



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

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.

Introduction

Aims and objectives of the research

This research was developed to understand how further education colleges (FE) in the British Isles experienced online learning during Covid-19. Additionally, we sought reflections from small island colleges on how online learning will impact delivery for the future, and lessons learned during the process of adjustment. The main questions this research aimed to explore were:

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

Institutions in small British island contexts are used to working responsively and flexibly within their local communities to solve problems and address emerging challenges. Some of these island colleges have had some form of online learning prior to Covid-19 college closures so taking a closer look at island colleges may set a baseline for understanding FE online provision.

Covid-19 has brought increased challenges for colleges in terms of provision. Many colleges may have already had the infrastructure in place for online learning, while some introduced online learning for the first time during college closures. We believe this research will:

- Illustrate how colleges have adapted their provision, understanding some of the benefits and challenges, and exemplify some good practices across the sector
- Set out lessons learnt from colleges that can help inform the effectiveness and future use of online learning
- Understand perspectives from tutors and students on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning as a mode of delivery for vocational courses.

This project adopted a collaborative approach, between the Edge Foundation and the University of Nottingham. This research followed a qualitative case study methodology researching a total of four colleges in small island settings within the British Isles.

Structure of the report

The report is structured by first introducing the different British island contexts including their governance systems, the role of further education on small islands, and how college lockdowns looked during Covid-19 to illustrate why this piece of research has focused on small British islands as main subjects of the study. This will be followed by the literature review which focuses on the definitions related to online learning, followed by an examination of the impact of Covid-19 on teaching and learning specifically the effects on mental health, student engagement and the VET sector. The methodology section will detail the qualitative approach this research adopted and outline the participants of the study. Finally, the findings and conclusion sections will respond to the three research questions with the use of interview data.

Context of the British Islands and Covid-19

Small Islands: Definitions

The definition of a small island, or even of what constitutes an island in itself, is contested and subjective (Baldacchino, 2018). For the purposes of this project, we have included islands smaller than the UK mainland and with relationships to UK governance, whether governed directly by UK parliament or with other established governance relationships to the UK such as Crown Dependency, as detailed below. As the project has focused on Technical and Vocational Courses at Level 3 (as defined by English qualification standards) or equivalent, the islands included in the project are all large enough to have an on-island further education college and well-established post-16 provision.

Table 1 gives examples of some population and land mass sizes in small islands in and around the UK for the purposes of establishing a broad context for the project; for ethical reasons, we have not specified whether any or all of these particular islands participated in the project.

Table 1: Population and land mass statistics for 6 small island examples

| Island | Population | Land Mass (km ²) |
|---------------------|------------|------------------------------|
| Isle of Man | 86,000 | 572 |
| Jersey | 107,800 | 120 |
| Guernsey | 63,385 | 65 |
| Orkney (mainland) | 17,162 | 523 |
| Shetland (mainland) | 23,000 | 967 |
| Lewis | 18,500 | 1,770 |

UK Small Island Governance Contexts

Small islands linked to the UK 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.

Crown Dependencies

A common governance relationship between a small island and the UK is that of the Crown Dependency. Crown Dependency of the UK is a status whereby islands are self-governing on all domestic matters, are not represented in the UK parliament, and have never been colonies of the UK. Within this category of governance there are instances of independent islands operating as Crown Dependencies (such as the Isle of Man) and island groups such as the Channel Islands; this group of four islands is further divided into two bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey, with the Guernsey Bailiwick comprising of eight islands in total. Within the Guernsey Bailiwick,

Guernsey and two other islands (Alderney and Sark) are large enough to operate their own parliaments, which work together with Guernsey's parliament on domestic issues including education.

Within a Crown Dependency, education policy is in some ways determined in response to policy in the UK, often using the same qualification frameworks and transition points. However, the adoption of UK education policy changes within each location is not legally required, with each island or island group determining which new policy initiatives are most prudent for their specific context. There are also points of difference in historical developments of educational structures on each island, such as histories of selectivity in state schooling. Similarly, higher education funding policies on each of these islands had been altered in response to the tuition fee rises in the UK, but the larger islands of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man has each developed its own means-tested criteria for funding grants and loans.

Each of the Crown Dependencies established independent responses to Covid-19 and to the closures and re-openings of educational institutions over the course of 2020 and 2021. Examples of these responses are given below.

Scottish islands

Islands in and around Scotland are not self-governing, and instead are directly governed by UK parliament or by the devolved Scottish government where policy areas are devolved, as is the case with education. Each island or island group (such as the Shetlands or Orkneys) has an island or islands' council which oversees local governance, but which does not determine education policy. Any change to education policy at a national level in Scotland therefore applies to education on Scottish islands.



While many Scottish island councils made decisions about island-specific issues such as border closures during the Covid-19 pandemic, the closure and terms for re-opening for educational institutions was determined by the Scottish Parliament, as detailed below.

The role of further education colleges on small islands

The population and land mass sizes of each of the islands included in this project are such that, while some have more than one secondary school, each has a single further education college. In each instance, the college provides the majority of technical and vocational education for each island. This education is provided for students from the ages of 14 (where there are partnerships with island schools for pre-Level 3 qualifications) and from the age of 16 for Level 3 qualifications. Each of these colleges also provides the only on-island access to higher education courses. While this project does not address higher education provision, it is worth noting that where colleges were subject to UK national governance, there were different policies in operation for further and higher education institutions; these policies were therefore particularly difficult to navigate for colleges providing both further and higher education courses.

School and college closures on small islands: responses to Covid-19

The majority of small islands around the UK, and each of those included in this project, entered a full lockdown with school and college closures on a similar date to the UK mainland, in the last two weeks of March 2020. However, there were distinct differences in the timescales of school and college closures in different islands.

Crown dependency school and college closures

Each crown dependency island developed a policy of lockdown and recovery with staged re-opening of essential and non-essential services according to on-island case numbers. Within the Guernsey Bailiwick, which comprises multiple islands, the Bailiwick established a staged re-opening strategy which individual islands could move through as their own case numbers diminished. For the purposes of this project, we focus here on the stages involving school and college closures specifically, in order that the data presented later in the report can be understood in the context of the length and number of school closures across the 2020 to 2021 years.

Table 2: Dates of school and college closures in 2020 and 2021 for islands in and around the UK

| Island | First school closures | Second school closures | Third school closures |
|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Isle of Man | Late March- early June 2020 | 7th Jan-1st Feb 2021 | 3rd March-19th April 2021 |
| Guernsey | Late March- early June 2020 | 23rd Jan-8th March 2021 | N/A |
| Jersey | Late March- early June 2020 | N/A | N/A |
| Isle of Wight | Late March – mid-June | 7th Jan – 8th March 2021 | |
| Scottish islands | Late March – mid-August 2020 | 4th Jan – 2nd March 2021 | N/A |

The diversity of governance relationships in small island locations has significant implications for the findings of this project for a range of reasons. Firstly, Crown Dependency islands were able to introduce school and college closures with more island-specific measures than Scottish islands, which were bound to central Scottish measures. Even within the category of the Crown Dependency islands, there were further differences between those operating as a single independent island or as part of an island group. Secondly, Crown Dependency islands were able to enter into direct dialogue with policymakers, with policies being developed with specificity to each college itself. This contrasts with the experiences of Scottish island colleges, where national-level policy applied to all locations and institutions across the country and therefore was not tailored to the needs of each college. Finally, the different governance arrangements in each island meant that school and college closures were in place at different times and for different lengths of time, requiring very different levels of response and preparedness from the colleges themselves.

