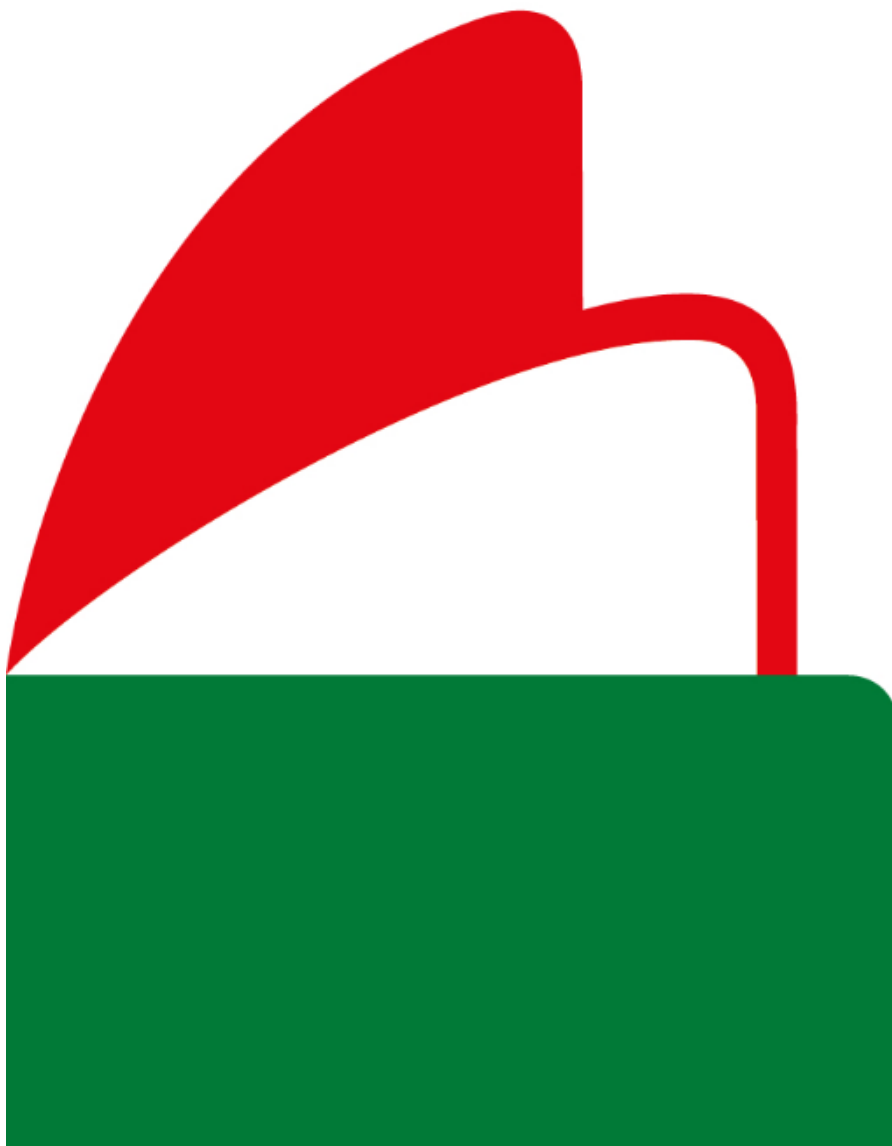




# **National Approach to Professional Learning: Research Report**

## **The Professional Learning Blend 2.0**



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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In 2018 the Welsh Government commissioned eleven research projects<sup>1</sup> to support the development of the new National Approach to Professional Learning (NAPL). One of these, entitled '*The Professional Learning Blend*', was undertaken by the EWC. The subsequent report, examining blended approaches to the delivery of professional learning, was presented at a symposium in October 2018, alongside the other ten projects. This follow-up report, on the theme of blended professional learning, was commissioned by the Welsh Government to develop a deeper understanding of the NAPL's commitment to achieving a professional learning blend.

The National Approach to Professional Learning is the cornerstone of the Welsh Government's ambitious education reform agenda for schools, set out in its National Mission Action Plan 2017-2021 (Welsh Government, 2017). Central to these reforms is the co-construction of a new curriculum, building on proposals contained in '*Successful Futures*' (Donaldson, 2015). It would seem anomalous to have an aspiration for our children and young people to be independent learners with a stimulating and future-facing curriculum while offering our education professionals limited opportunities to transform their own learning and development. This report explores how blended approaches have been used most effectively for professional learning in education, as well as considering their application in other professions. This evidence base has been used to highlight how blended approaches can maximise the design and beneficial impact of professional learning and improve access to learning opportunities for practitioners, including for those at different stages in their careers or living in remote geographical areas.

This report seeks to build on the growing evidence-base regarding models of professional learning to identify how educators in Wales can increasingly take the lead in their own individual learning. At the same time, we are also seeking to consider how learning opportunities can be made available with greater consistency across Wales, so that the positive impact of professional learning on both education professionals and their students is maximised. The report also sets out recommendations for policy makers, detailing how blended approaches can improve professional learning experiences for the education workforce.

### Key questions to be answered

In considering the nature of the professional learning blend required to support the successful introduction of the new curriculum in Wales, we have sought to answer four key questions:

- 1) What are the key elements of an effective professional learning blend?
- 2) Is there evidence that identifies the most effective components of a blended approach?
- 3) Does the evidence point us to elements of a blend that are more suited to developing particular areas of knowledge and skills, particularly in relation to curriculum development and pedagogy?
- 4) What does the evidence say about the how elements of a blend can support and meet the development needs of learners at specific career stages and in different roles?

It is hoped that in seeking to answer these questions, we will contribute to the evidence base regarding professional blended learning and suggest how these approaches can most effectively be used to support the introduction of Curriculum for Wales 2022 and help each individual maximise their potential.

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<sup>1</sup> The projects can be accessed through the Hwb pages outlining the NAPL (Hwb 2019).

## 2. DEFINITIONS

This report considers the National Approach to **Professional Learning** and the **Professional Learning Blend**, set alongside the need to establish a broader **Professional Learning Culture**. Here we explore how these terms are defined, both in this report and in recent academic literature.

### Professional learning

For the purpose of this paper, we subsume the term ‘professional development’ within the term ‘professional learning’. As noted by Jones (2015), ‘professional learning’ is distinct from ‘professional development’ and the former term has now largely supplanted the latter in Welsh Government policy documents. This change in language reflects a growing appreciation of the importance of adaptability and lateral thinking amongst education professionals, reflecting the fast moving nature of the profession and of society:

*‘Professional learning’ involves active learning: it is a continuing process; it focuses on enquiry, analysis, reflection, evaluation, further action; it should be professionally critical; in its best forms it is collaborative; and it enables an approach which is not confined to a linear interpretation of future events and ways of working’* (Jones 2015).

Professional learning therefore encompasses a wide range of activities and experiences that can have a significant and meaningful influence on personal development. Netoliky notes that these can include *‘impactful moments, relationships, conversations, and life events that have the potency to shift core beliefs, shape senses of self, and alter learning trajectories, in nonlinear, viral, and synaptic ways.’* (2016). Professional learning therefore encompasses events and experiences that lie outside traditional conceptions of professional development, but which ‘can be catalysts for deep lasting personal learning and individual change’ (Netoliky 2016).

Calvert (2016) identifies the need for a cultural move amongst education professionals, from ‘compliance to agency’, to make professional learning more effective. This mirrors the increased agency and discretion that teachers and learning support workers will be expected to deploy in the classroom, as the new curriculum is implemented in Wales. As Bodman et al (2012) have argued, *‘rather than acting as a performative robot enacting policy, the teacher becomes an ‘alchemist’, planning and leading learning experiences creatively, flexibly and responsibly and able to do so through informed autonomy’*. To perform such a role effectively, educators will need to exercise greater discretion and autonomy in relation to their own development, as well as being encouraged by leaders at all levels to develop their capabilities within supportive professional learning cultures.

### The ‘professional learning blend’

Blended learning was once understood quite simply, as a combination of online learning and face to face delivery, but as a result of technological advances and new pedagogic approaches, understanding of the concept has become more fluid. Aureccio states that ‘blended learning as traditionally conceived is destined to become a relic of the past’, with increased digitalisation enabling ‘omni-learning...where online and offline are indistinguishable’ (cited in Millar, 2015). A key dynamic in these developments is that it is now possible to interact in real time with tutors, mentors and fellow students without being co-located physically, thus redefining the notion of ‘face-to-face’. The growing prevalence of mobile technologies including smartphones and tablet computers also plays a significant role in transforming this and other aspects of blended learning practice.

A ‘professional learning blend’ can now be best understood as a combination of many forms of learning experiences including formal and informal, individual and group, workplace-based and

located in personal professional spaces, face to face and online, synchronous and asynchronous. An approach can therefore be developed that engages learners using a variety of tools and techniques, including: online provision; individual reflection and enquiry; engagement with professional learning networks; observation of teaching and learning in other classroom environments; mentoring and coaching; and engagement with best practice through local, national and international visits. As noted in our first report: 'It is helpful to see these as potential elements in a mix of professional learning experiences, sometimes blended like a smooth soup, sometimes complementing each other like ingredients in a Welsh cawl' (Jones et al, 2018). Of particular significance, however, is the question: 'who does the blending?' We return to this point later in the report.

On Hwb, the Welsh Government's National Digital Learning Platform, the professional learning blend is referred to as a balance of four approaches:

<b>Live</b>	Instructional or collaborative learning, outside the practitioner's classroom
<b>E-based</b>	Online, using digital tools for accessing content, and for communication and collaboration
<b>Classroom</b>	Practice-based learning, often driven by action research or close to practice research
<b>Coached learning</b>	Working closely with a coach, who can focus on the specific personal learning needs of the practitioner.

In addition to embracing the approaches outlined above, we would argue that the national approach to blended professional learning should also be:

<b>Sustainable</b>	Supported by local and national professional learning cultures, capable of withstanding short-term political and organisational change.
<b>Consistent</b>	In terms of quality and access, providing equitable opportunity for all.
<b>Learner-led</b>	Allowing the learner to play a key role in constructing what they will learn and engaging in a professional learning blend that suits their individual needs.

## Professional learning culture

There is a long history of education reforms faltering at the implementation stage. Long term commitment to professional learning will therefore be required. In this context, it is important to heed the warning of Norris (2004) who argued that,

*'...educational leaders and policy makers should exercise caution when confronted with the trap of immediacy. Intellectual growth takes time. It is a naive and terribly flawed idea that one or two days of study alone will become the catalyst of change for the next twenty years.'*  
(Norris, 2004)

A sustainable approach to professional learning, capable of withstanding potential headwinds, such as future political or organisational changes, is therefore essential. Building such an approach will require a strong lead from the Welsh Government. However, it is of the utmost importance that a strong professional learning culture is embraced by stakeholders at all levels of the education system in Wales. Leaders and individual stakeholders at each of the three levels listed below therefore need to be aware of their responsibilities, as summarised on the following page:

- Macro** There should be a clear, nationally understood conception of what professional learning entails and the alternative learning blends through which it will be experienced. Strong leadership will be required from the Welsh Government and its agencies to set out a coherent national approach that is capable of ensuring that the system is sustainable and resilient. The current National Approach to Professional Learning is a major step towards achieving this.
- Meso** Sub-national organisations involved in the delivery of professional learning, including HEI's, the Welsh Regional Consortia, local authorities, Estyn, the EWC (particularly in our roles as the accrediting body for ITE and the host of the Professional Learning Passport) and the National Academy for Educational Leadership will play a key role in ensuring quality, consistency and equitable access to professional learning opportunities. This will be essential to the achievement of a coherent and credible national approach.
- Micro** Schools will be responsible for establishing a professional learning culture of dynamic engagement and ensuring that all of their staff have access, support and appropriate funding to engage in professional learning that will benefit them as individuals, as well as their institutions and students.
- Equally the commitment of individual professionals is critical. Teachers and support staff will play a crucial role in identifying their learning requirements, selecting the blend through which they can most effectively be provided and reflecting upon their learning.

