Remote learning in Scotland's Colleges

National overview

1

"It's no longer about classroom spaces."

Support manager

Context

The Covid-19 pandemic created significant challenges for all learning providers. In Scotland's colleges, managers, staff and learners had to adapt to new ways of planning, delivering and engaging in learning activities. Following the announcement of the national lockdown in March 2020, colleges took swift action to enable learning and teaching to continue remotely.

Prior to the pandemic, all colleges had existing facilities and resources in place to enable teaching departments to incorporate on-line learning within their programmes. Some colleges benefited from very well-established Information and Computing Technology (ICT) infrastructures and systems for remote learning

delivery. Many, but not all colleges, had invested continuously in their ICT infrastructure to enable delivery of a portfolio of on-line provision, including University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) colleges, and specialist institutions such as the national Gaelic college, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Before the pandemic, overall the prominence and prevalence of remote learning within individual colleges programmes varied due to: capacity and effectiveness of the digital infrastructure; staff access to digital resources; learner access to digital resources; skills of teaching staff in the use of digital resources; skills of learners in using digital resources; and services to support learners and staff to overcome ICT challenges.

As a further resource, you can also access stakeholder comments and short case studies in the accompanying "Comments and Cameos".

Between March and April 2021, HM Inspectors of Education (HMIE) engaged in professional dialogue with 495 college staff and managers, and 180 learners from all colleges in Scotland to develop a national overview of practice in the delivery of remote learning. The purpose of this overview report is to:

- outline the learner and staff experience of remote learning and teaching during the pandemic;
- highlight what is working well and share this widely to celebrate success;
- surface the challenges in delivering of remote learning in colleges; and
- identify aspects for improvement of the quality and effectiveness of delivery of remote learning.

The findings from the fieldwork are summarised using the following key themes:

Digital infrastructure;

Planning remote learning and teaching delivery;

Delivering learning and teaching remotely;

Engagement of learners in remote learning;

Monitoring and assessing learner progress remotely;

Assuring the quality of remote learning and teaching; and

The impact of remote learning on the wellbeing of learners and staff.

"If somebody had asked me if we could support all students remotely this time last year I would have said no way, but we have found a way."

Support manager

Digital infrastructure

2

All colleges have in place digital infrastructure that enables them to deliver learning remotely. However, the pace and scale of the challenge of moving all learning and teaching to online delivery presented significant issues for some colleges, particularly in terms of digital capacity. This included the need to ensure that college digital platforms were equipped to accommodate the significant increase in usage by both learners and staff across colleges, many of whom operate across multiple campuses. Some colleges made rapid and significant improvements to their digital infrastructure within a very short timescale and as a result, overtook mid to long term targets in their digital strategic plans. Most colleges report a range of issues in relation to connectivity, particularly in rural areas, characterised by unreliable and slow access to broadband. In areas where connectivity continues to be erratic or limited, it significantly restricts or interrupts the learning experience. There remain variations across the college sector in terms of geographical operating context and capacity to convert provision to online delivery.

All colleges have prioritised making digital devices and Wi-Fi available to learners and staff in their homes. College managers worked quickly to ensure, as far as possible, that staff and learners had access to appropriate digital devices and resources. There are many examples of colleges deploying staff to deliver laptops and Wi-Fi dongles to the homes of both learners and staff.

> "There has been a huge leap in the digital upskilling of staff."
>
> **Senior manager**

However, for some subject areas, colleges found it difficult to replicate specialist technical equipment within the home environment. Many colleges describe that overall, despite the high level of support provided to learners, digital poverty continues to impact on some learners' ability to engage with and benefit fully from the opportunities remote learning offers.

Most colleges have provided additional staffing resource by creating new or enhanced digital development and support roles, to assist teaching colleagues in using new technologies and creating online resources. These roles are having a positive impact on improving staff understanding and skills in the use of digital resources to deliver services remotely. All colleges have ensured that staff have access to specialist technical support alongside Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL) opportunities. These arrangements have supported staff to develop the skills and confidence needed to apply learning, teaching and assessment strategies for remote delivery.

