access students at The Open University, in both Arts and Humanities and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (Butcher and Clarke, 2021; Butcher et al, 2019). These studies found uplifted study skills and improved time management, as well as improved confidence of students in relation to maths in particular. The preparatory Arts and Humanities module was able to support students in critical thinking and discussion, engendering open-mindedness and creativity – which students enjoyed and valued in their lives in contrast to what the authors criticised as a prevailing 'economic value' paradigm in higher education.

Access students who don't complete currently get no recognition for work, even if they have done most of a course. Providers would like to see some form of Certificate or smaller credit provided for partial completion. This issue might be helped by better part-time provision.

In arranging for former students to come into the college, institutions recognise the importance of role models for adult learners. Careers Wales acknowledges that there is low awareness of their support, and of provision in general for adult learners. There is scope for a bigger campaign to raise awareness – particularly if this can direct learners to potential resources and support. Institutional partners believe a low cost ‘quick win’ here could be undertaking perhaps three case studies each of learners within their own institutions, to increase awareness of Access and Foundation study.

“You need to see it to become it.”

9. Collaboration and competition

(Institutions and agencies across the tertiary sector.)

While on the face of it, institutions compete for learners (and their fees), it emerged during workshop discussions that many staff across different providers knew each other and many institutions have formal or informal collaboration networks. Agored Cymru run conferences such as the *Access To Higher Education Conference* at Llandrindod Wells (June 2023), and a regular meeting for healthcare providers (providers were not sure why only healthcare staff had this facility). Teaching staff were not sympathetic to a business view of tertiary education, particularly in regards to their own widening participation work. They said they were educators, not a business. They viewed alternative provision as offering different options rather than as competition, for example part-time providers of nursing degrees saw the full-time provision at another institution as simply suitable for a different kind of learner.

One example of a mutually beneficial collaboration is between Grŵp Llandrillo Menai and Bangor University, in which Grŵp Llandrillo Menai staff deliver Foundation learning at Bangor University. This was an important example of good collaboration to support best learning provision, in an environment of anxiety about competition: FE colleges are concerned about HE institutions potentially replicating Access provision in Foundation courses simply to gain the extra fees. Addysg Oedolion Cymru / Adult Learning Wales also partner with a number of other HE and FE institutions, and work with the TUC to deliver work-placed learning.

At the same time, staff were conscious of cases where developing new courses could take away from other already established providers. One provider had seen course provision halve as learners found it easier to travel to another nearby provider, who was then being enabled to develop wider course provision. Maths and science provision had been cut in consequence. They themselves were able to offer wider provision than a college on their other side and attract learners from a more sparsely populated area. Learners were not necessarily being well served by course provision being developed to follow numbers.

Access providers sometimes developed good relationships as feeder colleges into local HE degree providers, suitable for their learners. Universities were felt to have better recognition of Access following the pandemic. One institution was even managing to get offers for its students in Medicine and similar high status degree programmes. There was good recognition of the learning Access supports. Where there was a recognised numeracy element, the requirement for a Maths GCSE could be dropped. Staff might personally contact universities to ensure that the potential of individual learners was properly recognised.

One local university offers a mock interview to learners to whom they are considering making an offer. The Access course provider praised this as giving disadvantaged underconfident learners familiarity with the interview process. There were institutions which would guarantee an interview to Access students, and an institution giving contextualised offers to students with a postcode that indicated an area of deprivation.

Agored Cymru are not without competitors in Wales, however they support the bulk of Access learning here. The loyalty institutions show them is helpful in allowing them to develop quality learning resources, and offer additional infrastructure support such as events at which FE staff can come together.

Bangor University/ Grŵp Llandrillo Menai case study

Bangor University (BU), in collaboration with Grŵp Llandrillo Menai (GLIM), has pioneered a partnership aimed at enhancing accessibility to higher education for diverse learners. This collaboration centres around a Foundation Year 0 programme designed to empower students who may not meet traditional entry requirements but aspire to pursue science pathways. The programme links to degrees in four academic schools at Bangor.