The Welsh Government has signalled its intention to embrace a collaborative approach, in which stakeholders are engaged in co-constructing the National Approach to Professional Learning. This is commendable and aligns with the view that professionals *develop* (actively) and are not *developed* (passively). The Welsh Government's Professional Standards for teaching and leadership, published in 2017, also place a strong emphasis on the role of professional learning in helping to develop effective pedagogy, stating that 'the teacher is a professional learner and commits to continuous engagement in career long development, collaboration and innovation'. The Professional Standards go on to describe the role of teachers as professional learners and the responsibilities that those in leadership roles have for promoting professional learning:

'The teacher consistently extends knowledge, skills and understanding and can show how reflection and openness to challenge and support informs professional learning to progressively develop pedagogy. The teacher in a formal leadership role stimulates an appetite for professional learning that is valued, has impact upon pedagogy and supports professional growth across a learning community within and beyond the school' (Welsh Government, 2019).

Guided by the NAPL and the Professional Standards stakeholders from each of the tiers outlined above will need collaborate actively to support professional learning. Individuals will need to have access to more than one form of learning, and in their own ways will make the experiences coherent. In this sense it is at the third tier that the key element of the blending takes place, with individuals making sense of their own learning experiences to inform and develop their own practice.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The approaches used to answer the research questions posed in section one can be broadly divided into two phases of work, as was set out in the original project proposal that was agreed with the Welsh Government. The first phase involved undertaking a literature review to deepen our understanding of current ideas around blended professional learning. The second focused on gathering further evidence focussing on the context for the National Approach to Professional Learning, including undertaking interviews with key stakeholders and distributing a questionnaire to practitioners.

#### Phase one - literature review

The literature review examined recent academic and professional literature relating to blended learning. Government reports (both Welsh and international) were also considered, alongside research produced and commissioned by research bodies, regulatory bodies and other organisations. Evidence was sought from both UK and international sources, and was not limited to the field of education.

#### Phase two – further qualitative research

The second phase of the research focused on what can be learnt about approaches to blended professional learning from the experience of stakeholders in the Welsh education system and those working in comparable contexts in other countries and in other industries. Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders were conducted between March and July 2019, either face-to-face, via telephone or through email. These included<sup>2</sup>:

<b>Wales wide organisations</b>	These included Hwb (Welsh Government), Estyn and PebblePad (supplier of the Professional Learning Passport).
<b>Higher Education Institutions</b>	Universities, including the OU, were selected to provide a geographical balance of providers across Wales.
<b>Regional consortia</b>	Two consortia (South East and North Wales) were approached for interviews, selected as representative of consortia provision.
<b>Practitioners</b>	The views of practitioners were sought through interviews with trade unions and through short questionnaires, distributed to teachers and TA's in their schools.

Questionnaires were also sent to other stakeholders with experience of blended learning, including those with experience of blended professional learning for education professionals in other countries, including Scotland, Northern Ireland and Australia. In order to gain a broader perspective, professional bodies for a number of other industries were also contacted for their opinions on blended learning. A core set of questions was used, adapted as appropriate for the specific organisations. These sought to identify:

- Existing and planned provision for professional learning;
- Approaches to blended learning;
- Perceived effectiveness of various elements of the blend;
- Examples of practice; and;
- Lessons learnt from any evaluation of blended learning activity.

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<sup>2</sup> A full list of interviews / those contacted for interview is attached as Appendix A.

In total, interviews provided data from five HEIs, one consortium (the second did not respond to our invitation) and 16 other organisation, both within and outside Wales. Questionnaire responses were returned from 176 practitioners. Within the scope and scale of this project, these data sources were appropriate. However, there were a small number of organisations not included in the sample, that we would have liked to have spoken to if additional time and resources had been available. These are listed (alongside the complete list of interviewees) in Appendix A. In addition, it would have been interesting to have gathered the views of school leaders regarding current practice and this is presented later as a strong recommendation for a future study.

## 4. BLENDING THE APPROACHES TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

It is clear that an increasingly diverse range of activities can contribute to the professional learning blend for education professionals. This may include a combination of: face to face delivery; online learning; individual reflection and enquiry; engagement with professional networks; classroom observation; interacting with colleagues at different career stages; mentoring and coaching. The array of online modes of professional learning is also rapidly expanding and may now include: virtual mentoring; video observation; synchronous and asynchronous online lectures and seminars; social media interactions; and engagement with discussion boards. Emerging technologies, such as virtual reality are also likely to play growing role within the blend.

In this section of the report we explore some of the key elements of successful blended professional learning approaches, highlighted by academic and professional literature and through our own research. Each approach is worthy of its own section and each is informed by a growing range of literature within the field of professional learning. For the purposes of this report we have focused on the emerging area of online provision and simply noted key aspects of other approaches that make up the professional learning blend.

### Online delivery – design factors

Over recent years, online delivery has come to play an increasingly important role within the professional learning blend. It is highly likely that this trend will continue, as new delivery mechanisms emerge and digital infrastructure is improved. As the use of digital technology becomes increasingly prevalent, the ways in which it is used to support professional learning are becoming more diverse, as individuals tailor the way they learn to suit their particular needs, personalities and circumstances.

#### Embedding digital literacy through professional learning

A significant proportion of children in Wales gain their first experiences of using tablets, mobile phones and other similar technologies as toddlers, prior to commencing the Foundation Phase. As such, even the youngest pupils entering Primary education often have basic levels of digital literacy and have an instinctive understanding of how to use a variety of devices, for both learning and entertainment. It is therefore increasingly essential that teachers and school support staff have excellent digital skills, enabling them not only to engage with the full range of learning opportunities available but also to apply these skills creatively and purposefully in their work with other learners. The coordinated integration of new technologies into programmes of professional learning therefore becomes essential. This begins with pre-service preparation, and the radical changes in initial teacher education currently under way in Wales will, hopefully, embed these skills in the pedagogies of new generations of teachers. Beyond ITE, more experienced staff will also need to continually update their skills, to ensure they remain relevant and up date. This will involve a radical, coordinated and funded national approach to the use of new technologies in teaching and learning which must be more than a series of 'courses'. New teacher (and student) leaders will therefore need to be found to promote creative approaches to the use of new technologies in schools and classrooms which will be attractive and essential not only for new teachers but also for mid and late career teachers and for school leaders at all levels.

Through engaging in social interactions in online environments, teachers can also develop increased awareness of other issues such as ethics, privacy, copyright, netiquette and digital literacy (Forbes, 2017). Engaging with digital elements of the professional learning blend is therefore likely to improve digital skills and increase their capacity to embed them into practice. As Jisc argue, 'if staff are



experiencing these delivery methods, with embedded digital skills, they are better prepared to deliver in this way to their pupils' (2019 interview).

### Facilitating interactive learning

Online platforms, employed as part of the professional learning blend, can facilitate interactive approaches to learning that can play a key role in boosting learner engagement. Increasingly, online programmes including MOOC's (Massive Open Online Courses) incorporate extensive interactive elements, alongside traditional course materials, such as recorded lectures and reading lists. Many online courses also incorporate problem solving elements and encourage digital interactions between learners.

Shand et al (2018) found that flexibility and control over work pace were clear benefits in relation to the online element of a blended course for pre-service teachers. Modules that could be completed in chunks were seen as fundamentally important, as were opportunities for formal and informal dialogue. This particular study also highlighted that learners appreciated opportunities to engage in face-to-face peer discussions where students were able to make links between the course content and their practice. Effective time management was a challenge for this group, therefore reminders and prompts, and additional support were also deemed important. Mark Lester of Futurelearn has also lauded the potential of MOOCs as a mechanism for upskilling workers at a large scale, by providing a 'suite of options' to suit the needs of different learners, ranging from those who only want to top up their learning in specific areas to those who wish to study whole degrees. To encourage individuals to 'continuously dip in and out of formal education' Futurelearn has embraced a system of 'micro-credentials' which are awarded for 100 to 150 hours of study and can count towards a formal degree (McKie 2019).

In a study of teachers engaging in a Coursera-run MOOC, Silva (2015) noted that participants felt 'online PD programs have positive impacts on their pedagogic practices and students' achievements'. Bonafini et al (2017b) studied the effect of engagement with videos and forums on participant achievement, finding that engagement in forums has a bigger impact on the probability of MOOC completion (32%) than videos watched (6%). They concluded that designers and instructors should create discussion prompts that foster interactions 'about the deep meaning or application of concepts'. The importance of participant interaction is also underlined by Cisel (2018), who found that in a MOOC environment, it was common for students to work in groups, even where tasks were designed as independent activities. This suggests an inherent need for the provision of collaborative opportunities within online provision.

The challenge for Wales is to stimulate the sharing of new approaches to teaching and learning at local, regional and national levels without resorting to contrived collegiality or short-term linkage. Regional Consortia have recognised the importance of networking and the Regional Support Overview for School Improvement operated by EAS (EAS interview, 2019) outlines how they are working towards a blend of collaborative provision. Networking and collaboration through online interaction need to be prioritised and supported if the multiplier effect of professional learning is to be achieved. There is a clear role for Welsh Government and for Regional Consortia in developing this.

### Social media

It is important to recognise the growing importance of social media within the professional learning blend, including its potential for facilitating networking, interaction and the sharing of information and ideas. Social media can also be particularly useful in enabling interaction between professionals across wide geographical areas and international boundaries; potentially facilitating important learning opportunities. Jones and Dexter (2014) purport that social media is well suited to support

various aspects of formal, informal and independent teacher learning and also identify this mode as important for just-in-time and on-going support. Carpenter and Krutka, (2014) argued that educators valued Twitter's personalised, immediate nature, and the collaborative community it facilitated. In particular, Twitter connected them to educators beyond their own schools and gave exposure to both like-minded and diverse perspectives. These positive comments were echoed in a more recent study by Nochumson (2019) who found that professional engagement through social media helped many combat various forms of isolation. Kaiser (2017) found that social media could help overcome barriers (time, location and funding) but that without training, educators may not 'embrace' social media as a learning tool.

#### Online discussion groups and forums

Engaging in online discussion with peers is increasingly recognised as an important element of the professional learning blend, although Karimi and Ahmad (2013) found that pre-service teachers learnt very little from discussion boards within a blended environment. However, despite highlighting challenges relating to time management, group dynamics, technical issues and individual differences, Kalelioglu and Altun (2012) argue that case based discussion groups in a blended learning environment can help to develop higher order thinking skills.

Research undertaken by Shen et al (2013) relating to an accelerated post baccalaureate teacher education programme, found that participants felt the online environment was better suited to content that was fact-based and self-learning. Online classes were seen as more challenging than face-to-face delivery, with students feeling greater accountability for reading class materials and thinking through a response for online discussion. However, Marchisio et al (2018) highlight challenges in securing active participation in forums. In this respect, learner preferences in the online world need as much consideration as they would in a classroom environment. Individuals all learn differently and Armstrong and Manson (2010) highlight the need to allow teachers the choice of staying silent in online communities. As Marchisio et al (2018) noted, not actively participating online is not necessarily a barrier to learning: whilst those who actively engaged and posted in forums, benefitted from doing so, those who visited to read posts made by others were also seen to acquire new skills.

#### Online engagement and 'flipped learning'

Flipped learning is a pedagogical approach in which 'the conventional notion of classroom-based learning is inverted' (Higher Education Academy, 2019). Students engage with learning materials in advance of classes, allowing face to face delivery to be used to develop a deeper understanding, often through problem solving activities and discussion with peers. Horvitz and Vellom (2012) have highlighted the extent to which engaging with online discussion and reflection in advance of face to face engagement can help students to prepare their thoughts ahead of classroom discussions and help them make deeper and more meaningful contributions to in-class conversations, enriching their experiences. Research undertaken with pharmacy students in a blended environment (Margolis et al, 2017) also indicated that students found that completing online material as part of a pre-class assignment, allowed them to benefit more from structured classroom learning, based on application of that material. Social media can also be used as part of the blend in flipped learning approaches. For example, Tur and Marin (2015) found that Twitter activity had positive effects on preparing individuals for face-to-face debate.