Across all colleges, support staff have adapted their processes and systems to enable learners to access their services online. Learners used these facilities to make bursary applications and to book appointments to access additional support, including mental health and counselling services. Student finance teams have focused on making discretionary funding available and ensured timeous responses to queries or problems relating to finance. These arrangements are enabling support staff to engage with more learners and make quicker referrals to specialist support. Learners highlight how much they appreciate, and have benefited from, increased and flexible online access to support functions.

"Waiting outside Student Services for my appointment made me feel ashamed, but now I can do it online its more private and I feel so much better."

Learner

3

"This year has been like crossing a bridge whilst you are still building it."

College manager

Planning the delivery of remote learning and teaching

From the outset of the pandemic, all colleges acted quickly to prepare and equip staff and learners to participate in remote learning. Many colleges made arrangements to identify the needs of individual learners and staff in relation to their level of digital skills, access to digital equipment, and connectivity. In most colleges, learning resources and activities were also made available as physical resource packs, delivered to learners' homes, to support learners facing barriers to accessing remote learning such as poor connectivity or digital poverty.

All colleges drew productively on their experience of the first period of lockdown to plan for the start of the new academic session in August 2020. This included contingency planning to respond to further and varying levels of restriction and continued closure of campuses and facilities. Many colleges report that previously, they had underestimated the digital capabilities of their younger learners, and had also established that generally, older learners have lower levels of digital skill. To help learners overcome digital skills gaps and confidence, and using feedback from both learners and staff, most colleges have developed and delivered comprehensive online induction programmes to introduce learners to the protocols, etiquette and skills needed for remote learning. In addition, bespoke digital upskilling programmes were offered to learners who require further support to engage in remote learning activities.

"It is very heartening to see some of our learners on the autistic spectrum embracing online learning, and in some cases excelling."

Learning support worker

In all colleges, staff delivering support for learning quickly adapted their approaches to take account of the new operating environment and to convey how and where learners can access support. Staff working with learners with more complex additional support needs engaged closely with parents and care-givers to plan and agree appropriate learning activities. These services have been vitally important in helping these learners remain on their programme and engage in their learning.

All colleges have worked hard to minimise the impact of lockdown restrictions on the learning experience and to provide continuity of learning. Staff quickly revised and adjusted timetables to enable learners to undertake classes at home that did not require access to campus facilities. In response to changing levels of restrictions, college managers and staff regularly and rapidly rescheduled learning activities to enable learners to undertake practical elements of their programme on campus. For example, learners on a few programmes with large elements of practical work, such

as marine engineering, benefited from having the practical elements front loaded when they were able to attend a college campus. This allowed them to continue with remote learning with greater confidence in their ability to complete their programme successfully. However, many learners on practical programmes such as construction, hairdressing or hospitality, have had only limited access to practical skills development in their vocational area, and many learners will require to defer or extend the academic year to complete their programme successfully as a result. Since the re-opening of college campuses in April 2021, college staff have worked hard to ensure that these learners are supported to achieve within realistic timescales by, for example, extending the college day to provide additional sessions for practical delivery and assessment.

Delivering learning and teaching remotely

As colleges moved quickly to remote delivery, teaching staff made use of the limited time available to familiarise learners with the new arrangements, systems and resources involved in learning remotely. Given the tight timescales for implementing these arrangements, most learners reported that colleges dealt well with supporting and equipping them to adapt to learning off-campus. Colleges have continued to deliver a mixture of blended learning and restricted blended learning in response to changing guidance, taking careful account of social distancing restrictions on campuses.

Overall, teaching staff describe how their confidence in delivering remote learning has increased since the initial period of lockdown. Support for teaching staff in the delivery of remote learning is proving valuable and is supporting subject lecturers to extend and enhance their learning and teaching approaches. Almost all colleges consider the move to online delivery as instrumental in progressing significantly the skills of many teaching staff in delivering remote learning. In addition, it has supported teaching departments to engage more in the use and application of digital resources. However, both teaching staff and college managers acknowledge that there is significant variability in the digital skills and confidence of lecturers in delivering learning remotely.

4

"It's been an injection of creativity."