GLIM lecturers contribute 80 credits to the Bangor University Foundation Year 0. The collaboration emphasises a seamless experience for learners, preparing them for a four-year undergraduate science degree (including the Foundation Year) at Bangor University.

Strengths of the Collaborative Programme:

1. **Complementary Expertise:** The collaboration leverages the expertise of GLIM staff in delivering essential knowledge and skills, seamlessly

- integrating with Bangor University's specialist undergraduate programmes.
2. Strong Programme Design: A well-structured curriculum enables students to apply skill development modules to their specific science specialisations.
 3. Early University Integration: Delivery of Year 0 at the university ensures students feel part of the University from the outset and are acclimatized to university life, setting them up for success at Level Four.
 4. Widening Participation: Entry criteria include Level 3 study to not compete with existing FE widening participation.

This collaborative initiative embodies a commitment to inclusive education, emphasising the crucial role Further Education plays in preparing learners for successful journeys in Higher Education. The partnership underscores the partners' dedication to continually refining the model for the benefit of students and the broader academic community.

Other providers

A number of other routes into HE were mentioned by interviewees. These included qualifications such as BTEC, which learners may not realise also give access to Higher Education.

The major provider of Access qualifications across Wales is Agored Cymru, with the Open University also offering online distance Access and Foundation learning. Pearl were mentioned, however were thought to be costly in comparison.

One alternative to tertiary sector education appears to be employers undertaking their own training. Councils as well as commercial employers were thought to be using learners' Personal Learning Allowance to fund in-house courses. One provider which used to see learners coming in from local health boards, recently found they have started training in house. Some employers will accept corporate certificates, such as Microsoft badges, rather than college accredited qualifications. These may be better suited to the specific needs of the company ('economic value' paradigm - Butcher and Clarke, 2021), but it is not clear if they provide broader learning and qualification for the learner, to enable them to be mobile across the employment landscape.

Other potential partners and stakeholders

Teaching staff did not appear to be well connected with employers in the local area including businesses and public sector employers, although there may be good connections at a higher institutional level. The cutting of Careers Wales support, and now re-employing and re-training of Business Engagement Advisors, was mentioned as having been short-sighted.

Some universities have connections with schools, either through staff who are School Governors, or partnering schemes (see National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 2017). These tended to be university research and degree teaching staff partnerships, although it is possible that more university and college staff are serving as school governors in a private capacity than institutions realise. Careers Wales are strongly connected with an advisor in all secondary schools, and work with some parents on behalf of pupils they are supporting.

10. Methodology

Project partners – a collaborative approach

Action research

Action research is a democratic and collaborative problem-solving approach which seeks to transform rather than just describe practice (Cohen et al, 2018, p.440).

The project was commissioned soon after the [Tertiary Education and Research \(Wales\) Act, 2022](#), therefore into a policy environment promoting collaboration across tertiary sector providers. Rather than undertake a descriptive project in which the research team collected the views of participants to report these back, it was agreed by the steering group to use the opportunity and actively foster the collaborative network between Further Education and Higher Education institutions. Staff in funded project partner institutions were invited to come to in-person focus group workshops in geographically selected groups: North Wales, South-West Wales and Cardiff capital region, at which they could not only share insights, they could network with other educators and share good practice.

The project partners and some other stakeholders were invited to an online pre-Convention to discuss a working draft of the report distributed a week beforehand. This allowed for continuing collaboration and buy-in across the sector in the geographic groups. Further insight was gained from analysis of the transcripts of breakout discussions.

The project was supported by both a steering group and organisational group, with senior representatives from each partner institution involved. We were able to include two Open University Student Reps in the steering group: embedding Learner Voice in the governance of the project. We were continuously consulting and planning the research with partner FE and HE institutions, and Student Reps, and taking on board reflections for the research.

In-person focus group workshops with staff

Bringing participants together in a way which could foster collaboration proved quite difficult. We did not want to hold online interviews, which might be treated

like the meetings staff have become used to. For logistical reasons, we agreed that it would be best to hold the project pre-Convention online. This did lead to issues such as participants having to come late or leave early due to other commitments arising.