### Offline elements of the blend

The approaches discussed above rely on a variety of forms of online engagement to be effective, as part of a blended approach to professional learning. The Welsh Government has already received reports outlining the benefits of various other approaches to professional learning as part of its first phase of information gathering. These reports are available through the pages on the Hwb website that relate to the NAPL (Hwb 2019), so they will not be discussed in this report, but they include:

- **Mentoring and coaching:** Within a blended approach, opportunities for coaching and mentoring are vastly expanded. Digital platforms offer opportunities for professionals to engage with colleagues from further afield, potentially enabling them to access a wider pool of experience and helping combat professional isolation, particularly for those working in smaller schools in more remote areas.
- **Collaborative enquiry:** Although there is some history of professional research being embedded into practice, the history of higher award participation suggests that learning experiences were rarely blended or collaborative and that results were rarely shared within participants' own organisations. In other words, they were individually-focused activities. The exception to these was in the small number of school-based MA (Ed) programmes which have operated in Wales and (significantly) the national Masters for Educational Practice (MEP)<sup>3</sup>
- **Peer Observation:** The practice of teachers observing each other at work, to develop and improve their performance in the classroom is designed to be a two way process, involving honest feedback. This allows both the observer and the person being observed to benefit from each other's perspectives. Through online platforms education professionals can also engage in peer observation exercises in where they can view practice from outside their own schools. For example, a large number of participants could potentially observe an exemplar lesson and participate in a discussion about what they had seen, what they had learned from it, how practice could be further improved and how the knowledge they had gained could be applied in the context of their own practice. Such a session could be observed either synchronously (in real time) or asynchronously (recorded and watched at the convenience of the viewer). Furthermore, there might also be observers present in the classroom itself during the same session, allowing online and face to face delivery to be combined within one session.
- **Professional Learning Networks / Professional Learning Communities.** These are designed to foster collaborative learning amongst professionals, preferably in a critical but secure environment. As with the other elements discussed above, online elements can play a significant role in facilitating dialogue and the sharing of ideas. Online platforms, including Hwb networks can also play an important role in combating isolation and connecting individuals with colleagues who have similar interests.

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<sup>3</sup> The MEP is discussed in further detail within section 5.

## 5. CURRENT PICTURE: WALES AND BEYOND IN 2019

Our research has attempted to identify key issues relating to the professional learning blend in Wales. In this section of the report we look at how practitioners currently engage with professional learning in Wales. We also examine approaches to professional blended learning in education in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Australia, as well as considering relevant practice in several other professions.

### The current picture in Wales: Welsh Government, Higher Education Institutions, Regional Consortia, providers, practitioners

There are currently 80,822 education practitioners registered with the EWC, across seven registrant groups: School Teachers; Work Based Learning Practitioners; Youth Workers; School Learning Support Workers; FE Learning Support Workers; and Youth Support Workers. 35,187 of current registrants are school teachers, with the number of school learning support workers almost on a par, at 33,182. Collectively, these two groups make up almost 85% of the registered workforce (Source: EWC Register of Education Practitioners, March 2019).

As noted in our previous report, there is already experience of disparate elements of the professional learning blend in Wales. There are also pockets of high quality (and innovative) practice, though many have been developed in isolation rather than making up a coherent learning offer. For example, recent years have witnessed the advent of professional learning communities, self-improving schools, the Masters in Educational Practice and Welsh Government Continuing Professional Development programme, as well as a range of programmes provided by the four regional consortia. The Welsh Government also recently announced an initiative with the Open University to develop alternative routes into teacher education and a flexible blended learning approach is integral to this.

The National Education Workforce Survey (EWC, 2017) provides an insight into the types of professional development and learning activity being undertaken by school teachers in Wales. It is clear from this data that teachers are engaging with a plethora of learning opportunities. For example:

<b>76.8%</b>	Attended courses, workshops, conferences, seminars (including e-learning)
<b>73.1%</b>	Had colleagues observe their teaching and give feedback
<b>46.3%</b>	Read publications, books, journals, article (hard copy or online) or researched new developments
<b>39.3%</b>	Mentored or coached others
<b>32.8%</b>	Participated in collaborative learning with colleagues in school
<b>10.5%</b>	Studied for an academic qualification such as a Masters

Source: National Education Workforce Survey (EWC, 2017)

Taken at face value these figures show an active engagement in a variety of approaches to professional learning, but the figures don't reveal the impact of this learning on practice. Also, it is unclear whether those who engaged in, for example, collaborative learning were the same or different respondents to those for the other categories. Arguably, a figure of nearly 25% of respondents not engaging in key approaches to professional learning as implied in the first category is too high and clearly further research looking in more depth at patterns and, more importantly, impact of professional learning in Wales is required.

## **Practitioner questionnaire**

As part of the research for this report, a paper-based questionnaire, was distributed to practitioners attending EWC Professional Learning Passport presentations between April and June 2019 (see Appendix D.) Data from this provides further insight into the current professional learning blend across Wales. The sessions were delivered to teachers and learning support assistants across the country in both Welsh and English-medium schools. The questionnaire sought to identify the types of professional learning activity that practitioners have been undertaking, where the activity typically took place, and any use of online learning. The activities listed were adapted from the National Education Workforce Survey (EWC, 2017). As a key resource for education practitioners, the questionnaires also sought to gain information about the use of Hwb.

The survey was completed by 176 respondents, including a mix of classroom based teachers, learning support workers, teaching assistants and individuals in various leadership roles. In the main, returns indicate that the vast majority of learning activity is taking place either within a practitioner's own school or in other schools, rather than in alternative locations. This may be attributable to challenges linked to funding external professional learning activity and the cost implications of associated supply cover requirements, but may also be a reflection of the trend towards more school-based approaches to professional learning. There is also some evidence to suggest that practitioners are collaborating via online platforms such as Hwb and the Professional Learning Passport.

The range of professional learning that respondents were engaged with over the previous 12 months is detailed in the table on the following page, listed from the most to the least commonly reported types. In relation to each type of activity they had engaged in, respondents were also asked to indicate whether there had been an e-learning element involved. The proportion of respondents who indicated that there was, for each type of professional learning, is indicated in the right hand column, in brackets.

These survey responses provide a snapshot of the approaches to professional learning undertaken by attendees the EWC's PLP training events. As such, they can be considered to provide an indication the range of professional learning that teachers and school support staff are engaged in and also the variety of different types of learning activity in which online activity of different sorts is being used as part of a blended approach (albeit that the sample size is very small, in the context of the overall workforce). The results show a significant proportion of practitioners engaged in shared practice, either through observation or actual demonstration and a wide variety of approaches to professional learning. Of less surprise because it is an emerging area is the relatively low use of e-learning and further research is required to examine these trends in more detail.

<b>% engaged</b>	<b>Type of Professional Learning</b>	<b>% with e-learning element</b>
<b>70%</b>	Had colleagues observe their teaching and give feedback	<b>8%</b>
<b>67%</b>	Observed colleagues' teaching or work shadowed them	<b>24%</b>
<b>65%</b>	Shared or demonstrated best practice with others	<b>10%</b>
<b>63%</b>	Made use of new technologies	<b>13%</b>
<b>62%</b>	Read publications, books, journals, articles etc.	<b>36%</b>
<b>61%</b>	Attended courses, workshops, conferences, seminars (Inc. e-learning)	<b>23%</b>
<b>53%</b>	Had been part of a Professional Learning Community	<b>13%</b>
<b>53%</b>	Undertaken collaborative learning with colleagues in your school	<b>32%</b>
<b>52%</b>	Worked on something new (e.g. an initiative, project, activity, teaching a new subject / year group)	<b>26%</b>
<b>52%</b>	Acquired new skills or knowledge as part of a new post or role	<b>22%</b>
<b>40%</b>	Mentored or coached others	<b>14%</b>
<b>26%</b>	Undertook collaborative learning outside of your school (including online such as Hwb networks)	<b>35%</b>
<b>26%</b>	Received support from a mentor or coach	<b>27%</b>
<b>23%</b>	Undertaken action research / enquiry	<b>30%</b>
<b>18%</b>	Followed a national programme (e.g. Induction or NPQH)	<b>19%</b>
<b>14%</b>	Studied academic qualifications (e.g. a Master's degree)	<b>46%</b>
<b>1%</b>	Undertook no professional development activity over the previous year	

Source: EWC questionnaire 2019

## Hwb

Hwb is the Welsh Government's single strategic channel for providing digital content to education stakeholders across Wales. The platform is therefore central to the provision of a professional learning blend in Wales, as well as facilitating teaching and pupil assessment. Hwb provides a point of entry to a range of services and content supporting digital classroom practices. It also provides access to other services once users have logged in, including Office 365, Google for education, Just2easy, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom and online personal assessments. Non-learners can set up networks on Hwb (on a particular topic) enabling collaboration and the sharing of ideas, and can also create 'playlists' for specific topics (e.g. Governors' mandatory training, teaching and learning, promotion of the new curriculum etc.). Resources are aligned to the new curriculum and every teacher (including supply teachers), TA, staff member and learner in Wales has a single sign-in enabling them to access all of these tools.

The Welsh Government operates a Hwb support centre, providing online support materials and help for users. The WG also provides grants to the regional consortia, helping them to support schools in adopting Hwb through training and support, including through face to face sessions, drop ins to schools for inset days and 'Hwb meets' (informal after school meetings, led by teachers). The training is focused on sharing best practice and innovative ideas and applying them to real world situations and experiences - showing people how Hwb can make their life easier and transform their delivery (Hwb interview, 2019).

The system has evolved in recent years and many of the new services (such as Google Classroom and Office365) were added following the closure of Hwb Plus, the Welsh Government's previous virtual learning environment. This has led to increased engagement levels, with recent WG data suggesting that 97% of schools in Wales are now using the platform (Hwb, 2019). The Welsh Government also has dashboards enabling them to monitor usage at the level of the Regional Consortia, Local Authorities and individual schools. They can also see how often individual services (such as Office 365 and Google Classroom) are being accessed. This data is shared with the Regional Consortia and Local Authorities, helping them to build their support offer. However, it is not currently possible to analyse whether particular groups of teachers (e.g. Headteachers, supply staff) or individuals from particular demographic groups are accessing the site more than others. More sophisticated data gathering could therefore play a role in allowing Regional Consortia in particular to look at specific usage and to advise on content. The Welsh Government also do not currently hold data around how well equipped the workforce is to use the services (Hwb interview, 2019). Data from our own questionnaire shows that a significant majority of respondents, when asked to rate their own level of ICT competence, described themselves as being either very confident (23%) or fairly confident (63%); only 16% of respondents described themselves as 'not very confident and 0% responded that they were 'not confident'.

Practitioners completing the EWC questionnaire were also asked about their use of Hwb. Of those responding, 83% said that they had made use of Hwb over the previous 12 months, against just 17% who had not, indicating that use of the platform is widespread. When asked to identify the most beneficial aspects of Hwb, respondents gave a wide range of answers suggesting that individuals are making use of it for a variety of purposes. The most popular aspects of Hwb amongst respondents were its capacity to facilitate various forms of professional networking, as well as the access that it provided to particular applications, including Office 365, email and Just2easy. When asked about how Hwb could be improved, a number of issues were raised, including that the system could be more user friendly (easier to navigate) and problems with logging in. A small number of respondents also stated that it had not yet been introduced in their schools.

### The Professional Learning Passport (PLP)

Since its introduction in 2016, the Professional Learning Passport has become an increasingly important element of the professional learning blend in Wales, allowing registrants to keep a comprehensive record of their professional learning and acting as a reflective journal. The PLP also functions as an interactive CV, through which practitioners can keep a full record of their qualifications and information on informal learning that they have undertaken. In addition, the PLP allows users to upload and share documents, videos presentations and audio files, as well as providing access to EBSCO<sup>4</sup>.