Programme leader

> "Remote learning is most effective in theory-based subjects, at advanced level."
>
> **Curriculum manager**

Throughout periods of campus closure, teaching staff describe how they worked hard to meet the needs of learners during remote learning. In most colleges, there is a clear and structured approach to providing a balance of recorded and live lessons to accommodate the needs and preferences of individual learners. Teaching staff are increasingly using more creative methods in the delivery of remote learning and teaching. These include flipped classroom approaches; recording and uploading lessons to enable learners to reprise lessons or prepare for assessments; and posting learning materials to the college Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) where learners can engage with the materials in advance of teaching sessions. Many lecturers have developed creative alternatives to simulate practical work and support underpinning knowledge development. However, teaching staff describe the challenges they have faced in moving their teaching entirely online, and acknowledge the need to develop greater knowledge and skills for digital pedagogy. Most learners confirm that they have experienced variability in the quality of remote learning within their programme.

Teaching staff have worked diligently to develop materials and approaches to assist learners in learning remotely, such as video tutorials detailing best practice approaches in online learning. There are many examples of learning opportunities having been enhanced through, for example, virtual events, virtual tours and guest speakers from the world of work. Podcasts and virtual work placements for learners with representatives from the voluntary sector and employers are helping to increase learner motivation. However, many teaching staff describe how the pace at which they have been required to adapt learning and teaching materials to a format suitable for remote and blended learning delivery has been very challenging, and more time consuming than initially anticipated. Overall, teaching staff describe having insufficient opportunity to collaborate in developing resources and approaches to avoid duplication of effort, extend the range of resources available, or share effective practice

"We have progressed 5 years in our learning and teaching approaches…"

Our online training programmes and support for staff have made training accessible and available at times which suit staff."
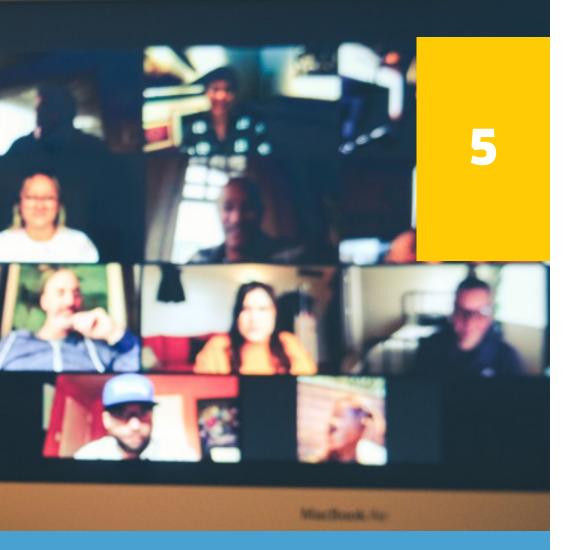
HR manager

"People have been quickly pushed out into deep water."

College lecturer

Learners describe how they have valued the ability to access remote learning materials to study at their own pace and at times that are convenient to them. Learners can use timetabled sessions flexibly to supplement their understanding and have easy access to learning materials online. This benefits learners who are managing other responsibilities alongside their studies, such caring for others, home schooling or work commitments. Many teaching staff follow whole-class online activities with individual and group discussions to support learner understanding and clarification. Increasingly, regular check-in calls and a focus on learner wellbeing are built into delivery by teaching staff.

Overall, approaches used by staff to deliver remote learning are helping learners gain confidence in independent learning and develop skills for further study. However, teaching staff describe how developing independent learning skills in younger learners remotely, and in particular those studying programmes at SCQF levels 4 and 5 is particularly challenging. They highlight how many younger learners lack the necessary motivation or skills to engage in remote learning, particularly those on practical subjects like construction. Staff describe how a number of practical programmes have experienced higher rates of learner withdrawal this year than previous years as a result.

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> "This is the most engaged I have ever been, and the most I have ever learned."