Review of recent literature

Defining online learning

The term online learning has been used frequently since before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, with the necessary shift to online learning during the pandemic the term is more widespread and has been used to define many different components, approaches and practices. For example, online learning is also referred to as distance learning, e-learning and hybrid learning, although each term slightly varies in its definition. There have been attempts within the literature to try and clarify a definition for online learning. Within this study 'online teaching and learning' will be referred to as a means of engaging with both teaching and learning via the use of online tools. This is the case across the literature where online learning is used as a shorthand "on the assumption that all teaching activity is aimed at learning" (Stephenson, J. ed, p.5). Within this report we discuss both online learning from student perspectives and online teaching from tutors' perspectives and therefore will cover both aspects.

Singh and Thurman (2019) conducted a systematic literature review performing a longitudinal study to track the growth of the field of online learning, and to collect and analyse definitions of online learning. During their content analysis they collected 46 definitions. The common elements they found across these definitions included technology, time, synonymous terms, interactivity, physical distance and an educational context. They narrowed down the three essential elements as:

- 1. Technology**
- 2. Time: asynchronous versus synchronous**
- 3. Synonymous terms**

Technology is seen as the main element of defining online learning because this is necessary to enable online learning to be achieved; *'Most authors agree that, regardless of what term they use when they are talking about online learning, technology is a crucial part of the definition; it is mentioned as an effective medium for delivering education or to enhance interaction'* (Singh and Thurman, 2019, p.295). Technology is used to deliver and facilitate content; the use of the internet and Information Communication Technology (ICT) are required for interaction to take place between students and tutors. These include the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and Learning Management Systems (LMS) that are designed to facilitate interactions. According to Bryson and Andres (2020) we should be cautious of the term 'facilitate' because teaching online *"reflects a shift from a teaching to a learning paradigm and that this requires online instructors to take on roles such as mentors, coordinators, and facilitators of learning rather than conveyors of information"* (Boling et al., 2012 p.118).

The element of time refers to the concepts of both asynchronous and synchronous online learning. Synchronous online learning refers to the live simultaneous interaction between tutors and students through online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Students are actively participating in real time. Asynchronous learning refers to learning where students do not participate in real time but instead use their own time to complete their work (Murphy et al., 2011), for example watching a pre-recorded lecture.

There are many overlapping terms such as distance education, e-learning and web-based education that are used synonymously with online learning, and therefore synonymous terms is another key element. *'If there is a consensus on defining online learning, it is that the terms are not consistently defined across the literature'* (Singh and Thurman, 2019, p.296).

Learning platforms

Online learning platforms gained more traction during the pandemic as they were seen as the main means to facilitate learning. Therefore, these platforms can help in formulating a clear definition for online learning. There are a number of VLEs and LMSs that have been in use up until now. Some include Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Blackboard, Zoom and Canvas. These platforms have developed over time and support both synchronous and asynchronous learning; they are used for *'transferring information and increasing accessibility of learning materials, and instructors consider the course website to be a platform for storing and sharing content'* (Hershkovitz et al., 2011 p.107).

An LMS should consist of three components: provision of organisation and content, course management such as attendance and assessments, and communication tools (Bryson and Andres, 2020). Prior to Covid-19 these learning platforms were used in a limited manner in a classroom environment, mainly provided to enable students to access course resources and other relevant information independently in their own time. These online learning platforms necessitate some digital competence, which is *'the group of skills, knowledge and aptitudes needed when using ICT and digital devices to perform responsibilities, such as problem solving, information management, collaboration'* (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020, p.5).

Migrating to online learning platforms is not without its challenges. Some of the challenges witnessed throughout the pandemic include privacy, access, limited interactivity, instructional preparation, technical issues and data sharing (Bryson and Andres, 2020; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020.). The switch to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic often lacked interactivity and collaborative experiences (Bączek et al., 2021; Yates et al., 2020). Bączek et al., (2021) found that around half (50%) of the medical students they studied reported reduced interaction with tutors, and only four percent of students thought online learning classes were interactive (Yan et al., 2021). These issues relating directly to online learning will be explored in more depth in the next chapter. Over the course of the pandemic many of these problems were mitigated as the systems developed and supported the growing concerns and needs of tutors and students worldwide who were relying on these platforms.

Structure of online learning in VET

The use of online learning platforms and digital transformation in educational environments is not new; these have existed more commonly in higher education settings for some time (Kopp et al., 2019; Leszczyński et al., 2018; Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). Prior to Covid-19, The Edge Foundation set out to see how education technology (EdTech) was used in further education settings, specifically within colleges in the UK. A unique characteristic of further education is its ability to adapt to labour market changes such as technological change, and therefore equip their staff and students with the skills needed to adapt to these changes (Dabbous and Emms, 2020). The findings of this exploratory research shed a light on the structures and digital strategy in place across specific colleges that supported the use of online learning platforms.

The colleges in the study, although not representative of all colleges across the UK, had all developed a digital team to support both staff and students' use of existing and new technologies. These digital teams included IT specialists, learning technologists and student volunteers. The support helped develop digital skills and confidence in using EdTech. Digital tools were also embedded in a majority of courses as Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) was ingrained within the digital strategies. College digital strategies laid out how each college intended to embed digital tools and skills across the college in classrooms, common places such as libraries, and virtually. The report concluded that the majority of staff interviewed "expressed how using digital tools in teaching allows students and staff to become more digitally literate and see how digital skills will be needed in the workplace" (Dabbous and Emms, 2020, p.35). Although that research is limited to before the pandemic, the existing familiarity with the use of education technologies within the colleges may have prepared staff and students for college closures and the migration to online learning demanded by Covid-19.

Colleges experienced online learning differently throughout the pandemic. For example, according to the CollabGroup Report (2021) documenting the effects of Covid-19 on the delivery of courses, some colleges reported different levels of success. *“Students enrolled in level 2 and 3 programmes reported favourable experiences with online and blended learning delivery. This was especially true for adult learners who reported that they preferred online and blended learning due to the flexibility it gave them to manage their studies alongside other work or personal commitments”* (CollabGroup, 2021, p.4).

Challenges of Covid-19

The declaration of Covid-19 as a global pandemic and the consequential lockdown of countries had significant and wide-ranging implications on education systems globally. Immediate effects included the closure of schools, colleges and universities across the world, disrupting the usual running of education systems. This led to long lasting impact on the health, social, and educational outcomes of students. By July 2020, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization reported nationwide school closures in 111 countries, affecting over 1.07 billion students, which is around 61% of the global student population.

The closure of educational institutions led to a rapid or almost instantaneous move to full online delivery of teaching and learning. For many, a shift to online education was unplanned with inadequate systems to support this. Furthermore, a shift to remote and/or online learning had disproportionate effects on both learners and tutors, which above all tended to perpetuate existing disadvantaged groups (Eyles, 2021). The following sections give an overview of the impact Covid-19 had on students, colleges and more widely the VET and economic sector.

Resources

Students' individual home environments and circumstances greatly affected their ability to learn, like never before. Digital poverty was highlighted as a major dividing point between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. The Digital Poverty Alliance (2022) has defined this as 'the inability to interact with the online world fully, when where and how an individual needs to', meaning those without access to space, technology and a stable internet connection were unable to adequately access lessons and learning material. It has been well-documented that there is a clear link between poverty and digital exclusion, with many already disadvantaged children experiencing a cumulative disadvantage due to the need for remote schooling (Holmes & Burgess, 2020). Sutton Trust's (2018) research pre-pandemic found that over a third (34%) of parents with children aged 5-16 reported their child does not have exclusive use of their own computer, laptop or tablet with which to access the internet at home. Some families may have one device shared between a whole family, with competing online lesson timetables to manage, with other students only able to access content through mobile phones which may not be adequate for online learning. Alongside this, the home environment itself varies greatly in terms of whether it is conducive to learning, with great variation between those with comfortable, quiet workspaces versus those with shared spaces or without the space to work (Edge, 2020). Additionally, some students experienced care responsibilities at home, whether that be siblings, their own children, or vulnerable adults, which were greater during Covid-19 lockdowns.