There is a growing appreciation amongst practitioners in Wales that professional learning embraces a diverse blend of activities. However, many registrants continue to think of professional learning in quite traditional ways. For example, there is evidence to suggest that 'on the job' elements of the professional learning blend are sometimes underappreciated, whilst UNISON reported that its members largely viewed professional development through the prism of formal training opportunities and certification. As such, other forms of professional learning, such as the informal sharing of best practice with colleagues, are not always recognised, recorded or formally reflected on (UNISON interview, 2019). Increasing engagement with Professional Learning Passports, as a mechanism for recording and reflecting on professional development that has been undertaken, could play an important role in changing this mindset.

Through promoting reflective practice, the PLP can act as a platform through which registrants can purposefully think about the learning they have undertaken and consider future learning requirements. However, Estyn (2019 interview) noted the PLP is sometimes not being used to its full potential by all registrants. The NEU noted that engaging with the PLP is more natural for newly qualified teachers already used to using it as tool to map professional learning that they have undertaken against professional standards, whilst more experienced teachers are perhaps less aware of how useful the tool can be (NEU interview, 2019). EWC is currently undertaking a rolling programme of school visits, training staff in how to use the PLP, with a view to encouraging NQT's to continue using the passport and increasing use of the passports amongst more experienced staff.

### HEI provision

Universities play an essential role within the professional learning blend in Wales, both in terms of enhancing the professional learning offer that is available for students and existing registrants and impacting on practice. As well as offering accredited ITE programmes and a variety of postgraduate teaching qualifications, universities also have a broader role to play in creating and promoting a positive professional learning culture, including through working with individual schools and clusters of schools within their regions.

Accredited learning provided by universities remains an important part of the professional learning blend and has a key role to play in broadening skills and knowledge and in creating 'communities of practice that otherwise would not be possible, including networks that promote cross-phase interaction' (UWTSD interview 2019). Initial teacher education in Wales incorporates a range of blended learning approaches, including face to face taught elements, school based provision and online provision. These modes are designed to be complementary and focus on developing communities of practice and learner reflection, as well as practical classroom skills. However, practitioners involved in initial teacher education programmes have highlighted the need to enhance the online offer that is currently available, with the aim of developing models that are more effective at encouraging active participation (Cardiff Met interview, 2019). The reconfiguration of initial teacher

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<sup>4</sup> An online portal to over 4,500 academic journals and e-books.



education has generated new partnerships and networks bringing together clusters of schools and teachers at all levels. This is a significant development, potentially creating inclusive and collaborative networks led by a combination of Higher Education and school practitioners, building on critical consideration of education research, incorporating small scale research undertaken by participants and focused on practice. In building this provision the past experience of leaders is extremely valuable.

The Open University is the leading provider of part time online professional learning programmes for the education sector in Wales, offering a range of 'digitally badged' courses, which address areas such as 'Improving Practice through Research' and 'Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement'. The OU's approach to professional development is school-based, rather than HEI-led, recognising that professional development often takes place most effectively within the classrooms. The courses are structured around three elements: face to face (though not necessarily meaning co-located in one physical location); peer support and peer working; and structured independent learning (continuous engagement with text, audio and video). The OU emphasised the importance of bridging the gap between theory and practice, arguing that:

*'When activities are local to the student and their practice it gives them the levers for change. Our approach is closer to practice than traditional university-based models...The gap between traditional 'training' and practice is too big to have an impact' (OU interview, 2019).*

At a higher level, and enhancing the professional learning blend, is the steady increase in doctoral programmes being offered in education in Wales. At UWTSO, the new Ed. D. has been 'constructed along blended learning lines from the start' (UWTSO interview 2019). Although take-up nationally is low at this stage, it is important that these programmes exist to ensure that the blended learning offer is as broad as possible. Staff from Swansea University have been involved with Masters programmes overseas and in the UK that were 'authentically blended – woven into a professional learning experience'. This experience is being used in building a new M level programme that will be blended in similar ways (using both synchronous and asynchronous approaches) and 'online activities will be a key element of this' (Swansea University interview, 2019).

As these new or newly formatted programmes come into existence, HEIs will be in an excellent position to work across agencies, supporting Regional Consortia and schools in creating collaborative cultures of professional learning. A key challenge will be for this collaborative practice to be consistently applied across Wales and Welsh Government may have a role to play here in creating a body with representatives from a broad range of stakeholders to advise on the coherent provision of professional learning in all regions and evaluate the impact of different approaches. Equally, HEI's could work in partnership with the Welsh Government in providing a platform for national programmes of learning (for example, around areas such as leadership, Welsh language or STEM). Regional partners (the consortia) and experts in local institutions could then adapt content to meet local needs (OU interview, 2019).

## Learning from experience

In our first report we stated that an excellent example of blended professional learning existed close to home, in the Masters in Educational Practice (MEP) programme. The programme was run by an alliance of four Universities (Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff and the Institute of Education at University College London (UCL)) and led by Cardiff University. Welsh Government provided funding support for five years and the first cohort of teachers began the programme in the autumn of 2012. The programme ended in 2017 with the non-renewal of funding support.

The MEP provided challenge and support for Beginning Teachers in a variety of ways including:

- Face-to-face professional support from academic tutors for completion of the Master's modules and professional enquiry;
- Critical engagement with academic and professional literature;
- Structured and continuing professional dialogue with mentors both in school and during programmed Learning Event Days at an external venue;
- Emphasis on reflective, research-informed practice through critical enquiry of their own teaching and professional learning;
- Formation of professional learning communities which provided opportunities for Beginning Teachers to engage in secure, critical discussion
- Online discussion boards enabling teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-mentor interaction;
- Engagement with dedicated resource support and other academic and professional materials in English and Welsh through a Virtual Learning Environment;
- Guidance and support in maintaining a Professional Learning Journal to record and enable critical reflection on professional learning (Jones, Evans and Roles 2018).

The example of a professional learning blend provided by the MEP could have given Wales a leading edge in the coherent national provision of professional learning. Our interview with the former co-Director of the MEP highlighted a number of specific positive aspects of the programme, including the way in which it helped to build capacity for further professional learning support within Wales and the mentoring relationships that were built, which student feedback indicated was the most impactful element of the programme. Another aspect of the blend was the online provision, but the views expressed on this were mixed views:

- Online elements were seen as perfunctory rather than integrated into professional learning.
- A range of approaches were used including WhatsApp groups developed (by students), Hwb, Office 365, Wikkis and blogs. However, 'it was difficult to prescribe what would work...Everyone operates in their own time so when do busy professionals do this? You can't force professionals to use personal time to do these things...'
- Although the VLE material was downloadable so could be seen off line, the technical challenges presented by incorporating the VLE / online component were underestimated.

It is felt now that:

*'the quality of this e-learning provision would be difficult to replicate beyond a dedicated programme...If we were to look at rolling out e-learning programmes nationally this might hit problems with HEIs having different VLEs. Hwb may be the solution but there would be some way to go. Institutional buy-in from different HEIs would be needed. Welsh Government would need to take ownership of any such programme and recruit people into a National Accreditation Board to step up to this level of engagement for a pan-Wales accredited programme.'* (MEP interview, 2019)

It is important that the experiences gained through the MEP are not lost if authentic approaches to blended professional learning are to be achieved in Wales. At the time of writing all nine Welsh HEI's are collaborating on the accreditation of professional learning in Wales and considering a new pan-Wales Masters in Education, which would be delivered through blended learning (Cardiff Met interview, 2019) and a number of parallel initiatives looking at aspects of professional learning have been instigated. It will be important for the findings of these to be communicated as clearly as possible to all stakeholders and interested parties if a coherent, blended approach is to be achieved.

### Regional consortia

The role of Regional Consortia is central in providing, monitoring and evaluating the professional learning opportunities necessary for appropriate blended learning. Consortia have structures and staff in place to oversee and coordinate professional learning support in their regions. They are also engaged in the cross-regional networking and provision essential to ensure consistency and coherence of an all-Wales approach. One consortium for which evidence was made available for this project is making excellent progress in establishing regional support for school improvement, including the identification of Learning Network Schools, support for curriculum reform, providing PL to support collaboration in leadership and pedagogy alongside peer working/networking, and whole-workforce recognition including support for teaching assistants and governors (EAS interview, 2019).

The *Schools as Learning Organisations* initiative is seen as collaborative and cross-regional, with a 'planned, strategic, well-marshalled approach' (EAS interview 2019). The identification of Professional Learning Leads and the movement towards Critical Collaborative Professional Enquiry for school clusters has been encouraging. The initiatives are interactive and are closely linked to the NAPL and the new standards. Different agencies are also being used by one consortium to provide professional learning support (for example leadership coaching). Although the provision of blended approaches to learning is in its early stages, there is evidence from evaluations that good progress is being made. The challenge in Wales is for all consortia to mirror the best practice that is emerging, and for all schools in consortia to actively seek access to the varied approaches on offer and share these for the benefit of all staff.

### Professional learning for teaching assistants and support staff

It is important to remember that professional learning is essential for school support staff as well as for teachers and school leaders. In 2018 there were over 32,662 support workers registered with the EWC across Wales (EWC, 2018) and, in its National Mission statement, the Welsh Government pledges to 'develop standards for support staff that can enable them to improve their skills, commit to professional learning and facilitate clearer pathways to the role of higher level teaching assistant (HLTA)' (Welsh Government, 2017). Blended approaches to the professional learning of support staff also need to be considered for this support to have maximum effect.

UNISON (2019 interview) highlighted the particular professional learning needs of school support staff and the implications of those needs for the professional learning blend. Many support staff experience challenges in accessing professional learning and are often not afforded the same opportunities (and time out of the classroom) for professional development as teachers. Notably, a significant proportion of support staff have not progressed in their careers through traditional academic pathways. A professional learning blend that is interactive and collaborative, rather than passive and theoretical is therefore often the most successful way to engage with these groups. UNISON has traditionally encouraged its members to access training and to develop their careers through a variety of methods, including face to face learning, mentoring and online provision.

Union Learning Representatives (ULRs) play an important role in promoting professional learning, focussing on the needs of individuals and the issues that they face in the workplace (Alexandrou, 2008) and those who hold such roles will need to be aware of and encourage varied opportunities for learning. In partnership with the Open University (OU) in Wales, UNISON delivers a range of courses for teaching assistants, held on Saturdays in central Cardiff. Delivery is face to face and highly interactive and covers subjects (including literacy, behaviour management and maximising attainment) which are central to the curriculum in Wales. In their first year these courses were attended by over 300 Teaching Assistants and were massively oversubscribed (UNISON interview 2019). Other professional learning support available through UNISON and some HEIs is provided through a blend of online, face to face delivery and mentoring, including access to open online courses, via OU Open Learn and Future Learn.

Concern was expressed that provision of core professional learning of this nature during the working week is inconsistent across Wales and it is to the credit of so many teaching assistants that they are willing to sacrifice time on their weekends to develop their knowledge and skills. UNISON (2019 interview) note that there are signs of change, with schools beginning to contact them with a view to running these training sessions on INSET days (also opening sessions to staff from nearby cluster schools). However, this remains rare and the union remains concerned that its members are still unable to access to training 'in the same way that other professionally registered staff do'.

#### The professional learning blend for school inspectors in Wales

A blended approach is also used to facilitate the training of school inspectors working for Estyn. Initial peer inspector training<sup>5</sup> is blended and involves reading materials being sent out for learners to engage with in advance of detailed face to face training sessions. This 'flipped learning' approach has proven effective, with evaluations and feedback suggesting the whilst face to face delivery is the most effective element of the blend, having preparatory materials in advance helps enable deeper understanding (Estyn interview, 2019). Training is followed by an assessment. There are also regular update training sessions, highlighting new findings, emerging practice and changes in the system. A collaborative, networking approach is used.