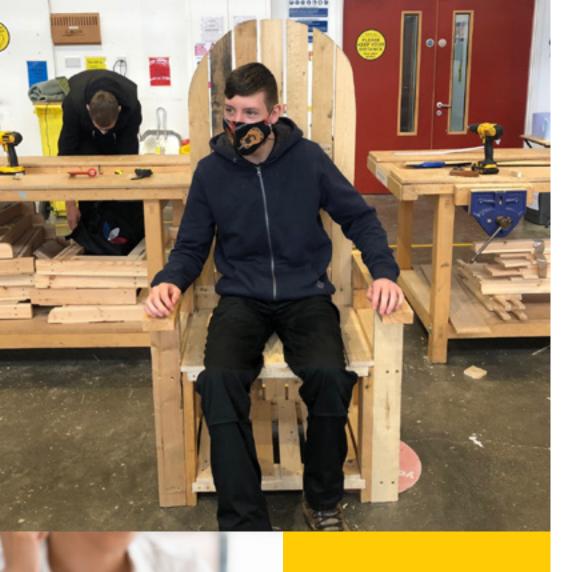**Learner**

Engagement of learners in remote learning

Overall, teaching staff describe how most learners participate and engage purposefully in remote learning activities.

Colleges have used the data analysis capabilities of their digital platforms effectively to monitor levels of learner attendance in online classes. However, staff highlight that this data does not always reflect the level of participation and engagement of some learners during remote learning. Most colleges report challenges in engaging some younger learners sufficiently in learning activities. This was particularly evident in in programmes that consist of large elements of practical work. Colleges report that, based on quantitative data available from their learning platforms and information from curriculum areas, overall learner engagement was less positive on

FE level programmes in comparison to Higher Education (HE) level programmes.

Learners highlight how they value the flexibility of remote delivery including being able to access course materials out with live lessons. They make good use of recorded lessons to revisit ideas, develop their thinking, and learn at their own pace at times that suit their lifestyle, family and work commitments. As a result, many learners feel that they have made progress at a faster rate than had been possible on campus. In curriculum areas where there is a substantial amount of theory, learners, particularly at HE level, report they prefer the remote learning model.

Teaching staff describe significant variations in the use of cameras

"We are all re-imagining how best to engage learners."

Lecturer

and microphones by learners in online classes. Staff report that this can hinder interactive learning and teaching, and makes it difficult to establish levels of individual learner engagement and understanding during lessons. Staff also highlight that when they are unable to see or interact with lesson participants, this inhibits whole-class interaction and affects wider engagement of the class group.

In most colleges, programme teams and staff providing services to support learning have worked collaboratively to help keep learners engaged. Teaching staff identify learners with learning or personal issues early, and refer them quickly to support service staff to enable them to access assistance. Across all colleges, the work of support service teams is acknowledged as critical

to maintaining the engagement of learners during remote learning.

Many learners report that self-directed learning works well for them during remote learning. In addition to subject-related skills, most learners are able to recognise the range of skills that they are developing through learning remotely. These include digital literacy, time keeping, working independently, planning and self-organisation. The development and application of these skills has helped learners prepare for progression to further learning or into employment. In some colleges, mini learning communities have provided learners with access to mentoring, peer support and engagement with business and industry leaders. In the best examples, this has supported learner engagement and interest in the vocational area.

"Getting people engaged is about getting to know people."

Class rep

Monitoring and assessing learner progress during remote learning

6

In all colleges, curriculum teams have undertaken detailed scenario planning to take account of the impact of the move to remote delivery on the progress and outcomes for learners in academic year 2019-20. A key focus of this planning has been arrangements to support learners who had been unable to complete their programme within the academic session and who may require to defer completion into the new academic session.

Overall, the shift to remote learning has necessitated more thorough planning for and integration of assessment. Teaching teams in all colleges have worked productively to plan and schedule assessments across programmes. Within programme teams, collaborative working between lecturers has helped to reduce the burden of assessment for learners through greater use of integrated assessment approaches

All colleges have worked conscientiously to devise creative solutions for assessing progress and learner competence, in line with the specific requirements of a large number of awarding bodies. This has included placing a greater emphasis on the role of formative assessment

to evidence overall student performance, and replace individual stand-alone assessments with a portfolio of work. Learners describe how the introduction of a more self-directed assessment approach has encouraged and enabled them to reflect more fully on their own performance. However, staff feel that in general, awarding bodies did not take enough account of the scale and impact of delivering college provision through remote learning. They describe how guidance on assessment was often issued late and did not always provide sufficient clarity regarding assessment requirements. Colleges describe how this created significant anxiety for both learners and staff.