A number of studies showed that across the world the level of development of internet infrastructure affected learning. For example, many learners in South Africa, particularly in rural areas, found themselves excluded from learning as they were unable to access online resources due to lack of infrastructure including unavailability of electricity and internet (Dube, 2020). Such problems have been reported widely, even spreading into urban areas for example in Bangladesh, where the majority of the students reported the lack of internet prohibited them from learning (Ramij & Sultana, 2020). These problems often link to tutors' ability to deliver online learning (Dube, 2020). However, these issues were, and are, not limited to developing countries. Learners in all countries, developing and developed, experienced lack of internet and technical problems, such as internet lagging (Yan et al., 2021).

Digital poverty also manifested itself in terms of the skill level of both learners and tutors. Barbour & Reeves (2009) argue that students need to have a high level of digital literacy to find and use relevant information, and to communicate with others through technological devices. Although children and many young people are regarded as 'digital natives', many lack the skills to effectively carry out a range of digital tasks in their personal and work life (Lloyds, 2020). An Ipsos MORI (2020) survey carried out in January 2020 found that around 11.7 million people aged 15+ across the UK lack the 'essential digital skills' needed for day-to-day life online, which includes being able to do a set of foundation level tasks, such as using word processing applications to create documents (e.g. a CV or a letter).

All the issues impacting young people's online learning can equally affect tutors' teaching and work. Tutors' home working conditions are also variable, depending on their personal living arrangements, access to digital devices and networks, and their family and caring responsibilities. Dietrich's (2020) study at an Institute of Applied Sciences in France found that tutors often had to use their own resources (apart from a laptop) to deliver learning online. Similar to learners, they often lacked dedicated equipment and institutional support, and were often unprepared for delivering teaching online.

Mental health

The impact of the crisis had, and continues to have, a profound impact on the mental health of young people at all stages of their education. For those young people already experiencing mental health issues and those who were already at risk - for instance those living in abusive households or temporary accommodation - the lockdown not only paused their learning, but in many cases disrupted their supportive routine and removed their regular safe space, potentially leaving them at greater risk of harm (Edge, 2020, p.11).

Research by YoungMinds (2020), a charity providing mental health support, has shown the impact the pandemic had on young people with a history of mental health problems. They surveyed over 2,000 young people in the UK with mental health needs in March 2020 and revealed that 32% agreed that the impact of the school closures and tightening restrictions had made their mental health much worse, and 51% said a bit worse. The organisation has continued to measure the impact on all young people; their survey in early 2021, at a time when the UK was experiencing another national lockdown, was carried out with 2,438 young people aged 13-25. They found 67% believed that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health (19% neither agreed nor disagreed, 14% disagreed). This includes young people who had been bereaved or undergone traumatic experiences during the pandemic, who were concerned about whether friendships would recover, or who were worried about the loss of education or their prospects of finding work (YoungMinds, 2021).

Growing mental health concerns can be a barrier for young people progressing in their education and into their next steps moving into work. YouthEmployment UK's annual Youth Voice Census in 2021 found that for young people aged 14-24 in England, anxiety, depression, and mental health concerns were in the top five responses for young people when asked about their barriers in progressing in education or work. Specifically, for further education college students in England, CollabGroup's research (2021) found that students are experiencing high levels of anxiety due to the uncertainty around prospective employment opportunities, feelings of social isolation, and in some cases dealing with bereavements.

Students were not alone in feeling an additional mental burden as a result of the switch to online learning. Research found that some tutors experienced more stress and higher workload from lockdowns (e.g. Klapproth et al., 2020), leading to some educators experiencing moderate levels of burnout (Taylor & Frechette, 2022). Phillips et al.'s (2021) research found, from surveying tutors across Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and USA, that they experienced struggles with online learning, connectivity/communication with students and families, delivering quality teaching, and increased workload, all of which could be contributors to levels of stress and concern amongst tutors. Similarly, See et al. (2020) found that the actual move to delivering lessons online could

be a cause of stress for tutors; 54% of tutors surveyed 10 weeks into lockdown in England found online teaching stressful, with 44% feeling adequately prepared for online teaching.

Conversely, a study by Walker et al. (2020) looked at the immediate effects of the pandemic on senior leaders' and tutors' working lives, by surveying these staff in mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. It found that, on average, senior leaders and tutors who responded to their survey were working fewer hours during lockdown than they did in a typical week in February 2020. They suggest that although reasons for this are unclear, some of this could be accounted for by tutors having to reduce their working hours to attend to other responsibilities such as caring for family members. Their study found leaders had stated that in fact they only had 75% of their usual teaching capacity available. The same research also uncovered the main sources of pressure for tutors which were: 'being responsible for estimating pupils' examination grades', 'parenting my own young children', and 'difficulties supporting pupils' remote learning'.

Student engagement

Issues around both digital poverty and poor mental health can have a damaging effect on students' level of engagement with their education and training. CollabGroup found that college students '*suffering from poor mental health, taking lower-level courses, suffering from digital poverty, and taking practical courses had their engagement drop significantly. Conversely, students taking theoretical courses, students taking level 2 and 3 courses, and adult learners generally saw an increase in engagement.*' (2021, p.11). They also found that those taking courses that involved the acquisition of technical and occupation-specific skills, such as construction, hair and beauty, and engineering, suffered significant disengagement due to the in-person nature of these courses.

Although some studies have shown that levels of engagement have continued to be sustained despite the switch to online learning, these have tended to be students at higher education level. For instance, Baloran et al. (2021) looked at levels of engagement of higher education students in the Philippines during Covid-19, finding that high level of engagement with their studies, and consequently course satisfaction, continued despite the switch to online learning. Furthermore, there were no significant differences between levels of engagement of different types of students.

Studies that have looked at levels of engagement amongst school pupils point to negative outcomes. Tutors surveyed during May 2020 in England stated that on average, less than half of pupils (42 per cent) returned their last piece of set work. Most tutors (90 per cent) believed that their pupils were doing less or much less work than they would usually expect them to be doing at that time of year. Parental engagement or the lack of it was one contributing factor. The same study found that on average, just over half (55 per cent) of parents were engaged with their children's home learning (Lucas et al., 2020). This study and others (e.g. Bray et al. 2021) have highlighted that levels of engagement tend to be affected by the level of pupil disadvantage. The most cited concerns about pupils' low engagement with education were linked to limited access to IT and/or lack of space to study at home (Lucas et al., 2020). Bray et al.'s (2021) study on school pupils in Ireland additionally established that low student engagement levels were significantly more likely in more disadvantaged schools. They likewise found that increased parental involvement is associated with higher levels of student engagement.

Colleges

Colleges were significantly affected by the pandemic, and quickly switched to online learning. A survey by the Association of Colleges (AoC) early on during Covid-19 (May 2020) found that overall there was not much variation in the amount of remote education being delivered by subject, with only 1 in 10 colleges reporting any significant variation therein. Perhaps understandably the survey did find though that engagement was reported as being more difficult for practical subjects such as catering, sciences, and trades (practical elements). This was also the case for creative subjects such as performing arts (TES, 2020).