The 'flipped' blended learning approach is also used to train Registered Inspectors (HMI's). Training is intense with participants required to undertake a lot of prior learning before attending day-long face to face sessions. Once appointed new inspectors attending their first inspection are paired with an experienced colleague who acts as an assessor and mentor, whilst also being ready to step in, if there are any issues. This experience will be helpful because it will be important for the quality of professional learning engagement to be adequately considered by Estyn in its inspection of schools. If inspectors have a good understanding of how different approaches can and should be blended and how the impact of professional learning on pupil learning can be made most effective this will continue to raise the profile and importance of achieving a National Approach to Professional Learning in Wales.

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<sup>5</sup> All school inspection teams include a current Head Teacher or Deputy Head Teacher, to ensure that a practitioner perspective is taken into account.

## International Approaches

### Scotland

The reform journey in Scotland, associated with the implementation of their 'Curriculum for Excellence' (CfE), provides a useful reference point for Wales, in terms of the step change in the professional learning that will be required to implement 'Successful Futures'. A recent report from the Institute of Welsh Affairs, draws on perceptions of colleagues in Scotland:

*'Continuing Professional Development (CPD) was considered by some (of the Scottish interviewees) to be an omission during the early stages of implementation of Curriculum for Excellence. Some stakeholders believed that unless a new curriculum and CPD are developed in unison, teachers will not have adequate support required to deal with the changes. There was recognition that the work happening in Wales around CPD and teacher training is a positive step and is important that it happens alongside the development of the new curriculum' (Begum and Stevens, 2019. p. 20).*

In common with Wales, large parts of Scotland (such as the Highlands and Islands) are rural and remote. This has had significant implications for the professional learning blend. The Scottish College for Educational Leadership, part of Education Scotland (the Scottish national improvement agency for education) reports that *'feedback from teachers suggests that they are still keen to engage face-to-face in collaborative learning'*, however, offering such experiences was not always possible, particularly for rural communities and in circumstances where it is more difficult for individuals to gain release from school for professional learning. Accordingly:

*'Our provision tends to take a facilitative approach engaging with participants as learners with a range of experiences that they build upon. It's our experience that having a blend of approaches to professional learning at every career stage is helpful.'* (SCEL interview).

Teaching staff in Scotland also have access to professional learning resources through the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), including an online magazine (produced every two months). Other resources include regular webinars, with recent topics including mental health and maths. As well as being available to view and engage with in real time, webinars are also recorded and remain on the website as resources that can be engaged with asynchronously. GTCS also previously produced a series of Podcasts which discussed issues including probation, online safety and LGBT issues, which continue to remain available through the website. The GTCS's Twitter account is also used to engage with probationers on professional learning issues. The GTCS also provides teachers with access to education journals, via an EBSCO package. However, this offer is largely focused on those undertaking formal programmes of study, accredited through the GTCS.

Another interesting aspect of the professional learning blend in Scotland is the collaborative approach to learning there, facilitated through 'Teacher Learning Communities' which has been highlighted by Minty and Priestley (2014):

*'It was felt that involvement in Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) was one such way of engaging teachers, because of the perceived 'non-threatening' format... Teachers on the whole highly valued the opportunity to meet with colleagues and discuss their experiences of and concerns about CfE, mainly because, as an interviewee noted, 'people just don't get the time to think, share ideas and perhaps allay the fears that there are amongst staff'. Encouraging teachers to take ownership by having them develop units of work for example... was also seen as important.'* (p.37)

Teachers in Scotland also valued the development of more school-based CPD, focused on working with department and stage colleagues, and an emphasis on generative, collegial dialogue with external input to generate new ideas and new practices.’ (Minty and Priestly, 2014). In seeking to develop the national approach to professional blended learning in Scotland, the SCEL has led an engagement exercise, to identify what teachers thought made for good professional learning. This indicated that teachers favoured professional learning which enabled them to talk to other teachers and share their experiences about learning, teaching and leadership. The research resulted in a report which included a number recommendations, including identifying a key role for Education Scotland in shaping the professional learning culture, stating that it should:

*‘Provide the policy framework and support to facilitate a fundamental shift in career-long professional learning based on achieving the best balance between teacher-led and system-led approaches.’*

## **Australia**

As Australia operates a federal political system, there are significant variations in approaches to professional learning in different parts the country. There are a number of areas of practice relevant to the matters under discussion that are worth highlighting.

### Victoria

In Victoria State teachers are required to undertake a minimum of 20 hours professional development annually to fulfil registration requirements. In doing so, registrants are able to choose the types of activity that they undertake, in the context of their own needs, the needs of learners and priorities of their learning environment or sector.

A notable aspect of professional learning culture in Victoria relates to the support available for casual relief teachers (CRT’s). A 2007 parliamentary committee inquiry into professional learning identified CRT’s as requiring more support in their professional development, to fulfil their registration requirements. As a result CRT networks were established, with the support of the Victorian Department for Education and Training. These created an avenue for CRT’s to share professional knowledge and undertake relevant professional learning. The networks run on a voluntary basis and usually have regular face to face meetings to share ideas, take part in discussions and receive presentations from external providers. To enhance this blend, the networks also communicate through a website and through social media, providing support and facilitating connections. Upcoming professional learning opportunities are also advertised through these platforms.

### Queensland

Teachers in Queensland are also required to undertake at least 20 hours of professional learning annually to maintain their registration. Practitioners are required to undertake a range of professional learning activities and the approach is designed to facilitate a balance between training requirements identified by employers (schools) and those identified by teachers themselves. Digital portfolios are used (with templates created using iTunes U), which include a discussion tool feature, allowing for synchronous feedback. The body provides guidance as to what can be included as professional development activity and this includes webinars, online networks and discussion groups in addition to more traditional opportunities to engage, such as at conferences.

## South Australia

The Teacher Registration Board of South Australia (TRBSA) has undertaken significant research in the area of teacher professional development and the professional learning blend. As a regulatory body, they provide a number of face-to-face opportunities to support teachers in fulfilling their CPD requirements and also hold annual conferences on a variety of topical education subjects.

TRBSA note that 'a blend of approaches is more likely to be impacted by the employment of teachers and their ability to readily access different types of professional learning.' From their experience, 'the number of years teaching does not seem to influence the professional learning activities selected or preferred by teachers' (in the context of meeting the required number of hours professional learning requirement).

*'Without doubt face-to-face fills a real need with many teachers because learning is a social construct ...Online learning, such as participation in Massive Open Online Courses) etc., provides an opportunity to engage with others but for many teachers this is not the same as sharing a conversation around a table.'* (TRBSA, 2019)

Indeed, the research conducted in 2016 highlighted that teachers felt that face-to-face learning was the most impactful mode of professional learning (70% indicated this was 'high impact') compared with 21% feeling online learning was 'high impact'.

### **The professional learning blend in other professions**

As well as looking at practice in the education sector, both inside and outside Wales, we also examined approaches to the use of blended professional learning in a number of other professions, which may offer valuable lessons. In many professions, formal requirements exist in relation to the undertaking of CPD, either for maintaining registration or demonstrating 'fitness to practise'. Particular requirements stipulated by the regulators and professional bodies are generally evidence-based, but driven by other factors e.g. technological advancements, accessibility/inclusivity and value for money. Approaches observed range from complete autonomy for selecting professional development activities, to more structured approaches.

The **Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA)**, has recently moved from an hours-based approach to demonstrating competence to one which allows the professionals they regulate to have complete autonomy over their own professional development and learning. This enables individuals to self-select professional learning activities based upon their particular needs. They have also moved away from accrediting professional development activity. The SRA note the extent to which this marks a fundamental cultural shift and has acknowledged that in hindsight certain aspects of this change could have been approached differently.

The SRA published a research report entitled *Workforce Education and Training Arrangements in Regulated Entities* in 2014, which looked at the professional learning available to qualified staff and others providing legal services. Teaching strategies being used included: external training, online learning, checking of outputs, discussion of cases, reflective learning, internal training, mentoring, work shadowing and 'role stretching'. An important question raised by the study was that of whether the same consideration was being given to 'on the job' training approaches (such as work shadowing, mentoring or discussion of cases) and whether these should be documented to the same extent as participation in external training, in particular the report noted that, 'some of the 'less recorded' learning, education and training strategies are among those perceived to be most effective for some staff grades' (IFF and Sherr, 2014).

The SRA's research has also considered the significance of 'on the job' elements of professional learning in the context of the intention, within the legal profession, to shift towards more outcome-focused learning, education and training and states that this:

'will require a considerable change of approach among some entities, as systems for determining the impact of learning, education and training or prompting individuals to reflect on its outcomes are relatively uncommon' (IFF and Sherr 2014).

Reflecting on learning has become a key component of professional learning requirements for many regulatory bodies, but this also brings challenges. Not all professionals have knowledge or experience of working in this way, and some may require support. The **General Pharmaceutical Council**, for example, proposed a new framework for pharmacy professionals in 2017, and consulted on their new approach. Their analysis of responses (GPhC, 2017) highlighted some concerns about reflective practice particularly for two groups of registrants: pharmacy technicians, and pharmacists towards the end of their careers who may struggle to adapt.

The **Institute of Groundsmanship (IOG)** has an online platform (Moodle) which hosts all of their professional development qualifications and blended learning courses. The IOG noted the practical nature of many of the skills that its professionals need to learn, noting that this 'lends itself to physical demonstrations / videos rather than text explanations. Video capture by learners of their practical activities which can then be discussed with a tutor is also of benefit'. Their experience is that interactive questions and immediate feedback from questions on Moodle are effective as these help to reinforce what has been learnt:

'Learning theory online (the theory is covered first followed by a practical session) which is then combined with practical elements in a physical session helps learners to engage more and answer queries they may have built up, in face to face situation' (IOG interview, 2019).

The **General Optical Council (GOC)**, operates a points-based system in relation to education and training, but have imposed a limit on the number of points that can be gained from non-interactive CPD. This was as a result of research they conducted in 2010 that identified particular risks relating to those completing a large proportion of their CPD requirement via text-based distance learning. New approaches to fulfilling CPD requirements are based upon encouraging increased interaction with peers to prevent professional isolation. Accordingly, at least half of development activity now has to be completed in an interactive setting. The regulator has also consulted on their scheme further (2018) and this identified several areas for improvement:

- the scheme should be more accessible, with more learning opportunities at a local level, online or free of charge;
- more could be done to promote and enable a culture of lifelong learning; and;
- registrants should have more control over their own learning and development, but the correct balance between autonomous and mandatory learning needs to be established to prevent de-skilling.



## 6. DISCUSSION

### **Aligning the professional learning blend with the national mission objectives**

As we introduce a new National Approach to Professional Learning in Wales, it is important to ensure strategic alignment with the Welsh Government's broader vision for education in Wales. Within 'Education Wales: our national mission. Action plan 2017-21', the aspiration for professional learning is clear:

'An education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers, and our new curriculum cannot be delivered without a well-supported, aspirational and inspirational teaching profession. The world's highest-performing education systems have vibrant, engaged educators and support staff who are committed to continuous learning. We will support teachers in Wales to be lifelong professional learners that reflect on and enhance their own practice to motivate and inspire the children and young people in their care' (Welsh Government, 2017. p. 25).

Recognising the needs of individual learners is central to the new approach. Indeed, one of the most common sentiments expressed by stakeholders interviewed during this research was that there can be no 'one size fits all' solution, when it comes to designing the professional learning blend (NEU, Glyndwr, Estyn and Jisc interviews). Professionals will therefore play a key role in determining what they will learn and in ensuring that it is relevant to their own practice. They will also have increased autonomy in deciding how they will learn, helping to design a professional learning blend that is tailored to their personal needs, lifestyles and preferred modes of learning. However, whilst the move to a model that is more reflective of individual learners needs and promotes independent enquiry is welcome, a coherent and consistent national framework will also be essential to ensure that agreed professional standards continue to be implemented.