Face to face workshops offered an opportunity to bring FE and HE staff together (we consciously worked not to separate the institutions into two sectors) for a good period of time. They could chat among themselves and form collaborative networks over refreshments. This was successful to the extent that when a fire alarm went off in one workshop, participants continued talking on the stairs going out of the building, with the researcher trying to memorise key information they were still sharing. Some participants were working in the same institution, but only recognised each other's face and name from online meetings: they had not even realised they were working in the same provision. Participants found they had a great deal in common.

“It’s been like a therapy session.”

There were issues related to ongoing concerns about COVID-19 : with late apologies when participants tested positive, and need to consider social distancing for participants who were shielding.

The main issue was geographic distance and lack of time. We tried to negotiate suitable days/times and locations, however staff sometimes signed up then realised other commitments made it impossible for them to attend. Post-pandemic online meetings are still the norm: people have difficulty timetabling the travel for an in-person event.

Staff were keen to contribute and often asked for an alternative if they couldn’t make the workshop. We were able to do a few shorter online sessions, which attendees also described as valuable opportunities to reflect. We were also able to recruit participants from two institutions who were not funded project partners: demonstrating staff commitment to the aims of this project.

We asked partners for their preferred location for the final Convention. Cardiff was the popular choice. Events in mid-Wales, while equidistant for participants, can suffer from the poor WiFi connections which are also a barrier for some learners. For the future, there is value in considering a roster of events at

different institutions: it would be insightful for partners to see each others' facilities and locations.

Social networking analysis (see Home Office, 2016) of both individuals and institutions might offer a useful overview of what partnerships already exist between tertiary sector providers and agencies, helping to identify existing points of collaboration and competition.

Online student participant interviews

To include this particular set of learners in a meaningful way in research is difficult. If learners can't access Access or Foundation education leading to Higher Education because of barriers, those same barriers have to be overcome by researchers reaching out to understand their experience. Asking those in situations of socio-economic deprivation and personal difficulty to give up time to provide their perspective has to be undertaken in a way which respects their contribution. We were advised that a £10 book token is an appropriate recognition, although partners did comment they felt this was below the level needed by student participants. (This form of recognition was chosen partly because the participants were likely to be receiving benefits or grant funding which might be impacted by payments.) We interviewed learners online for their convenience, however this made it difficult for those living in areas of low broadband and mobile signal to take part.

We asked project partners to recruit appropriate student participants for us, providing a brief presentation on ethics and data management and offering further support if needed for this. We contacted 68 students in total, across different institutions. In the end we were able to interview only 7 students and Student Reps. These came from across Wales: North and South, and from both Foundation and Access courses.

We had planned to include 'learner voice' in three ways:

- Ethnographic visits to Employment Agencies and Careers Advice centres during the summer, following exam results, to engage with learners needing to access advice on Access and Foundation courses.
- Interviews with students who had successfully taken up the offer of an Access place.

- Interviews with Student Reps to get a broader overview of student experience.

We were unable to undertake the ethnographic visits due to timetabling issues, however we would recommend these. These could offer detailed understanding of how advice is provided to learners, supporting design and delivery of a map resource of tertiary education provision.

We recommend future work with Student Reps. We found this a valuable means of gaining the views of more than one student: Reps take their role of broader representation seriously and are accustomed to put forward recommendations on the part of their constituents. This way of working also appropriately engages with and supports the democratic structures in learning institutions, potentially leading to institutions further increasing the active inclusion of 'learner voice'.

Student Reps had a better overview and understanding of the barriers which potential Access and Foundation learners face. Those students we managed to recruit were articulate and successful. They provided us with valuable insights, but did not have exactly the perspective we were looking for.

Narrative approach

Narrative interviews (rather than semi-structured interviews) allow participants to tell their own 'stories' - ensuring that their authentic perspectives are represented, rather than the research team's idea of their perspectives (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Rather than a semi-structured set of questions, interviews with all participants (including learners) were initiated with a quick overview of the main themes the research project wanted to cover and then if needed, prompts during the interviews and focus groups. The themes were:

- Views on any barriers to getting onto Access and Foundation programmes, in order to access Higher Education;
- Any interventions institutions were taking to support learners overcome those barriers.