There were many challenges for colleges that needed to be addressed to support their tutors and learners. As discussed above, lack of digital equipment was an issue for many learners. Many colleges had equipment on loan but inevitably, with finite resources, not all needs were met (JISC, 2021). For college tutors, most had little experience teaching online, having spent most of their career teaching in a classroom setting. Aside from having to learn new digital skills, a common issue tutors faced was getting students to engage during online classes (CollabGroup, 2021). Responsibility for upskilling lay with both individual staff as well as colleges, and inevitably colleges and individuals responded to this challenge to varying degrees.

Economic/VET Sector

The economic impact of the pandemic is deep and long-lasting. The effects have been felt disproportionately across industries, jobs and population groups. Many workers immediately faced loss of jobs or were furloughed, with certain groups such as women, young people and some disadvantaged groups more likely to be negatively affected. Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Joyce and Xu, 2020) shows that younger workers were nearly two-and-a-half times more likely to work in a sector that shut down as a result of the pandemic. Not only were full-time jobs impacted but also apprenticeships and work placements, recognised paths for gaining experience of the world of work. Many apprentices, particularly those working in the sectors and industries most adversely affected by Covid-19, were made redundant, furloughed or experienced breaks in learning. In early April 2020, the Sutton Trust (2020a), surveyed employers (around 150 surveyed) and found that on average just 39% of apprenticeships were continuing as normal. Furthermore, around a third (31%) reported that they were likely to hire fewer apprentices over the coming year, or none at all. Further research by Sutton Trust (2020b) found that 61% of employers surveyed in summer 2020 had cancelled work experience placements, which are vital stepping stones for young people on the road to a career.

The pandemic has led to changing perceptions of some occupations, especially those deemed to be necessary to carry on with normal life. There has been an increase in status of some professions, leading them to become more popular choices for careers, as well as many people opting to continue in education or reskill as job opportunities were scarce. For instance, applications for nursing courses in 2021 rose by almost a third (32%) across the UK (UCAS, 2021). Data from UCAS also shows that following the lockdown, the number of new applicants to postgraduate teacher training in England and Wales increased sharply. In the period between mid-March and mid-August 2020, the increase in the number of applicants to teacher training was 35% higher than the increase during the same period in 2019, and 46% higher than the average increase in 2017-2019 (NFER, 2020). This could be attributed to a renewed appreciation and value for 'key workers' during the pandemic, as well as people seeing it as a 'safe' option for keeping/securing employment. These are occupations that will continue to be in demand in the face of lockdowns and automation. These workers have been recast as heroes engaged in indispensable labour, encouraging a rethinking of the notion of skill (Avis et al., 2021).

The way workers have been doing their jobs has also changed since the beginning of the pandemic with, similar to education, many switching to remote working. This has led to an increase in the usage of digital tools, hence the need for enhanced digital skills among the workforce. Digital skills have become an indispensable requirement for both current and future jobs. Therefore, the digital skills of college students must also be attuned to ensure adequate preparation for the labour market. At the same time students' acquisition of employability skills has been constrained due to limited work-based learning and work placement opportunities during the pandemic. These skills are learnt best in social environments and during practical exercises that mostly take place within the college or work environment. Due to students having to stay home and learn digitally, developing these skills was not as easily achievable (CollabGroup, 2021).

Finally, the pandemic also affected the careers education that benefits students' ability to navigate and make choices about their futures. In the UK, the Careers & Enterprise Company - using National Compass data based on school and college self-assessments of provision against the eight Gatsby Benchmarks - showed there was

a decline over 2020/21 in employer engagement activities, in particular those giving students experience of the workplace. However new methods taking advantage of virtual and blended opportunities have created new careers education activities, encompassing personal guidance, virtual engagement with employers, careers learning within the curriculum, and virtual college and university 'visits'. For many, the pandemic has led to the removing of geographical barriers and the widening of opportunities across the student population who have benefited from online career activities (Edge, 2021, p10).

A new status quo

Students and learners faced huge health, economic and social challenges as a result of Covid-19. The shutdown of educational institutions and the switch to online and remote learning led to negative consequences concerning students' learning and educational outcomes (Jamieson, 2020). There is a lack of evidence on the full impact that Covid-19 has had on learners, particularly on their outcomes. In terms of attainment, NFER (2022) for instance have found evidence that across primary-aged year groups, pupils performed at a lower level than expected in both reading and mathematics in Autumn 2020 and again in Spring 2021. However, by Summer 2021 the gap was seen to be narrowing somewhat. However, for those at secondary level and indeed in colleges, there is a lack of evidence as to what the full impact has been, and will continue to be, on attainment.

In spite of this, it is argued that the pandemic has also brought the opportunity to reimagine our systems and practices across the education and training landscape (UN, 2020). For the wider VET sector, the changing economy and job market may lead to an increased demand for training and retraining programmes, with the potential to improve access to VET and ensure better outcomes (Avis et al., 2021). The massive adoption of online learning and digital technologies may also be seen as a positive step forward for education and society more widely. As Mhlanga & Moloi (2020) state '*the pandemic has presented an opportunity to assess successes and failures of deployed technologies, costs associated with them, and scaling these technologies to improve access.*' Specifically, they found that across all education levels from primary to tertiary, new educational applications and websites have been founded, digital schools have been realised and virtual learning has become widespread. All these and more have the potential to increase education access and can be significant contributors to recovery (Avis, 2020).

Methodology

Data Collection and Analysis

Following the research questions, this research adopts a qualitative case study approach with four colleges in British island settings. Within each college, two to three vocational courses were selected with Levels 1 to 3 qualifications across a range of sectors. These included courses such as Fashion, Public Services, Hairdressing, Hospitality and Performing Arts.

The insight and understanding of this study was developed through the use of online semi-structured interviews with staff, including a minimum of at least one course director and one member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). In total 10 college tutors, 11 students and 4 members of the SLT were interviewed (see Table 3). Data collection was undertaken between March and July 2021. Participating colleges on British Islands were identified through the project researchers' networks.

Table 3: Interviews at colleges

| College | Tutors | Senior Leadership | Students | Other |
|-----------|--------|-------------------|----------|--------------------------|
| College A | 2 | 1 | 3 | |
| College B | 3 | 1 | 6 | 2 (digital team members) |
| College C | 2 | 1 | 2 | |
| College D | 3 | 1 | | 1 (support staff) |

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis to draw out the themes and lessons learned across the colleges within the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a form of content analysis "*the process of organising information into categories related to the central questions of the research*" (Bowen, 2009, p.32). The findings respond to the three research questions of the study and will be illustrated as such.

Ethical Considerations

This research follows the British Education Research Association ethical guidelines 2018, concerning issues such as informed consent, anonymity of interviewees, confidentiality of research data and data protection (BERA, 2018). Ethical approval for this study was granted through the University of Nottingham. Participants were informed that both colleges and their names will remain anonymous throughout this report. Hence the findings are not presented in a case study format, but rather all data are discussed thematically.

Findings and Discussion

The interviews within this study have generated an informative picture of how colleges on four British islands have adapted their VET courses during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moving learning online has had an impact on colleges, staff and students. These three perspectives will be explored throughout this section by bringing in excerpts from the interviews within this study. The themes will be discussed in response to the three research questions of the study:

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

As a response to the first research question, we found four themes that summarise the manner in which VET courses across island colleges were adapted online. Firstly, the mode of delivery was changed; online delivery focused on the theoretical elements of the course rather than the practical elements. Secondly, the availability of resources to college staff and students determined the level of consistency with which staff and students could engage with online teaching and learning. Thirdly, the level of digital literacy of staff and students was a crucial aspect in how online learning was adapted in the colleges. Finally, employer engagement, which is a significant element of VET courses and relies significantly on person-to-person contact, changed considerably due to courses being moved online.