Teaching staff have used online formative assessment techniques well to motivate and engage learners. There are many examples of teaching staff adapting assessment approaches engage and enthuse learners. These include hosting quizzes at the end of lessons to help learners consolidate their learning and identify any areas that require revision. However, many staff describe how converting assessment materials into a format suitable for remote delivery has placed additional pressure on them.

"Lecturers have done a fantastic job, and got better and better at it."

Learner

College staff recognised that some learners would be unable to complete their programme within the academic session, and colleges have made arrangements for these learners to be defer completion to the following year. Learners who were unable to access specialist digital and vocational resources from home have expressed concern that their remote learning experience would not prepare and equip them for entry to university or employment. Many learners describe feeling that their practical skills are under-developed and that they lack practical experience. A number of students are concerned that future employers might be less likely to offer them employment if their practical skill levels were not developed, or perceived to be developed, to the required standard. Colleges have hosted discussions with universities regarding articulation and progression arrangements for learners affected. These discussions have focused on deferring completion in order to reduce anxiety and support learners to plan for next steps in their learning

Teaching staff have made good use of online platforms to provide learners with feedback on their progress and performance in assessments. Learners describe how they have valued the more personalised and detailed feedback they have received through one-to-one discussions. In some colleges, feedback has also been provided in recorded video format. In a few colleges, teaching staff have made good use of approaches such as screen capture to share learners' assessments and discuss strengths and areas for improvement in their submitted work. Learners comment positively on the efforts that college staff have made to keep in touch with them and discuss their progress. Overall, learners describe how the shift to remote delivery has improved the quality and accessibility of feedback they have received on their progress.

Across all colleges, teaching and support staff meet regularly to identify learners at risk of disengaging from their learning, and to coordinate early interventions and approaches to help them to remain on their programme. Learners requiring additional support, or extra time for assessments, describe how they have been supported well by teaching and support staff. However, some learners with more complex additional support needs have found participating in remote learning very challenging.

7

"This college is dealing with 28 awarding bodies, all of them updating their guidance. Staff are doing well to cope with this."

Manager

Assuring the quality of remote learning and teaching

Throughout the initial period of remote learning, colleges focused on implementing systems and structures to enable remote learning, capturing learner feedback on their experience, and implementing assessment arrangements to accommodate changes to awarding body requirements. In all colleges, support was mobilised and provided quickly to assist staff and learners to adjust to remote learning. From August 2020, in most colleges the focus shifted to evaluation of the consistency, quality and equity of the learner experience. Most colleges have made progress in developing their approaches to evaluation of remote learning and teaching, learner engagement, and learner progress, and are ensuring that learner views and experiences of remote learning are captured and shared to inform future planning. Many colleges have made quality assurance processes available online. This has had a positive impact on supporting and engaging staff in carrying out quality assurance processes remotely.

All colleges had to focus heavily on adapting arrangements for quality assuring assessment processes. Regular standardisation meetings have supported teaching staff to engage in professional dialogue regarding alternative assessment approaches. Teaching staff highlight how the need to make changes as quickly as possible to meet the needs of their learners has enabled a 'can do' solution-focused approach to assessment planning.

The impact of the pandemic on college provision significantly increased the need for team-working between and across college departments to

> ## "I have realised that support services do not need to be location-based – we can support learners from anywhere."
>
> **Support service manager**

maintain and enhance the quality of the learning experience during remote learning. In almost all colleges, teams have worked collaboratively to review and adapt delivery approaches and reduce the assessment burden on learners. This collaboration has helped teaching staff to have confidence in making reliable and consistent assessment decisions.

Many colleges have devised and begun to implement, new approaches to evaluation of the quality of remote learning. These include observation of 'live' or synchronous learning sessions, work-placements and work-based learning activities; hosting discussions with learners in virtual breakout rooms; and converting end-of-unit and lesson evaluation arrangements for use in an online context. These arrangements are still at an early stage of development in

most colleges. There is significant variation within and across colleges and subject areas in the approaches to and volume of evaluation being undertaken to support improvement of remote learning. Many staff acknowledge that the ability to assess the engagement of learners in class activities during remote learning to inform planning for improvement remains challenging.