Rich informed discussions took place, with participants keen to offer their understanding. In the focus group workshops with project partner staff, we had the benefit of sometimes accessing views from those who had undertaken PhD or Masters dissertation research into Access, Foundation and early Higher

Education studies – indicating that excellent academic knowledge about the field exists in Wales.

For logistical reasons it was not possible to undertake coding and analysis together with participants, however they were invited to view the write-up of the focus group interviews, to comment or add further insights. The online pre-Convention event also supported stakeholders to comment on the analysis, 'storying the story' (McCormack, 2004).

Inductive thematic analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This allows codes to emerge from the data, rather than the research team developing themes out of the literature or our own prior views, which are then imposed on the data. This supported a more intuitive and participatory conceptual framework, located in the specifics of Access and Foundation provision in Wales. We were fortunate in having academic perspective offered within our focus group workshops and steering group meetings, which supported conceptual thinking from the earliest stages of coding data. Additional understanding was also then developed from relevant literature to support the analysis of the data (specifically the framework: "situational, institutional, dispositional" widely used in widening participation studies).

Learner Voice

The project partnership group were always keen to ensure inclusion of 'learner voice' in the project. There are different definitions of this concept, ranging from simply ensuring the views and perspectives of learners are reflected in research in order to make sure the findings are authentic, to actively empowering learner inclusion in decision-making about their own education provision. (Hart's (1992) ladder of participation, designed to support thinking about children's learner voice, shows different levels of 'learner voice' along a continuum of participation in research.)

We looked for, and found, evidence of active empowerment and inclusion of learner views across the sector, although this is not universal. Where staff are feeding the needs of students up to senior management and asking for resources students are requesting, this is not always recognised as advocacy of

'learner voice'. However Student Reps appeared well integrated into democratic structures of institutional governance.

11. Conclusion

Reflecting in 2020 on 20 years of the journal *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, Butcher regrettably concluded that policies aimed at widening participation remain contentious worldwide. He asked:

“Should we invest in policies which produce real flexibility to enable greater participation?”

The Minister for Education, Jeremy Miles, has maintained a vision of Wales as a ‘nation of second chances’ (2022). He has supported this vision with policies which seek to bring tertiary education together and include learners from many and varied disadvantaged communities. Access and Foundation are the vanguard of wider participation. This research shows that, while there is still work to be done, they are being supported in flexible delivery to learners.

Access and Foundation learning are the second chance for the great majority of learners in Wales. While still fragmented by some competition, institutions providing Access and Foundation courses actively seek to collaborate where possible. The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research being established by the Welsh Government is coming in to an Access and Foundation environment where there is appetite for working together, and passion for supporting adult and post-16 transition learners to be skilled and capable, dynamic and mobile across a rapidly changing economic and employment landscape.

12. References

- Bassett, E. (2022). *Further Educating Rita: Exploring the experiences of working-class women in Further Education*. Master's thesis, The Open University. Available at: https://oro.open.ac.uk/87296/1/BASSETT_E822_VOR.pdf (Accessed 6/12/23.)
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77–101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Butcher, J., Clarke, A., Wood, C., McPherson, E., & Fowle, W. (2019). 'How does a STEM Access module prepare adult learners to succeed in undergraduate science?' *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43(9), pp.1271–1283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2018.1476679>
- Butcher, J. (2020). 'What has been learned from 20 years of published articles on widening participation and lifelong learning?' on Higher Education Policy Institute blog. Available at: <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/01/14/what-has-been-learned-from-20-years-of-published-articles-on-widening-participation-and-lifelong-learning/> (Accessed 6/12/23.)
- Butcher, J., & Clarke, A. (2021). 'Widening HE participation in the arts: Impacts of an access module on learner preparedness'. *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 20(4), pp.403–425. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14740222211004884>
- Butcher, J., & Curry, G. (2022). 'Digital poverty as a barrier to access.' *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 24(2), pp.180–194. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.24.2.180>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2018) *Research Methods in Education*. 8th edn. Oxford: Routledge.
- Corfe, S. (2017). 'Living on the edge: Britain's coastal communities'. *Social Market Foundation*. Available at: <http://www.smf.co.uk/publications/living-edge-britains-coastal-communities/> (Accessed 6/12/2023.)
- Education Wales (2018). *Rural Education Action Plan*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/rural-education-action-plan> (Accessed 6/12/2023.)