The second research question brings together the benefits and challenges of online learning from the perspectives of college leadership, staff and students. The final research question of the study focuses on the interviews with the SLT at each college, identifies lessons they have learned from their experiences during Covid-19 college closures, and how they see the way forward. However, to establish a common discussion ground, 'online learning' should be considered and defined.

Defining 'online learning'

Across the literature we have found that the term 'online learning' can have a range of definitions, and is also synonymous with terms such as remote learning and distance learning. In this study we asked participants to define what the term online learning meant to them. This elicited a few interesting responses that provide a unique perspective to this study. These responses illustrate that there is no common definition of the term. All definitions include similar aspects as participants defined online learning in their own words:

Okay, so for us, we use the term remote learning deliberately because, for some people remote learning includes online and we didn't want students to be excluded from that just because they couldn't do it online, it isn't online (Vice Principal, College A).

It's about accessing through any digital resource either synchronous or asynchronous, live or not live. The information to be able to learn and complete something with a result. Learning is something which results in doing something that you can then return and show your outcome (Coordinator for Computer and Digital Games, College C).

I guess it's the process by which you're engaging with material, learning material. You're interacting with peers as part of that particular learning process. You're following a structured and an interactive journey in terms of the learning. I don't see it being any different to what you'd expect to see happening in the classroom really (Director for teaching and learning, College C).

How have British island college provisions of VET courses been adapted online during the Covid-19 crisis?

Online delivery of theory and practice

Unavoidably the move to online learning during college closures affected the nature of delivery across vocational courses. Through the interviews with both college tutors and students, it was voiced that initially some online teaching focused on the theoretical part of the course. However, staff across many courses made an effort to find creative ways to deliver the practical side of vocational courses online. Tutors used the time during lockdown to complete the theory elements of the course as they felt this fitted well with online learning. They also hoped that when face-to-face teaching resumed, they could develop students' practical skills. They rescheduled the parts of the curriculum, prioritising on the theory during lockdown.

What I did is I did a lot of the theory during lockdown, I said [to the students] look, I know it's not particularly exciting but let's get theory done now (Public Services tutor, College A).

College B was working on supporting fashion students completing some practical parts of the course. The college was posting/dropping off course materials, such as textiles and sewing kits to students enabling them to complete some practical tasks. Students claimed this was very helpful in maintaining the practical element of their course. The equipment available at the college and at students' homes may have differed, yet the materials delivered allowed for continuous learning to take place.

For us as art students sometimes it's difficult to have the same resources that we would have in college and because we did have 24-hour notice that we were going into a lockdown this time, we did come into college and get a few supplies, and we also did have dropped off resources (Fashion Student 2, College B).

However, in the same college, College B students on the Hairdressing course expressed that although learning theory online worked well, they did feel they were missing out on the practical element, which was better suited to a face-to-face context. Courses such as hairdressing and performing arts relied on the physical environment for the majority of students' learning and this could not be replicated online.

Yeah but, personally, it's really good if [learning] is in class, you know person to person because it's more like, how you do it on a person, rather than virtual. But theory wise virtual is fine (Hairdressing Student 1, College B).

Although the hairdressing students voiced that they especially missed the person-to-person learning aspect of their course, the Hairdressing tutor at College B tried to be more creative online by simulating a studio environment in a home setting. Therefore, students could watch as the tutor used props to model different skills, and students could ask questions. The tutor stated that some students had equipment at home such as head props and brushes whereas some did not. Although the college offered students the opportunity to come and pick up some items if needed, many understandably preferred not to venture out to the college during lockdown to pick them up.

I would use visual aids like a colour chart and in one of my bedrooms I made like a little office like a little YouTube thing, so I had a little ring light and I had a stand and a trolley and everything, so I would have all this ready, and I would use all these visuals and I do stage and then stop and see them [the students] ask them questions (Hairdressing tutor, College, B).

Although three colleges provided teaching of more theory online during college closures, the fourth college, College D, stated that this was more difficult to do so as it depended on the type of course. Due to some courses at this college overwhelmingly relying on practical work, it proved challenging to adapt these hands-on courses to online delivery, for example the horticulture course. Over time, staff were actively trying to find ways to deliver the practical elements of the course, but expressed their difficulty in doing this. Consequently, the adaptation of some vocational courses such as hospitality and horticulture can contain limiting curriculum elements that cannot be delivered online.

No, they didn't get any [theory], there wasn't any kind of alternative for not coming in to do the horticulture. With art they did their history but with horticulture and hospitality, not really. I suppose it's been really difficult for them coming up with us alternatives when everything so hands-on (Student Support Assistant, College D).

A unique aspect to small island colleges is that some students live on the mainland rather than on the island. This is the case with College D, where many students would usually commute from the mainland, but this option was no longer available during lockdown. Because of the difficulties in adapting some of the courses online, this meant that some course completion dates were affected. One course tutor claimed that agriculture students who were commuting from the mainland would most probably have to defer their course since they would be missing out on the practical element offered at the college. However, to maintain the practical element for some courses, such as hairdressing, recorded instructional videos were used.

So [our tutor] sent us the videos and then we practice it at home and then we send her the video of what we have done...at least we get an idea of what to do. Like weaving, how to do weaving right. Even if it's virtual we can see how to do it. And then we go back to face to face at least we have an idea of what to do (Hairdressing Student 2, College B).

Furthermore, for example, when College C gradually went back to face-to-face teaching, they maintained online teaching of theory for some of their courses. This was an attempt to help run smaller groups of workshops at the college. Therefore, while some cohorts were at the college completing their practical elements, others were at home learning the more theoretical aspects of courses.

We were fortunate when we came back in September that we could run a 50:50 timetable so for the more kind of practical based the 50% on site was all practical work. Then all the theory was done digitally which kind of made sense (Director of teaching and learning, College C).

However, College B discussed the importance of face-to-face learning because it contributed to assessments and exams for vocational courses which were required to be in person. The college stated that for some courses, which are not part of the UK curriculum, some of their exams were administered internationally, and a few of these exams were not cancelled. Therefore, it was necessary to open the college during lockdown to bring students in, socially distanced, to complete their exams. However, for vocational courses they attempted to conduct some practical assessments with a camera, observing students in their homes for this purpose, but this proved to be difficult and such assessments were a key challenge during lockdown.

The challenge will be in practical vocational areas, they have quite a lengthy practical assessment to do, under control test conditions. So you're an electrician and you've got a wire up a circuit under control test, and then you've got to fault-find and things like that. So somebody will be there observing and assessing you and you can't necessarily do that remotely (Senior leadership member, College B).

Resources and accessibility determine how well online learning works

A main determining factor in how well courses can be adapted online are the resources available to staff and students. This includes the technological infrastructure in place at the college, such as existing virtual learning environment (VLE), available resources such as laptops, computers, and a stable internet connection, as well as opportunities for professional development for staff to develop the skills necessary for online teaching. In most colleges in this study, resources such as laptops were provided to students, specifically to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. One college noted that digital poverty was hidden at the college, staff were not aware of the students who needed a laptop at home until they were specifically asked. However, the college had put money aside to address any digital issues learners experience at home and set up a process for accessing it.