All colleges have developed and implemented processes to capture learner views about what is working well, and what has been more difficult for them during remote learning. These include carrying out online student surveys; hosting online meetings with class and subject representatives; and working closely with Students' Associations and Student Councils to gather learner views and plan for improvement.

Some Students' Associations have used sparqs resources well to help learners to evaluate their experience. Most colleges are positive about how well learners have engaged and contributed their views to inform improvement during remote learning. Overall, response rates to student online surveys were very high and this helped colleges to improve and enhance their approaches to delivering provision remotely. However, some class representatives have found it difficult to engage with their peers in order to gather views during remote learning as many did not engage socially or informally with their classmates.

Most colleges are beginning to plan future arrangements in response to learner feedback on their experience of remote learning. In a few colleges, in response to the views learners, some programme areas are planning to continue to deliver the theory aspects of programmes online in future.

Staff in support areas describe how remote learning has challenged their perception of what is possible in terms of providing support for learners remotely. Support service teams have reviewed and adapted their services in the light of the move to remote learning to ensure learners have access to a range of advice and support. These include library services, counselling, financial and welfare advice, and digital and technical support. Staff have reflected on the new delivery models to identify what worked well and as a result of the findings many colleges are planning to continue to provide services remotely in future. They describe how the new approaches have enabled them to offer learners with more flexible options to access support, in line with their personal preferences, needs and circumstances.

College staff have particularly valued the increased range of digital networking opportunities and support offered by both their own colleges and by College Development Network (CDN). Teaching staff from all colleges, particularly those out -with central Scotland, appreciate the flexibility of being able to access and attend events online, for example CDN subject networks, without the need for significant travel. This allowed them to share practice, discuss and address challenges, and identify and learn from what is working well during remote learning.

The impact of remote learning on the wellbeing of learners and staff

8

The impact of the pandemic and the move to remote working and learning on the wellbeing of learners and staff has been a priority area of focus for all colleges. Colleges have worked hard to ensure that support is available when needed for those staff and learners who are experiencing difficulties. Learners describe how they appreciate and have benefited from, high-quality pastoral and academic support during remote learning. Colleges have made good use of social media to ensure learners are supported by their peers to feel included and cared for throughout their programme. Teaching staff report that digital engagement between learners and staff has helped to develop a sense of belonging that has supported learner engagement and improved motivation.

Within learner induction programmes, colleges have prioritised and promoted the importance of mental health and wellbeing, for example through use of a range of national and locally-developed online resources. Mental health referrals have increased in all colleges, and counselling and guidance staff have worked well together to provide the necessary support. College staff are also benefitting from access to support and counselling services.
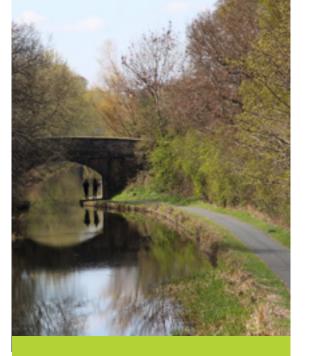
Learners describe feeling well supported by college staff during remote learning, and how they have benefitted from how well their mental health and wellbeing issues have been a central consideration when planning the delivery of remote learning by staff. Teaching staff acknowledge that the lack of opportunity for social interaction with their learners has been challenging, both for them and for their learners. They highlight how challenging it has been overall to establish supportive relationships with learners to help them engage in a positive learning experience.

Staff recognise that learners with additional support needs or mental health-related issues have found engaging in remote learning extremely challenging and physically draining, particularly over an extended period of time. To compensate for this and the loss of personal contact, many support for learning staff have introduced regular one-to-one engagements and check-ins with their learners. Learners describe how these regular pastoral conversations are supporting

> "In some ways we have been more in touch with individual learners through these pandemic times than we ever have been."
>
> **Support Services Staff**