### **Creating a strong (but flexible) professional learning culture**

Establishing a vibrant professional learning culture and ensuring that sufficient resources are available to facilitate it is essential if the Welsh Government's ambitious vision for education in Wales, set out in the National Mission, is to be realised. Jisc has stated that there are currently pockets of good practice and innovation in relation to the professional learning blend in Wales but caution that, 'achieving consistency across an organisation, a sector or a nation is challenging' (JISC interview 2019). Strong commitment will be required from stakeholders at all levels of the education system, to ensure that registrants from across Wales are able to access the professional development opportunities that they need, in a way that suits their needs. The Welsh Government will inevitably have a key leadership role in establishing and promoting this professional learning culture across Wales. This should include an ongoing commitment to channelling sufficient resources into the funding and promoting of professional learning opportunities. A coherent national approach will also ensure consistency in terms of the quality of provision. To some extent there will also be a need for consistency in terms of the content that is provided across the country.

A strong lead from the Welsh Government, creating a coherent national approach to professional learning, should in turn permeate to sub-national and regional stakeholders, including the HEI's, regional consortia, the National Academy for Education Leadership and local authorities, that will play an essential role in ensuring that the infrastructure is in place that will allow the professional learning culture to thrive. Universities also have an important role to play in quality assurance, through the

accreditation of professional learning and in creating and developing programmes that incorporate blended learning and professional research.

Individual schools and school clusters, across the country, will need to fully embrace the national approach and ensure that time and resources are provided, allowing individual staff members to engage with the appropriate professional learning blend for their particular circumstances. Pioneer and Lead schools also have a particular role to play within and beyond their clusters in promoting and disseminating best practice in professional learning. UWTSD argue that creating this sort of professional learning culture remains problematic in some places, 'We all have to be looking up and looking out. We still haven't found out how to switch on those schools who find it difficult to do this' (UWTSD interview 2019) and this is clearly a challenge across Wales if coherence and sustainability are to be achieved. Estyn has also highlighted the importance of creating the right culture and conditions within schools with respect to professional learning. In their recent call for evidence submission to the Children, Young People and Education Committee Inquiry into Teachers' Professional Learning and Education, they stated that:

*'In the very few schools where leadership and teaching are excellent, leaders develop a strong culture of professional learning, with systematic planning for and evaluation of professional learning activities' (Estyn, 2017)*

Within schools, a vital role of Head Teachers and senior managers will be to set the tone for and actively promote a learning culture and to adapt the professional learning blend to suit the needs of their staff. As well as ensuring that teachers (of all levels of experience) and support staff have sufficient time to engage with different forms of professional learning, leadership teams will also play a proactive role in ensuring that the right provision is in place and that relevant opportunities are promoted to staff. Leaders also have an important role to play in monitoring the effectiveness of professional learning and helping colleagues to identify suitable opportunities to develop their capabilities and progress in their careers.

If such a supportive environment is put in place then individual staff members will then be able to play a proactive role in directing their own professional learning blend; choosing to pursue learning opportunities that are best suited to the needs of their careers and the specific demands highlighted by their own experiences in the classroom. Gibson and Brooks (2012) highlight the extent to which this represents a step change in professional learning culture:

*'...while a set course menu may have sufficed in the past, in a digital age an 'a la carte' menu, offering both face-to-face and online learning opportunities from a variety of sources, has the potential to meet the needs of teachers and ultimately support enhanced student learning' (p. 19)*

The rollout of Hwb has taken time but potentially provides a positive example of how a co-ordinated, multi-tiered approach to transforming professional learning in Wales can deliver results. Whilst initiatives have been led by the Welsh Government the regional consortia have played a key role in promoting the use of the tool. Furthermore, as initial teacher education students now have access to Hwb, universities have a role in helping the next generation of teachers to understand the system's capabilities and functionality – as both a teaching and professional learning tool. This should ensure that they are fully prepared to use the system from day one, when they become practitioners. However, the way in which they use the tool will be largely determined by the schools that they are working in and their own preferences as individuals.

## **Specific challenges for the professional learning blend in Wales**

### Geography and access to provision

Wales is diverse in geography, demography and culture. Whilst much of the population is concentrated in industrialised areas of South Wales, particularly in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and the valleys, a high proportion of the population lives in smaller more remote settlements. According to the Rural Development Plan for Wales, 2007 to 2013, as recently as 2005 nearly 20% of the population lived in villages of less than 1,500 persons compared with 10% in England. At the same time, only 26% of the Welsh population lived in urban areas with a population of over 100,000 in comparison with nearly 40% of the English population. Furthermore, 15% of the Welsh population lived in the 'sparsest rural areas' compared within an equivalent figure of just 1.5% in England (Welsh Government, 2005).

The bilingual nature of Welsh society and the uneven distribution of Welsh speakers across Wales also poses an important challenge for the provision of and access to professional learning. According to the 2011 Census, 19% of the population of Wales aged over three were able to speak the Welsh language (562,016 people). The highest concentration of Welsh speakers was in Gwynedd, where 56% of residents aged three or over said that they could speak, read and write in Welsh. The equivalent figure in Blaenau Gwent, the Unitary Authority area with the lowest percentage of people who could speak Welsh, stood at 7.8% (ONS 2012).

The requirement to ensure that registrants from all parts of Wales, including remote rural areas, are provided with equitable access to professional learning in both national languages, poses a specific challenge. However, the growth of new technologies and improvements to connectivity offer opportunities to realise this goal, through expanding the availability and range of professional learning activities that are available online. This could include a greater range and improved quality of opportunities to learn and collaborate online, including through 'face to face' elements that can be delivered and experienced virtually and remotely. Platforms that facilitate increased sharing of materials and opportunities to collaborate through forums, message boards and social media could also be particularly beneficial for those living in more rural and remote areas and in allowing Welsh speaking registrants to share their experiences and collaborate through the medium of Welsh.

### Career stage implications

There is something of a question mark regarding whether the blended approach to professional learning has particular implications for individuals in different age groups or different stages of their careers, within the education profession in Wales. Recent research by Ofcom (2019) showed that younger, more educated people typically use the internet to undertake a broader range of activities (including accessing learning and study support) than those who are older and less well educated. However, it is less certain that this pattern holds true within the education profession. Indeed, stereotypes regarding whether particular groups of staff are likely to be more reluctant to engage with technology than others, including the idea of a divide between 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants', are unhelpful (Bayne and Ross, 2011). Our own survey, albeit one with a very small sample size (176 respondents) also indicates that there is little difference in ICT competence between staff with more experience and those with less. The results show that amongst staff with less than five years of experience, 20% described themselves as very confident in using ICT in their own professional learning, with 60% fairly confident and 20% not very confident. The figures for staff with over 10+ years of experience are similar: 21% very confident; 62% fairly confident and 17% not very confident. Interestingly, however, separating out learning support workers from teachers showed that amongst LSW's with under five years' experience, none described themselves as being very confident. Also, all of those within that category who described themselves as 'not very confident' were LSW's. In

contrast, amongst staff with more experience, there did not appear to be any such significant gap in confidence between teaching assistances and teachers (EWC questionnaire 2019).

Whilst there is a paucity of research on effective blended learning specific to career stage in the teaching profession, there is some evidence to suggest that particular elements in a blended learning programme can be more effective depending on level of study. Bachelor students, for example, tended to find more utility in self-assessment tests compared with those on masters level programmes (Langa, 2016). For teachers and school leaders, a balance between mandated and self-directed learning is important (Netolicky, 2016). Acree et al (2017) found that blended learning 'is an effective way to provide training for principals. The flexibility and efficiency are invaluable to busy principals, and experiencing blended learning first-hand provides the participating principals with experience and an enriched understanding of what is necessary in the transition to blended learning.'

Simonds and Brock (2014), found that older students were more receptive to asynchronous forms of learning such as pre-recorded video lectures, as opposed to younger students who valued the ability for interactive learning such as live chats and group work. However, there are also many examples of people in the later stages of their careers fully embracing and leading on the use of new technologies, whilst there are also younger people who prefer to work in more 'analogue' ways, despite being perfectly comfortable in using technology to engage with social media. As such, every professional has their own 'spiky profile' when it comes to digital skills (Jisc, 2019).

Much of the evidence relating to effective blended learning for education professionals focusses on the experiences of those in initial teacher education and newly qualified teachers. This reflects the current reality in which a wider range of professional development opportunities tend to be available to individuals in these groups. However, professional learning is an ongoing process throughout the entirety of a professional's career. As such, the professional learning blend must be flexible and appropriate to the needs of professionals of all ages, at all stages of their careers and all levels of seniority.

#### Accessibility for different groups of staff

The provision of professional learning opportunities needs to be equitable and inclusive of all teachers and school support staff. However, as noted earlier, it can often be difficult for certain groups of staff to access professional learning. These include teaching assistants and particular groups of teachers, including supply teachers and those who are away from the workplace due to sickness or as a result of parenthood. Staff in these groups frequently exist on the fringes of existing provision, with supply staff often not invited to take part in formal sessions by the schools in which they are teaching, or being specifically hired to cover for permanent staff, to allow them to engage in professional learning.

The supply workforce forms a significant proportion of the registered workforce and plays a crucial role in the Welsh education system. However, professional learning opportunities for the supply workforce are fragmented. Evidence from the National Education Workforce Survey (EWC, 2017) highlighted that almost 34% of supply teachers who responded had not engaged in any professional development in the previous 12 months. The survey also showed that they had engaged with a narrower range of professional development activities than non-supply staff. Evidence has shown that in other jurisdictions and professions where there is a specific continuing professional development requirement linked to registration, there is still an expectation that those in supply roles meet the same requirement as those in permanent roles (e.g. Queensland College of Teachers).

Online learning offers a significant opportunity to re-engage parts of the workforce, such as supply staff, who currently find it difficult to access professional learning. Digital elements of the professional learning blend can also potentially improve access to training for those with disabilities (including physical disabilities, dyslexia and ADHD).

#### Technology: hardware, skills and connectivity

Substantial investment has already been made in building infrastructure and platforms to facilitate the delivery of blended professional learning to staff in schools across Wales. This includes the development of Hwb, the introduction of the Professional Learning Passport and investment in broadband infrastructure. These platforms provide important building blocks for delivering the profession blended learning approach that we wish to see, offering a pan-Wales approach that is able to facilitate blended learning provided by local providers. However, to facilitate a professional learning blend that incorporates a menu of customisable approaches and remains at the cutting edge of delivery, further significant investment will be required in hardware, software and networks. Equally it will be important to invest in skills, both in terms of ensuring that registrants are comfortable accessing professional learning using technology and in making sure that those who will be instrumental in managing the infrastructure (school IT staff, network managers etc.) are capable of doing so.

As Jisc argue, technology is never a solution unless it is resolving a problem (Jisc interview, 2019). However, whilst not every aspect of the learning blend can or should be supported by technology, there are opportunities for most types of learning to be enhanced. The most significant roles for technology are in promoting access to learning opportunities and in facilitating greater engagement and interaction within professional learning.

In terms of digital infrastructure the Welsh Government has already invested £45m (Hwb interview) in expanding 'superfast broadband' into schools and, in July 2019 the final remaining school in Wales was connected to the network. However, many schools are currently unable to fully benefit from the broadband upgrade, due to issues with internal networks. Further investment is now being made in areas such as upgrading network cabinets and removing rate limits from in-school routers, which should help to ensure that all of these schools are able to experience the full benefits of superfast connectivity (ISP Review, 2018). Lack of internet access, or poor access caused by poor bandwidth speeds can also be barriers to people being able to access online professional learning from home. As of January 2019, 95% of properties across Wales had access to superfast broadband and BT Openreach are continuing to work on network improvements.