Fortunately, [the college] knew this was going to happen. So they put in some money for it. So we have a form that the students fill out and all we did was we went and basically said, "how many people have got access to a laptop at home?" Two hands went up. "Is that yours? Or is it your mom's." "It's my mum's. I haven't got access." "Right. OK guys fill these out because then you can borrow a laptop [from the college]" (curriculum leader, College D).

Staff and students interviewed at Colleges C and D were, overall, satisfied with the support they received in terms of resources available to them. A gaming development student voiced an impression of how the college supported students during lockdown.

Anyone who didn't have from a technology perspective, didn't have like a computer was given a laptop that could run everything we needed to. They were supported. Anyone who didn't have internet or anything that was all looked after. As soon as they started [working from home], they were like if anybody needs anything, put that question out there, and if you need it ask for it because we'll [the college] get you sorted out so that you're not struggling (Gaming Development Student, College C).

However, College B had limited funds and therefore had to prioritise which courses and students received laptops. Consequently, some Dental Nursing students at College B missed out on receiving laptops, which detrimentally affected their ability to access course materials:

In fact, at one of the dental practices here, I had two students that didn't have any [laptops], you know, they only had their phones really to do work and stuff. So one of the practices over here [at the college] is actually to provide laptops for the two students. The College could provide laptops but, obviously with us being locked down they only have so many to go around and because the course is only part time we weren't necessarily priority (Dental Nursing coordinator, College B).

The lack of resources such as laptops was a key barrier to online learning for students, in particular those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The colleges that could provide laptops to their students dramatically reduced the barrier for students to engage with learning. However, a specific aspect to small island colleges that posed an additional barrier was internet connection, specifically the stability of the connection. This issue

existed on one of the islands in the study and unfortunately was not a barrier that could be resolved by the college. The instability of the internet in some areas across the island affected how consistent students could be with accessing their courses online.

Yeah, the connection really, some areas here [on the island] we have really poor connection (Student 1, College B)

We only have two connections [on the island] we cannot hear well sometimes because it's just the connection. It can be like choppy. (Students 2, College B).

Digital literacy of staff and students

Across the four colleges there was a difference in student and staff readiness for remote teaching and learning, and proficiency in using online tools. Some tutors took advantage of online learning tools while others used the basic functionality available to them. Almost all course tutors and students used some form of chat function online to stay connected, for example used the Microsoft Teams chat. All colleges had been previously using Microsoft Teams or Google Classroom for some part of their course, as well as their college-wide VLE such as Canvas or Moodle. Therefore, there was some awareness of online learning tools among staff and students, yet in some cases students refused to use the college VLE.

When the students were out of college, this is when I adopted the Skype classroom approach... the group of students I had, refused to engage with the VLE. All five of them said, "If we have to work with Brightspace [name of VLE] I will not continue with the course." (Hospitality tutor, college D).

There was a range of IT and digital skills levels demonstrated across college staff which led to some tutors being more prepared to adapt their courses online than others. In most colleges either professional development was offered, or IT services were available, to offer the support staff needed. However, a few tutors interviewed did wish they had had more training and would like to do more professional development in this area in the future.

Equally we have pockets of staff who are less familiar with and have used less [digital tools] very quickly we had a lot of professional development, on how to use online learning tools and adapting (Vice Principal, College A)

[Tutors] didn't necessarily have the confidence or skills to be able to engage online and whether that be by video. Certainly via video there was a reluctance to use that kind of technology (Director of Teaching and learning, College C)

Additionally, some college tutors also believed that, despite students being IT savvy, their digital skills were lacking when it came to supporting their online learning. There were no development opportunities available for students at the college to prepare them for online learning.

They're on their phones all the time, but what are they actually on? Well, and what are they actually doing? They're not doing any research to be honest. They're being fed a lot of stuff on TikTok and Instagram and all the social media...saying that, they're not digitally literate. I showed one of the groups in progression course how to design a website and I was using a thing called Webley...I showed them how to do it and they were just like, "Oh my God, you can do this" (Curriculum Leader Inclusive Practice, College D).

The main tool that both staff and students seemed both proficient with and comfortable using was the chat function through Microsoft Teams, Messenger or the college VLE. Tutors raised the importance of staying connected with students. Many claimed that it offered a different student-tutor relationship that allowed students to open up about their personal circumstances, which tutors saw as very valuable during lockdown. It allowed tutors to become more aware of their students' home circumstances, which in turn would provide tutors with more flexibility to support individual student needs. The chat function also allowed tutors to be available for longer hours and therefore more reachable by students. However, in the next section we will see that this also had its negative consequences, such as the effects on tutors' mental health and the expectation to work overtime, leading to greater pastoral responsibilities for tutors, such as maintaining contact with students outside college hours, providing flexibility to students who had difficult circumstances at home, and actively following up with students who did not engage with online learning.

Using personal messaging on Teams was very important. The ability to actually drop a DM [direct message] to a student at any time of the week. Not just in your hour slot with them, but I think giving them the feeling that they could contact us anytime and if they weren't in the mood to learn during the lesson (English tutor, School C).

Furthermore, in some cases colleges also witnessed students' limited digital skills that could have had an impact on their engagement with online learning. This was seen at College D where students contacted the Student Support Assistant multiple times and in evening hours because they were "stuck" while using different tools. Additionally, the Student Support Assistant had to remind students to check emails or attend their course sessions online because they were not engaging with the online tools.

Me and the course leader would set up a few Teams meetings for them [students] just so they could check in, but even then we would maybe get two out of the seven [students]. Yeah, so they didn't know how to, or as I say, they weren't checking their email so they didn't even have the notification to know that there was going to be a meeting. Yeah, so I would need to phone them before it had to say, "Go on," [online] you know (Students Support Assistant, College D).

In response to the shift to online learning one college in the study created new job roles to support online delivery and digital literacy for staff and students. In College B, new members of the digital team were introduced to understand tutors' digital needs to implement online learning and help support them. In the long-run these new members of the digital team will help the college move into a more blended learning approach.

A lot of our work has sort of been centred around understanding what people and what the staff need first, in order to be able to sort of carry on this blended learning approach or to even implement it. So the first thing we've done is put together some surveys for some staff feedback and finding out sort of what the [digital] needs are, what CPD is required for staff and we've also put out some guidance for doing online learning for staff and students (Digital Team member, College B).

Changes in employer engagement

External partnerships and employer engagement are vital aspects to all vocational courses. Students rely on accessing their experiences with employers through their college. Employer engagement involves a broad range of activities that may include internships, short-term work placements, linking with employers to provide real-world learning to students. However, during college lockdowns these activities changed or stopped altogether. College staff struggled to continue to engage with employers, and often paused contact during Covid-19. In

many industries working from home full-time became the norm, preventing employers from offering student placements in a similar way:

In terms of work placement, that's been a struggle because there's been a reluctance from employers to have anybody other than their main stable of staff on their premises plus the fact that the employers were working themselves from home and off site (Director of Teaching and Learning, College C).

Contact with employers during lockdown was determined by the particular vocational course. This was clearly articulated by the Public Services tutor:

We couldn't, public services like the area in the army and people like that just they wouldn't engage and, obviously, the police and paramedics were exceptionally busy (Public Services Tutor, College A).

In College D the insight into the Hospitality courses revealed how difficult it was to secure job placements for students. This was due to job losses and hotels being closed on the island due to the effects of Covid-19. The small island context ordinarily enables close links with employers. Under normal circumstances this meant that course structures were worked around seasonal industries, and that it was possible to informally rely on students working locally alongside their course to gain industry experience. These arrangements have been significantly affected by the shutting down of the hospitality sector during the pandemic.