Elmi-Glennan, C. (2013). *Influences of Past and Present Relational Social Processes when Entering Higher Education Post 30 Years: Experiential Accounts of Foundation and Year One Students*. PhD thesis, Cardiff Metropolitan University.

Gorard, S., Smith, E., May, H., Thomas, L., Adnett, N., & Slack, K. (2006). *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*. A review for HEFCE. Available at: <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/6204/1/barriers.pdf> (Accessed on 6/12/2023).

Hart, R. (1992) *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF.

Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*, London, Sage.

Holtom, D., Bowen, R. and Pells, H. (2021). *The Benefits to the Individual, to Society, and to the Wider Economy in Wales of Widening Participation in Community-Based Adult Learning: Report for Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales*. Pobl a Gwaith / People and Work: Cardiff.

Home Office (January 2016). *Social Network Analysis: 'How to guide'*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/491572/socnet_howto.pdf (Accessed 5/12/23).

Learning and Work Institute (2022). *Adult Community Learning Impact Report 2022*. Available at: <https://www.learningandwork.wales/resources/research-and-reports/adult-community-learning-impact-report/> (Accessed 17/12/23.)

McCormack, C. (2004) 'Storying stories: a narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 219–36.

Miles, J. (April 2022). 'A Second Chance Nation: Where it's never too late to learn'. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/second-chance-nation-where-its-never-too-late-learn> (Accessed 14/12/2023).

National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2017). 'Lessons from the School-University Partnerships Initiative (SUPI)'. Available at:

<https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/resources/report/lessons-school-university-partnerships-initiative-supi> (Accessed 6/12/2023.)

13. The project partnership

The research team:

The Open University in Wales – internal governance structures, approval and project monitoring: The Strategic Leadership Advisory Team (SALT), OU in Wales

Project sponsor: Lynnette Thomas, Deputy Director, Strategy & Development (Wales)

Project Lead: Darren Jones, Senior Manager, Partnerships

Project Manager: Gareth Harvey, Partnerships Manager

Lead Researcher: Anita Naoko Pilgrim

Research Associate: Maryaa Bibi

Project Team Assistant: Mel Thomas

Acknowledgements

We would like to gratefully acknowledge the support of learners, Student Reps, institutional and organisation staff, who generously supported our project with their knowledge and insights.

Susie Arnold	Clare Glennan	Katherine Murphy
Janet Beauchamp	Samantha Hobby	Ceri Nicolle
Emma Bengar	Darren Howells	Sinéad O'Connor
Bridie Benson	Elisha Hughes	Steven Peacock
Graham Bird	Cindy Hunt	Emma Pearce
Andrew Bond	Emma Hurst	Vinmathi Ponalagappan
Claire Brown	Gemma Ible	Julie Pritchard
Taran Brown-Edwards	Yusuf Ibrahim	Liam Riddiford
Louise Cook	Simon Jenkins	Deirdre Rock
Michelle Cooper	Gareth Jones	Dave Roylance
Teresa Cox	Michelle Kerswell	JoAnna Singh
Iestyn Davies	Claire Leakey	Huw Swayne
James Dawson	Rachel Leighton	Katherine Sweet
Sue Diment	Angela Lewis	Sarah Taylor
Michael Draper	Amy Lewis	Jodie Trotman
Chris Drew	Caroline Lewis	Joshua Vella
Rachel Edmonds-Naish	Conor Merrick	Anne Verries-Wade
Jeremy Edwards	Libby Morgan	Alison Walker
Sandra Fender	Victor Morgan	Marc Welsh
Paul Flanagan	Kelly Murphy	Emma Wheeler

Ceri Wilcock

Tim Woods

Caitlin Woodland

Deborah Youngs

