



# Responding to Covid-19:

Experiences of vocational learning and teaching from colleges in the British Isles

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# Executive summary

The aim of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding into how small-island colleges in the British Isles responded to the challenges of delivering vocational courses during the pandemic, and how they experienced online learning during lockdown. Specifically, reflecting on their experiences in adapting vocational courses online and how they changed their teaching and learning strategies. This study draws on interviews from tutors, students and senior leadership teams (SLTs) across four small-island colleges and is guided by the following research questions:

- 1. How has British island college provision of VET courses been adapted online during the Covid-19 crisis?**
- 2. What have been the benefits and drawbacks of online learning during the pandemic?**
- 3. How will future provision at the British island colleges change based on lessons learned during this crisis?**

## Main Findings

Small islands linked to the UK represent unique contexts. They have a range of different governance relationships to the UK; each of these governance relationships has implications for education systems on the islands, as well as for the ways in which Covid-19 restrictions have been managed in each location. During the pandemic they experienced both less frequent and shorter lockdowns, and a greater influence from the local government of when colleges could re-open for face-to-face teaching. Looking closely at vocational courses across the four participating island colleges, the interviews with tutors and students point to:

- The colleges on Crown Dependency islands were able to reschedule their curriculum delivery to deliver theory upfront during periods of lockdown, given the shorter and less frequent lockdowns they experienced.
- Availability of resources (e.g. digital resources, specific course materials) is vital for successful implementation of online teaching and learning, and resources should be equally accessible to all learners and FE staff to be considered as an inclusive approach to teaching and learning.
- Digital literacy among staff and students determines how well staff and students can engage with online learning and teaching; and
- Employer engagement is fundamental to VET. While this partially stopped and changed during Covid-19, there were ways this could be sustained and resumed in some cases given the close communities on small islands.

Across participants of this study, there were a range of benefits and challenges of online learning. A majority of participants voiced they were keen to return to colleges and resume face-to-face teaching. Additionally, what could be seen as a benefit to one participant was sometimes a challenge to others. Below is a summary of a few benefits and challenges described by tutors, students and SLTs at the four island colleges of this study.

Benefits	Challenges
<b>for students</b>	<b>for students</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop independent learning</li> <li>● Offline tasks</li> <li>● Flexibility fitting learning with personal circumstances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Lack of social interaction with peers and tutors</li> <li>● Loss of work experiences</li> <li>● Varied engagement from students (motivation confidence, commitment)</li> <li>● Some home environments were not conducive to working</li> <li>● Mental wellbeing was affected</li> </ul>
<b>for Tutors</b>	<b>for students</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Opportunity to improve digital literacy skills</li> <li>● Flexible working hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Changing roles- more pastoral responsibilities</li> <li>● Limited digital skills</li> <li>● Increased workload affected mental health</li> <li>● Difficulty monitoring attendance and engagement of students</li> </ul>
<b>for College SLT</b>	<b>for students</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Increased use of technology in the future</li> <li>● New learnings in how to react and adapt to change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Difficulty providing technology resources and access for all staff and students</li> <li>● Limited external partnerships</li> <li>● Low to no CPD opportunities/IT support available</li> </ul>

While this research identified some small island specific findings, many of the lessons learnt can be applied more broadly – to other colleges and in relation to other vocational courses. FE is now working in a new context, and this must be reflected in their vision and in their practice. As classroom teaching resumes, the opportunity is unique to build on the best of both online and classroom teaching and learning.



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