What we actually do is, when our students come for interview, if they don't have a job already, we ask them to find one. The season would be starting then so that they've got a very clear idea of the type of industry that they're going to enter because it's hard work. Then as they build up their skills and the confidence, by the time they finished at college, the tourist season has started and they'll will be employed full time. So I mean that that just hasn't happened really for this group. (Hospitality Curriculum Lead, College D).

In all colleges, respondents mention that there were plans to resume working with employers once face-to-face teaching and contact was permitted. Course tutors stated that although the employer activities stopped during lockdown, the relationship with employers was still maintained.

Their [public services] workload has increased dramatically, so therefore a lot of the engagements that we had with them we have to cancel because of the face-to-face contact and because of their own personal workload. But that doesn't mean to say they won't happen, it's just a fact they've had to be postponed (Public Services Programme Leader, College A).

The themes so far have provided a glimpse of how students, tutors and SLT'S at colleges perceived adapting to online learning. The excerpts show both the benefits of online learning and the challenges experienced by the different participants of the study. The next section will delve into these experiences further.

What have been the benefits and drawbacks of online learning?

During the interviews with SLT's, members of staff and students at each college, there were very minimal benefits outlined by participants to adapting vocational courses online, as this was an unexpected necessity and not a free choice. In addition, participants noted that VET courses, as work-related courses, rely heavily on practical tasks

such as working with material and machinery in fashion and design, along with having an opportunity to access the workplace and meet employers. This had stopped during college closures. Additionally, the instantaneous closure of colleges due to Covid-19 and the need to swiftly adapt VET courses online can be viewed as another leading factor in the low perceived benefits of online learning. Table 4 summarises the different responses among participants of the perceived benefits and challenges of adapting VET courses online.

Table 4: Benefits and challenges in adapting VET courses online

| College | Colleges/Courses | Staff | Students |
|------------|---|---|--|
| Benefits | Increased use of technology in the future | Improving digital literacy skills by learning how to use new software and tools to support students' learning | Develop independent learning |
| | Reacting and adapting to change | Flexibility in working hours | Tasks can be completed offline in one's own time. Flexibility of fitting learning in with personal circumstances (i.e childcare) |
| Challenges | Difficulty providing technology resources (i.e laptops) and access for all staff and students | Changing roles – more pastoral support for students led to longer working hours for staff | Lack of social interaction with peers and tutors |
| | Difficulty adapting VET courses online; the theoretical element was translated better online than the practical element | Limited digital skills set and in some cases resistance to change | Loss of work experiences |
| | Limited external partnerships and employer engagement | Increased workload affected mental health | Varied engagement from students (motivation, confident, commitment) |
| | Low to no CPD opportunities/IT support available to assist staff to navigate digital tools and software | Difficulty monitoring attendance and engagement | Not all home environments were conducive to learning and working due to personal circumstances |
| | | Varied engagement from students (motivation, confident, commitment) | Mental wellbeing was affected |

Benefits

Participants at each college discussed some benefits of online learning. One benefit commonly acknowledged was the continuation of the course online with no disruption to overall learning. Many courses looked very different online, with practical aspects being creatively transformed and, in some cases, deferred until face-to-face teaching resumed. Students and staff appreciated that they could still attend/deliver their courses online, and some staff learnt how to adapt their courses creatively. The process has allowed for digital skills among staff and students to develop and these skills are essential for the current and future workplace.

So when [staff] found a new feature [of a digital tool], they found a new way of doing something, then they posted it online. Then you saw a bit of conversation taking place where people were solving each other's problems...It was the people that were already confident with the technology who were probably contributing and which is only natural but a lot of people benefited from it [Director of teaching and learning, College C].

Working from home provided tutors with flexible working hours which provided a change of pace for staff. This included having more time to prepare lessons. They restructured some of their timetables along with structure of their lessons in a manner that was more conducive to both their home work environment and for their students.

If there's certain things I would take away from the whole thing it has to be the ability to have more flexible learning, more flexible working in terms of for myself. The concept of nine to five needs to be diminished completely in my opinion (Hospitality Tutor, College D).

I think, for some, students and some staff, not being stuck or not using a rigid timetable is quite beneficial because of maybe [having] younger children at home...so I think the flexibility has been nice for most people (Public Services Programme Leader, College A).

Another benefit the flexibility working from home offered was the ability to work effectively from non-standard environments, such as from abroad. In College C, one teacher who needed to travel back to Israel for personal circumstances managed to continue teaching while outside of the UK. Teachers and students were not disrupted by the change and were not aware their teacher was abroad. Therefore, the flexibility online learning provided allowed for the continuity of teaching even in difficult circumstances during Covid-19.

With the Teachers, one way we benefited from having it all online, is one of our teachers moved to Israel during Covid-19 and he was able to teach us the same way as any of our other teachers. We didn't even realize he wasn't at the college for the first three months which was a weird experience...it's the same experience as all the other teachers which obviously we couldn't have done if we were in the class and him being projected onto a board (Creative Digital Media student, College C).

Additionally, online learning provided flexibility for students. Working at home meant independent learning could take place at a time when they felt more effective, and students were not fixed to a timetable to complete their learning. Students appreciated the independent learning that working from home encouraged. The offline tasks meant that students were able to use their own time, work more comfortably in their pyjamas, have a later start to the day and use their own space to complete their assignments.

I was fortunate enough to have a space that I could use at home and it meant that if I was doing textiles and then my next lesson was ceramics I was able to leave my textile stuff out still so that I could easily come back to it. Whereas in college when you move in-between classrooms in different areas, you have to pack everything away and then you might not have that lesson for the week... (Fashion Student 2, College B).

Our tutors set a video she's recorded herself doing a bit, and we are free to do when we want, instead of in that set lesson and for me that's given me the flexibility to adapt learning to my own personal style (Performing Arts Student 2, College A).

Although for many members of staff it was difficult to navigate online tools that were not familiar to them, the necessity to improve these skills was beneficial to staff over time, with many lectures sharing between colleagues the different features of online learning tools such as Teams, Zoom, new applications and college VLEs that they found useful in their teaching. A very specific benefit discussed by almost all tutors was the increased level of communication they had with their students. In many courses tutors felt they were able to become much more informed about their students' home environments and understand any personal circumstances that may affect their learning. This resulted in better communication between tutors and students.

I think what I really gathered from it all, is that you got to know them because the less confident ones were more confident to speak up online and they were almost happier to submit things digitally. Because they could get the feedback - either I'd ring them and we'd talk it through, or they'd have a few lines of feedback (Fashion Tutor, College B).



Challenges

The move to online learning brought with it many challenges for colleges. Although there were benefits discussed, many participants stated they were looking forward to returning to face-to-face teaching because of the challenges of adaptations to online learning. One key challenge is the consequences of increased flexibility. Although tutors discussed it as a benefit, it also had its downfalls. Flexibility allowed staff to make themselves available to students after working hours which led to increased working hours and greater pastoral responsibilities for tutors.

And therefore a different way of teaching where you're suddenly finding yourself open to communication with students at all times of the week. I mean weekends as well. I've had some students on a Sunday evening. Okay I've logged in now, you hadn't heard from them all week but suddenly here they were and so you go with it. You don't say its Sunday can you get back to me tomorrow. You just have to respond there and then (English Tutor, College C).

A further challenge of this flexibility and non-stop availability is the increased workload for staff. Working from home for many tutors meant that it was quite difficult to cut off from work and therefore many were working non-stop preparing for their courses and maintaining contact with their students.

But the workload can be huge and actually funny enough my workload has now increased because they know they can get a hold of me after class (Public Services Tutor, College A).