It is also important to note that the pace of technological change shows no sign of abating. The implications of this for blended professional learning are unknowable, but are likely to be profound. Amongst the new technologies that are rapidly developing today are those associated with the '4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution' (automation, AI, robotics etc.) which are likely to have a radical impact on the workforce and the nature of professional learning. Alvarez (2018) cites the opportunities for using Virtual Reality to improve 'post intervention' skills and more effectively than other forms of delivery. Elsewhere, Crowe et al (2017) highlight the important role of instructional designers in shifting the perspectives of educators about the potential of augmented intelligence. Those involved in procuring and delivering professional learning in Wales, at all levels, will therefore need to remain cognisant of contemporary trends and best practice to ensure that all professionals continue to benefit from the most effective learning blend that is available.

## Sustainability

A further set of issues in establishing the new National Approach to Professional Learning relate to the need for the professional learning blend to be sustainable. Establishing a strong professional learning culture, with stakeholder buy in at all levels of the Welsh Education system, will be a major element of this, in terms of creating an enduring mind-set that is capable withstanding the headwinds of political and institutional changes that might occur.

The approach to blended learning will also need to be sustainable in the practical sense of making sure that 'one-off' set-up and recurrent investment in software, hardware and infrastructure is made in such a way as to best facilitate renewal and redevelopment. As well as ensuring that solutions are relevant to the needs of registrants in Wales, they will also need to be flexible and adaptable. Potential ongoing costs, relating to maintenance and upgrades, must therefore be fully factored in to procurement decisions. Hwb Plus provides an interesting case study of a bespoke system that required considerable start-up costs but which rapidly became obsolete. Ongoing substantial investment would have been required in order ensure that it remained fit for purpose and the partnership with Google and Microsoft, which has superseded Hwb Plus, perhaps represents a more sustainable model.

Voogt et al (2016) emphasise the importance of strong leadership in the design and procurement process and the need for specialist support:

'Our study demonstrated that teams need external support to enhance the curriculum design process and deliver quality products. Four forms of support were identified: organisational support, process support, expert support, and technical support. We confirmed the influential role of the leadership in promoting the design process, its outcomes, and the success of sustainability of the outcomes of the collaborative curriculum design process.' (Voogt et al, 2016)

In the same context, it is also important that careful due diligence is undertaken to assess the suitability of organisations who could potentially become strategic partners in offering blended learning opportunities or providing platforms for others to deliver. Clearly there are benefits that can be derived from economies of scale and 'sunk' investment but equally, any partner organisation will need to have the flexibility to meet Wales-specific needs including the ability to offer professional learning opportunities through the medium of Welsh, as well as their capacity to deliver required technological solutions and provide suitable training and support for their implementation.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The introduction of Curriculum for Wales 2022 marks a significant moment in the Welsh Government's national mission to raise standards and reduce the attainment gap in our education system. The National Approach to Professional Learning will be a key building block, underpinning the successful introduction of the new curriculum. Its development therefore marks an exciting opportunity to fully embrace a new approach to the professional learning blend, which empowers practitioners and helps all members of the workforce to develop new skills and grow their careers. The development of the NAPL is therefore a unique opportunity for the education sector in Wales.

This report has examined academic and professional research on blended approaches to professional learning, as well as considering areas of best practice from other countries and professions. In Wales, we found a relatively encouraging picture with many teachers and school support staff already engaged in a variety of professional learning activities that incorporate forms of blended learning. Developments such as the introduction of the Professional Learning Passport, enhancements to Hwb, the reconfiguration of ITE and the focus on leadership provided through the NAEL are important building blocks helping to drive this change, as is the substantial investment that the Welsh Government has made in upgrading broadband infrastructure. However, national initiatives such as these are still not engaging all parts of the education workforce in Wales and significant work remains to be done to further embed a blended approach to professional learning, across the whole country. In summarising our findings, we return below to the four questions posed in the introduction.

### ***What are the key elements of an effective professional learning blend?***

An effective professional learning blend embraces a variety of approaches, to develop skills and knowledge and improve professional practice. The blend may include any combination of: face to face delivery; peer support (including observation, mentoring, shadowing and coaching); structured independent learning; engaging with learning tools that make theory relevant to the classroom; reflective practice; and undertaking and sharing practitioner enquiry, focusing on close-to-practice issues. Elements of the blend can potentially be accessed through (or complemented by) online or digital elements, including: virtual mentoring; video observation; synchronous and asynchronous online interaction; reflective tools; message boards, forums and social media; engaging in and disseminating online research; and using Professional Learning Passports as a tool for recording and reflecting on learning that has taken place (and that registrants require in the future).

### ***Is there evidence that identifies the most effective components of a blended approach?***

Our research has indicated that individual learners tend to have their own preferences when it comes to designing a professional learning blend that meets their needs. Nevertheless, there is evidence that there are components of the blend that individuals and organisations regard as being particularly effective or important in different circumstances. The most commonly cited of these was face to face engagement (defined here as interaction at an individual or group level with other experienced professionals), which many practitioners clearly regard as being at the core of their professional learning. However, practitioners increasingly recognise the value in utilising multiple complementary approaches as part of a professional learning blend. Evidence also shows that many individuals find face to face engagement more impactful when it is complemented other modes of learning. This creates a 'hybrid' approach, where independent learning is complemented by a face to face sessions, supported by technology or by interaction with peers. A blend might also include undertaking investigation outside the classroom (including online) and building reflective practice around a 'flipped learning' approach.

Rather than any one particular component, it is the blend itself and the extent to which it meets the needs of individual learners that is key. Acknowledging that 'one size does not fit all' means that the professional learning blend needs to be responsive, interactive and customisable - able to be tailored to the needs of individual learners and groups of learners, within the context of an overarching national framework.

***Does the evidence point us to elements of a blend that are more suited to developing particular areas of knowledge and skills, particularly in relation to curriculum development and pedagogy?***

Again, it is the blend of learning and its suitability to the needs of particular cohorts and individuals that is the most important factor in determining how successfully knowledge and skills are developed. If the Wales National Mission is to be truly transformational, there needs to be an open-minded approach to professional learning:

- Introducing a new curriculum may be better led by new entrants to the profession.
- Staff who have engaged with accredited programmes at Masters or certificate levels may be called on to support practitioner research.
- Existing networks and links with other institutions need to be made explicit so that individuals are aware of the rich links that already exist between HEIs, Regional Consortia and their school and between their school and others locally, regionally, nationally and (increasingly) internationally.
- Reciprocal learning should be valued and practised. Most learning processes are two-way and 'experts' often learn from engaging with others. Close-to-practice peer support including observation, shadowing, mentoring and coaching has multiple benefits, as does interaction with professionals in different organisations, sectors and regions.

There is significant evidence that a learning blend that incorporates opportunities to demonstrate and hone new skills and to put them into practice can often be particularly effective in helping to embed good practice. Learning opportunities that develop practical skills within a classroom environment are therefore also recognised as particularly important. However, all of these forms of learning are more effective if they form part of a broader learner-led blend that includes elements such as learner reflection, peer interaction and participating in communities of practice.

***What does the evidence say about the how elements of a blend can support and meet the development needs of professional learners at specific career stages and in different roles?***

There has been, for some time, dedicated support for the development of specific groups of professionals. The NPQH and, formerly, the LPSH made available specific programmes for aspiring and serving headteachers. The statutory requirement for induction has normally been accompanied by programmes for new teachers. Funded initiatives (usually time-constrained) have also been provided to support the introduction of specific national initiatives such as The Foundation Phase, appraisal and performance management, literacy and numeracy strategies, professional learning communities, new technologies and the new curriculum.

Beyond those outlined above, take up of specific programmes in Wales has been inconsistent or reliant on individual motivation. Not all have been easily accessible to teachers in all parts of the country (such as accredited programmes for middle leaders provided by some HEIs in partnership with local authorities). There is also evidence that professional learning opportunities promoted in schools



sometimes restrict professional learning to a narrower range of experiences (focused on the school's own priorities) than should be the case. All education professionals in Wales should therefore be provided with opportunities to exercise professional autonomy in directing their professional learning, ensuring that activities are applicable to their career stage and professional context, as well as supporting school needs.

Many factors can influence how individuals at different career stages and in different roles choose to engage with professional learning and which elements of the blend are most relevant to their needs. Factors might include their academic background (likely to be different in teaching staff and support staff), the nature of their role, the type of school they are working in, their level of seniority and their age. Evidence regarding how these factors influence individuals' learning preferences is somewhat contradictory. Capacity and willingness to access and actively engage in different activities is therefore very much a matter of individual preference. As such, a flexible approach is required, that understands the needs of individuals as well as cohorts, creating an ethos of co-construction to develop professional learning that is interactive and customised. It is also important that as many varied learning opportunities as possible are available and that individuals are encouraged to engage in their own preferred blends of professional learning support. In this way, practitioners direct and are responsible for their own learning, selecting the activities which have most impact upon them and their practice.

### **Recommendations and next steps**

Wales is a 'small system' in global terms, but has the potential to become a model of best practice in establishing a coherent national approach to professional learning. The NAPL will play a key role in establishing a clear national narrative around the need to embed a modern professional blended learning culture throughout the education system in Wales. The Welsh Government also has a critical leadership role to play in promoting this national framework, as well as continuing to invest in digital infrastructure. This will ensure that learners continue to have access to the most up to date tools and that provision is consistent across the country. The commitment of multi-level stakeholders (at macro, meso and micro levels) will be essential, to ensure the success of the national approach. Regional consortia, universities, local authorities and the National Academy for Education Leadership all have important roles to play in developing and promoting the professional learning blend and in helping to embed good practice throughout Wales. At a local level, Head Teachers and leadership teams will be instrumental in laying the foundations for the national approach through establishing professional learning cultures within their schools and encouraging and supporting staff engagement. In turn, practitioners will be given licence and confidence to direct more of their own learning and to customise the blend of activities to suit individual needs, lifestyles and preferred ways of learning. Ultimately, if the Welsh Government is able to succeed in gaining such 'buy-in' from stakeholders at all levels, this should ensure that a professional learning culture emerges that is both effective and enduring. To achieve this aim, we have identified **three strategic priorities for the NAPL**. These are:

- Establishing **professional learning infrastructure and cultures** that embrace blended learning and provide a consistent offer to practitioners in all parts of Wales;
- Embedding **a learner-led system** where individual learners direct their own professional learning, based on blends that suit their individual learning requirements; and;
- Establishing **a sustainable approach** to elements of the professional learning offer, ensuring that they are embedded in the culture of our education system and are capable of enduring political, funding and organisational changes.

In addition, we also make the following recommendations, grouped under five broad headings.

- Practitioner led learning** **1** Individual learners' must play a key role in directing their own learning pathways, 'making sense' of learning experiences and putting learning into practice. In this way, it is the individual who does the blending.
- Ensuring opportunity for all** **2** Professional learning opportunities must be available on an equitable basis.  
Providers (including HEI's, consortia and schools) must facilitate professional learning through offering practitioners the widest possible range of learning options.  
Where necessary, the WG or regional consortia should intervene to ensure that no learners are disadvantaged as a result of locational, linguistic or other challenges.
- Exploiting new technologies** **3** A radical, coordinated and funded national approach to the use of new technologies is required to ensure that professional learning is more than just a series of 'courses'.  
The Welsh Government should be the key driver, providing nationally available platforms, (potentially in collaboration with carefully selected strategic partners) and ensuring that quality provision is available across Wales.  
National platforms will allow all-Wales content (e.g. around core areas such as leadership, Welsh language, STEM) to be disseminated but should also facilitate a three way partnership between the Welsh Government, regional consortia and experts in local intuitions, whereby content can be adapted to meet local needs.  
More sophisticated data gathering could help ensure that Hwb is being most effectively utilised. Regional Consortia in particular could use data to consider specific usage (e.g. within different demographic groups) and advise on content accordingly.  
The Professional Learning Passport should continue to be championed and promoted, as a means of recording professional learning that has taken place and encouraging reflective practice amongst all registrants.
- Co-ordinating access to learning opportunities** **4** Stakeholders at all levels (macro, meso and micro) must work together to create a collaborative professional learning culture. As well as creating platforms and delivering infrastructure, this means working together to ensure that new approaches to blended professional learning are widely disseminated throughout Wales, including through collaboration between HEI's, regional consortia and individual schools.  
In line with the Professional Standards, which states that those in leadership roles should encourage their colleagues to 'flourish' (Welsh Government, 2019), supporting professional learning should be an explicit and accountable element of the role of school and team leaders. Designated professional learning facilitators within schools (or clusters) could also help to ensure that all learners have access to the best provision.
- Communicating PL opportunities** **5** Constructing fully blended approaches to learning support will be reliant on professionals being made aware of learning opportunities available to them. Communication of PL opportunities to all professionals must continue to be a priority at all tiers.