> "We can help with qualifications but it's harder to help with their confidence or social development."
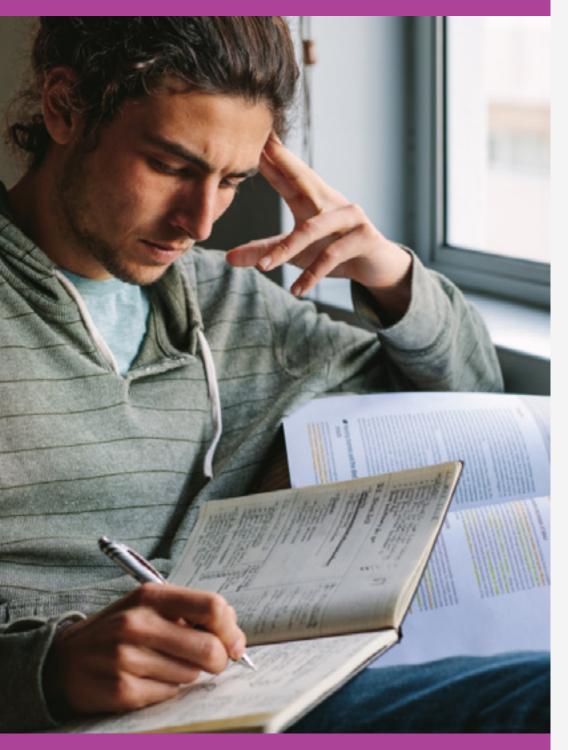>
> **Lecturer**

them to stay engaged and address any barriers to learning or personal issues. Staff also acknowledge the negative impact that financial issues can have on the wellbeing of learners. They have worked quickly to provide support to learners experiencing financial difficulties through disbursement of discretionary funds. This has helped learners to cope with the stress brought about by, for example loss of earnings due to the pandemic.

Both college staff and learners describe many factors that can create anxiety during remote learning. These include erratic or insufficient connectivity; lack of access to an appropriate digital device; lacking the necessary skills and confidence to use online learning tools; feelings of isolation; not having access to a quiet space to study; competing with other people to access the internet; caring for others and home schooling. College staff acknowledge that their ability to pick up on how learners are feeling or to identify and tackle safeguarding issues is much more difficult to do remotely.

All colleges have been proactive in monitoring the health and wellbeing of staff and learners during remote learning. They draw productively on feedback from surveys and check-ins to identify and target services and provide support. These include access to health and wellbeing groups; staff development opportunities focusing on health and wellbeing; self-assessment tools, exercise activities and access to support facilities. Both staff and learners value these services and the levels of support they have received from colleges.

All colleges have taken careful account of the changes to and impact on, the working conditions of staff during remote learning. They have provided guidance to staff on reducing screen time, taking regular breaks, engaging in physical activity and taking 'time-out' when needed. This has helped staff to cope with the challenges and demands of remote delivery of college provision and services, and of working from home. College staff describe how they have experienced challenges in juggling the demands of home and work life, and feeling that they were never 'off duty'. Many college managers highlight how managing conflicting priorities during lockdown has had a negative impact on their overall wellbeing.

Conclusion

Scotland's colleges have responded well to the demands of moving their curriculum online and delivering learning and teaching remotely. Managers and staff have planned for and mobilised digital resources, and provided support to help staff develop the skills required to work remotely, whilst maintaining a strong learner focus throughout the period of remote learning. College teams have worked collaboratively to overcome challenges and focus on learner wellbeing. Overall, remote learning delivery has developed well and at pace, across the college sector. However, the following common issues have impacted on the quality and consistency of remote learning; digital poverty and unreliable connectivity; the wellbeing and particularly mental health of staff and learners; the demands of developing learning, teaching and assessment approaches for remote learning; digital skills of staff and learners, including skills for digital pedagogy, and engagement of learners.

Recommendations

Colleges should:-
- continue to address digital poverty and enable all learners to engage in remote learning;
- continue to support the wellbeing of learners and staff, and in particular, their mental health during remote learning;
- ensure that all staff have the skills required to deliver learning and teaching, and services to support learning, remotely;
- develop approaches that support all learners to engage in remote learning, with a particular focus on younger learners on full-time further education programmes;
- develop and implement arrangements to evaluate and improve the quality of remote learning for all learners.

CDN should:-
- continue to support colleges to collaborate in developing and sharing resources for the delivery of remote learning.

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