Additionally, tutors discussed the limitations of teaching through a medium like Microsoft Teams and Zoom where interaction and engagement was limited. It was noted in some of the interviews that this also led to challenges for staff in monitoring their students' engagement. Staff found it difficult to engage all their students online and found many students unmotivated. Engagement was seen as a main difficulty across tutors in colleges. The physical environment provided more information about how students are digesting information in courses. This was difficult to assess online.

If you've got reluctant students it's very easy for them to just disappear. It's quite easy for savvy students to make it look as if they're engaging online when they're not. That is something that I find is quite tricky. Someone can log into Teams and say hi and then they say bye at the end (Hairdressing Tutor, College B).

Additionally, both staff and students had concerns about home working set-ups. Some course tutors discussed the differences in their students' home working environments. Some students' environments were limited by the amount of personal space they had to take video calls, or being able to do their work in a quiet space. It was also highlighted that students differed individually in terms of their level of independence and personal motivation, which affected their ability to engage effectively in learning from home.

I think it's just working in, like a small space, is quite difficult, it got quite overwhelming just being in my room (Art Student 3, College, B).

Whereas at home, I find it so difficult to even think to myself, to think "I need to do this, I've got to do this", I just lose everything as soon as I get home (Performing Arts Student 3, College A).

How will future provision at colleges change based on lessons learned during this crisis?

College vision was developed as a result of lessons learned

The senior leadership interviewed across the colleges in the study all reflected on lessons learned during college closures. Covid-19 has had some long-lasting impacts on the way teaching and learning take place, and an agreement that the traditional, pre-Covid-19 ways of operation do not need to return fully as default once lockdown restrictions were lifted. It provided colleges with an opportunity to look at doing things differently, and not return to the norm just because it was the way things had always been done. This includes increased flexibility for staff and students to do some form of home working and learning, and rethinking physical spaces at colleges to accommodate for blended learning approaches and social distancing requirements.

We very quickly had a plan for example a three-year plan to make all of our staff mobile. We did that by Christmas. We were prepared to fast track things and we saw it as an opportunity. How do we take advantage of the situation that we're in? We know that we need to upgrade our classrooms in terms of projectors and resources (Director of teaching and learning, College C).

Additionally, the Assistant Principal at College D explained how it was important to rethink current pedagogy. A key lesson was the flexibility it offered but also how courses were delivered. If there are ways to maintain online learning for some aspects of courses this could provide more flexibility for staff that may help free up some of their time to do other tasks. The effects of Covid-19 on learning have posed many questions for colleges to consider.

I think we need to really make this a real learning opportunity to in terms of pedagogy quite frankly and see what can be - do we need to be doing wholly practical teaching? Are there elements that we could do remotely? Does that free up staff space and staff time to look at developments and going forward? Because you know everybody is so flat out most of the time, they don't have the time to sit back. So could we do things in a different way that actually gives you as a teaching member of staff time to look forward, to build up your own practice, develop your own looking ahead in terms of curriculum and where we're going (Assistant Principal, College D).

Furthermore, the experience of the lockdown process has also challenged colleges' strategies in reacting immediately to change, and inevitably colleges have had to develop procedures for potential future college closures. College leadership reflected on the individualistic approach that needs to be taken in terms of courses and staff. Not all procedures can be applied indiscriminately, and assessing the needs of staff and students was seen as an essential takeaway from the first college closures.

The key ones are to not make assumptions and to make sure that people know what remote learning is and what that looks like and what you need to be able to do (Vice Principal, College A).

We know that we need staff to have better tools, because that was one of the barriers pre July we were relying on the quality of the tutors kit the other end. The reluctance of our staff initially to use some of the tools was the fact that they actually didn't have the tools to use, their PC couldn't do what they wanted to do so, it was about making sure we put that in their hands. (Director of teaching and learning, College C).

Conclusions

The UK small islands represent unique contexts when it comes to their governance and how education and training is governed within them. Their relationship with UK education policy could be described as responsive; hence demonstrating similarities with context-specific differences. Their responses to Covid-19 similarly exhibit different independent approaches to free or restricted operations of individuals and organisations, i.e. to lock down and re-open educational institutions.

College closures within the participating colleges of this study demonstrate significant differences during the period of 2020-2022. The three colleges on Crown Dependency islands experienced considerably shorter periods of lockdown and some only had one lockdown overall. Considering our Scottish case, even if the participating college was on an island, it had to follow the Scottish rules during the pandemic. The length and frequency of any lockdown, and colleges' prior experiences with online teaching and learning, influenced the way in which our participating colleges responded to moving vocational courses online. Their unique contexts led us to investigate how they adapted their VET courses to online delivery and what they consider as benefits and challenges of online teaching and learning.

Online teaching and learning is not new. What was new at the beginning of the pandemic was the speed, intensity and extent to which course delivery shifted online. Three out of four colleges felt that the theoretical parts of the vocational courses were better suited for online delivery. There was also an argument that certain vocational courses, where the majority of the course curriculum is based on hands-on tasks, are not suitable for online delivery at all. The small islands' colleges were able to reschedule their curriculum delivery and delivered theory upfront in the academic year. They were able to do this because their lockdown periods were shorter, and they could foresee face-to-face interaction resuming in the near future. Over time, there was also evidence for developing creative ideas and increasing support to engage students with practical tasks.



Online learning should not be a dividing approach; it should be equally accessible to all learners. Availability of resources to tutors and students - laptop, internet and skills to operate these - have been vital for successfully implementing online teaching and learning. Colleges were aware of the challenges that students, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds, faced. Participating colleges used their available resources to provide laptops and other material to support learning. What colleges on the small islands were unable to remedy was the poor internet connection in places, its stability and strength. To make full use of the VLE system and laptops, tutors and students had to develop a good command of digital literacy. Tutors' readiness and willingness to engage with online teaching varied. The chat function of Teams was well regarded by students as well as by tutors and served several purposes. They were used for general communication, learning, and delivering pastoral care. While it had the benefits of mutual communication on an ad hoc basis, it did lead to tutors feeling obliged to respond to students' queries during antisocial hours. While the benefits of this were acknowledged, this clearly led to tutors working longer hours and hence feeling more responsible for their students' well-being. This clearly did not match with safeguarding tutors' well-being.

Employer engagement is fundamental to vocational education and training. During the pandemic employer engagement has changed or stopped as employers were unable to offer the usual internship or work experience to students. However, given the small islands context, college staff confidently assumed that this would be re-established once face-to-face contact resumed. Supporting employer engagement, there is a close community on small islands and people know each other through various social contacts. FE colleges often work with employers who are personal contacts of staff.

This study identified a number of benefits and challenges of online teaching and learning. What is a benefit for one stakeholder group may be a challenge to another. Engaging with messaging with learners late at night is a good example of this. However, moving VET courses online offers flexible teaching and learning patterns suited to individual preferences and contexts. Further, moving teaching online led to continuity of teaching for teachers that travelled abroad, the flexibility allowed for teachers to work remotely when needed. Unquestionably, the biggest benefit for colleges and learners was the continuity of course delivery online. The disruption to tutors was noted alongside continuity being acknowledged and appreciated.

The past two years will not go unmarked. Valuable lessons can and should be learnt from the experiences of the case colleges. Whilst 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. From now, online learning is not a choice but an integral part of VET course delivery. Learning from the past two years, college leadership should reflect on their vision for the future; rethink student support, employability development, staff development and curriculum development, and pedagogy just to name a few. FE is now working in a new context, and this must be reflected in their vision. 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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