Finally we make a series of recommendations in relation to three areas where we think further research is required:

- Clarifying the role of school leaders** **1** School senior leadership teams will play a vital role in shaping professional learning cultures and supporting professional learning. Further research is needed into how schools structure their professional learning support and engage the skills of teacher leaders in this process.
- Understanding existing professional learning practice** **2** Our practitioner questionnaire (see Section 5) provided useful data, but the sample size was limited. Data needs to be gathered more widely across Wales (either by the WG or regional consortia) to identify existing patterns of provision and to highlight any areas where individuals may be disadvantaged from accessing the support they need.
- Our survey showed that current use of e-learning in professional learning is relatively low. This is unsurprising given that these technologies are still relatively new. However, it would be helpful for research to be undertaken to develop a deeper understanding of emerging practice.
- Due to time constraints and logistical challenges, the views of the supply workforce were not canvassed as part of this research project. As an integral part of the education workforce, it is important that this group is involved in the construction of policy and provision.
- Similarly, the views and opinions of school leaders should be sought, as they have a key facilitating role in creating the right culture around professional learning.
- Understanding impact** **3** Specific focus on the perceived impact of different professional learning approaches would be helpful, including evaluation of professional learning. The discussion relating to linear approaches in complex environments needs to be carefully considered.
- New forms of blended learning being employed should be evaluated by users as a built in component of the provision.

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## Appendix A – Stakeholder interviews undertaken

Organisation / Contact	Name and Designation	Method	Date
Bangor University	Dr Susan Jones, Senior Lecturer in Education	Email	18.07.2019
Cardiff Metropolitan University	Julia Longville: Dean - Cardiff School of Education and Social Policy Dr Susan Davis: Senior Lecturer for PGCE Primary Dr Cecilia Hannigan-Davies: Principal Lecturer / Learning Teaching and Assessment Coordinator Jo Bowers: Associate Dean Enterprise / Principal Lecturer Primary Education	Telephone	10.06.2019
Education Advancement Service for South East Wales (EAS)	James Kent: Assistant Director - Professional Learning (Curriculum Collaboration and Research)	Telephone	23.07.2019
Estyn	Liz Miles: Assistant Director	Telephone	16.07.2019
General Teaching Council Northern Ireland	Gerry Devlin: Senior Education Officer	Telephone	09.04.2019
General Teaching Council Scotland	Charlaine Simpson: Senior Education Officer	Telephone	09.04.2019
Hwb	Chris Owen: Head of Digital Learning Unit, Welsh Government	Telephone	10.07.2019
Institute of Groundsmanship	Tim Gray: Director of Business and Membership	E-mail	13.06.2019
Jisc	Paul Mckean: Head of further education and skills	Telephone	19.06.2019
Jisc	Esther Barrett: Subject specialist – digital practice	Face to face	26.06.2019
Masters in Educational Practice (MEP)	Emmajane Milton, Reader and Co-Director, MEP (Cardiff University)	Telephone	13.03.2019
National Education Union (NEU)	Beth Roberts: Wales Union Learning Fund co-ordinator	Face to face	16.07.2019
National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) Cymru	Rob Williams: Policy Director	E-Mail	03.07.2019
Open University	Steven Hutchinson: Head of School, Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport	Face to face	13.06.2019

	Eric Addae-Kyeremeh: Senior Lecturer, Leadership and Management		
PebblePad (supplier of Professional Learning Passport)	Shane Sutherland: Founder and CEO	Telephone	20.06.2019
Scottish Centre for Educational Leadership	Lesley Whelan: Deputy Chief Executive	E-Mail	06.06.2019
Solicitors Regulation Authority	Richard Williams: Policy Associate	Telephone	24.05.2019
Teachers Registration Board of Southern Australia	Professional Standards Team	E-mail	08.07.2019
Unison	Rosie Lewis: Regional Organiser / Wales lead for Education Jenny Griffin: Wales Union Project Fund Manager	Face to face	26.06.2019
Victorian Institute of Teaching (Australia)	Hannah Galloway: Senior Professional Practice Officer	Email	03.06.2019
University of South Wales Trinity St David	Anna Brychan: Director, Centre for Career Learning and Leadership, Yr Athrofa Institute of Education	Telephone	14.06.2019
Wrexham Glyndwr University	Kelly Smith: Deputy Programme Leader MA Education	Telephone	17.06.2019

## Appendix B – questions used in semi-structured interviews

### Core questions

1. Purpose of the interview and Ethics introduction as outlined (see Appendix C)
2. Briefly describe your role e.g. provider / instructional designer / technical support / leader / teacher /other.
3. There is a great deal of change occurring in education in Wales.
  - a. What different types of professional learning support are/have been available to teachers/school leaders to help them to understand and implement these changes?
  - b. Of these, what works best? Why?
  - c. What approaches are less effective? Why?
4. Of the different types of professional learning approaches listed, which in your view were the most effective in supporting Beginning Teachers in the early stages of their careers? Why?
5. Which approaches were less effective? Why?
6. Were there approaches that were more suited to developing particular needs / skills?
7. Which approaches were most effectively related to the classroom teaching and learning environment?
8. Of the different types of professional learning approaches listed, which in your view were the most effective in developing leaders / leadership? Why?
9. Is there any evaluation evidence that we can draw on which will provide more information on the effectiveness of the learning blend, especially from the student perspective?
9. Which of the approaches could most easily be used across Wales?

## Appendix C – Ethical considerations

### BERA Ethical Guidelines

British Educational Research Association [BERA] (2018) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, fourth edition, London. <https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>

### Responsibilities to participants

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) believes that educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons – including themselves – involved in or touched by the research they are undertaking. ...

#### **Explain the purpose of the research:**

- Welsh Government have commissioned a second research project to deepen the understanding of key areas of the NAPL commitment to blended learning, and
- provide guidance to providers and the National Academy for Educational Leadership on how the blend can improve professional learning experiences for teachers and leaders, and those assisting teaching within school settings.
- It is proposed that the conclusions and recommendations from this report will support the development of guidance for Higher Education Institutions and the regions.

Final reports (Part A and B) will be submitted to Welsh Government by 31 July 2019

The project is structured in two parts:

**Part A:** A literature review to develop a deeper understanding of the blend.

**Part B:** Qualitative interviews with key stakeholders with experience of delivering blended learning initiatives ...

**This interview is one of a number of interviews that will form part B of the project:**

#### **Part B:**

- What do we know, and what have we learnt about approaches to blended learning from the experience of other initiatives in Wales including:
  - Needs of learners
  - Effectiveness of the chosen blend
- What lessons have been learnt from the evaluation of blended learning activity?



### **Qualitative Interviews**

Structured qualitative interviews are being held with a range of stakeholders with experience of delivering learning with a blended approach. ... to identify existing approaches to blended learning and identify what works.

### **Ethical considerations**

We are working to and within the BERA Guidelines for Educational Research, 2018

Feedback from interviews with key stakeholders will be treated securely and confidentially and held by EWC for one year after the report has been submitted to Welsh Government.

Research activity will adhere to the BERA ethical guidelines for educational research.

- you may wish, for any reason and at any time, to withdraw your consent
- we ask you to agree to your participation, prior to the research getting underway
- the answers you provide to the interview questions will be recorded and transcribed confidentially within EWC. Raw data (your responses) will be shared only with the project team
- your name will not be used in the body of the report (e.g. a member of the MEP leadership team) but we would like to acknowledge your contribution in an appendix by listing the names of all interview participants. Please let me know if you do not wish to be named in the appendix.
- We will send you a transcript of your interview for approval.
- Interview responses will be used within the report to exemplify or illustrate aspects of blended professional learning. We would like to quote directly from your responses if appropriate.
- The report will be submitted to Welsh Government. They will make the decision whether it will be disseminated more widely.

When researchers become aware that research findings are likely to be controversial, they should aim to inform stakeholders prior to publication and negotiate with those stakeholders a fair publication strategy that takes into consideration the public interest in the findings]

## Appendix D – 2019 Practitioner questionnaire



### A Blended Approach to Professional Development

Research being undertaken for Welsh Government, 2019.

*We are looking at the different ways in which education professionals engage in professional development and how to make these more coherent. We define professional development as any activity which furthers your own ability to work as a professional in schools.*

*No names are required – we are looking for general responses – but **please indicate (circle)**:*

**Type of school:** Primary / Secondary / Other      **Medium:** English Medium / Welsh Medium

**Main phase:** Early Years / Upper Primary / Lower Secondary / Upper Secondary

**Role:** Teacher / Middle leader / Senior leader / Learning Support Worker

**Gender:** Male / Female / Prefer not to say

**Number of years teaching:** Less than 5 years / 5 – 10 years / More than 10 years

In this column please indicate which of the following professional development activities you engaged in during the past 12 months (select all that apply)	In this column please indicate where these activities mainly took place  S      In your own school AS     In another school OSC   Off site (consortium) OSH   Off site HEI H      Home O      Other	In this column please indicate whether the activity involved e-learning. Please provide brief details eg video-conferencing, distance learning, accessing education websites, electronic journal or books
Attended courses, workshops, conferences, seminars (including e-learning)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Acquired additional skills and knowledge as part of a new post or role		
<input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrated / shared your best practice with others		
<input type="checkbox"/> Been part of a Professional Learning Community		

<input type="checkbox"/> Followed a national programme (e.g. Induction or NPQH)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Had colleagues observe your teaching and give you feedback		
<input type="checkbox"/> Made use of new technologies		
<input type="checkbox"/> Mentored or coached others		

<p><b>In this column please indicate which of the following professional development activities you engaged in during the past 12 months (select all that apply)</b></p>	<p><b>In this column please indicate where these activities mainly took place</b></p> <p><b>S</b> In your own school  <b>AS</b> In another school  <b>OSC</b> Off site (consortium)  <b>OSH</b> Off site HEI  <b>H</b> Home  <b>O</b> Other</p>	<p><b>In this column please indicate whether the activity involved e-learning. Please provide brief details eg video-conferencing, distance learning, accessing education websites, electronic journal or books</b></p>
<input type="checkbox"/> Observed colleagues' teaching or work shadowed them		
<input type="checkbox"/> Read publications, books, journals, articles (hard copy or online) or researched new developments		
<input type="checkbox"/> Received support from a mentor or coach		
<input type="checkbox"/> Studied for academic qualifications (e.g. a Master's degree or professional certificate)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Undertaken action research / enquiry		
<input type="checkbox"/> Undertaken collaborative learning with colleagues in your school		

<input type="checkbox"/> Undertaken collaborative learning outside of your school (including online such as Hwb networks)		
<input type="checkbox"/> Worked on something new (e.g. an initiative, project, activity, teaching a new subject / year group)		
<input type="checkbox"/> I have not undertaken any professional development in the last 12 months		
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please state)		

**2. Please rate your level of confidence in using ICT in your own professional learning (select one)**

Very confident  Fairly confident  Not very confident  Not confident at all

**3. Do you use Hwb?**

If **YES**, what aspects do you find most beneficial in your role and why? Is there anything you think that could be improved?

If **NO**, why is this?

**Thank you for taking the time to participate in the survey. Your feedback is appreciated**

Acknowledgement: The survey questions are adapted from the National Education Workforce Survey Research Report (EWC, 2017)