



O C C A S I O N A L P A P E R S

LEARNING FROM LOCKDOWN: STAFF VOICES

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS

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FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested our resources, our resilience and our creativity. It has reminded us of our interdependence, as well as of the frailty of our social contract. And while it has taken a huge personal and social toll, it has also revealed hidden reservoirs of strength and hope on which we might build.

Understanding what has happened and learning from it will be crucial if we are to build on these glimmers of hope in a positive, creative and inclusive way. This is why this excellent and timely report, developed by educational charity OPUS, is so important. The Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) is pleased to support and to commend it. It deserves to be widely read.

This report reflects intelligently on the experiences of further education staff during the lockdown, using the 'listening post' methodology developed by OPUS and used in a previous FETL publication, *Leading by listening: Reflective learning*. This innovative methodology uses group discussion with participants to unearth themes that speak to the experience of the whole sector. In this case, 19 listening posts took place online between September and November with staff representative of different parts of the FE workforce, with five further individual discussions with senior leaders.

The results presented here highlight the issues the sector has been struggling with during the pandemic, indicating both the challenges faced by colleagues and the way in which staff and leaders have responded. The treatment is nuanced and illuminating, covering a wide range of relevant themes. I would highlight, in particular, the extent to which frontline FE staff have stepped up to handle the issues that have emerged during lockdown, exercising agency in unanticipated ways. The findings of the report suggest that there is much untapped talent in the sector that could be used better. This, to me, is among the most important learnings of the crisis (in FE and beyond), one I hope we can build on in the months and years ahead.

While COVID-19 will be with us for some time to come, the emergence of effective vaccines and treatments for the virus gives some hope that we can begin to turn our minds to the future. It is natural to want things to return to normal. But there is also an opportunity here to reflect on how we might do things differently, in fairer and more sustainable and inclusive ways.

As Arundhati Roy wrote in April this year, crises such as the one we are living through are also 'portals' to the future, gateways 'between one world and the next'. We must be sure to learn the lessons of the pandemic so that the world we build back is truly better than the one that preceded it. And while this report does not seek to offer definitive answers to such questions, it provides a critical snapshot of a sector in crisis mode and its attempt to act and think its way through and beyond it. As such, it is an invaluable aid to our reflection about what should come next.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

LEARNING FROM LOCKDOWN

This project was commissioned in September 2020 to understand the experiences of FE staff in England during lockdown and gain their perspectives on the opportunities and risks it presents for the sector.

The research used the 'Listening Post' methodology developed by the educational charity OPUS*. Listening Post is a form of social enquiry, not unlike a focus group, that is used to take a 'snapshot' of society, or a section of society, at a particular time.

Between September and November 2020, 19 Listening Posts were conducted online with mixed groups of teaching, admin and support staff from FE colleges across England, as well as specialist apprenticeship and adult learning providers. In addition, 5 individual discussions were held online with college principals, CEOs and senior leaders:



*OPUS – An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society Regd. Charity No. 282415 (see p.61)

LOCKDOWN LISTENING POST

- Listening Post assumes that the themes and patterns emerging from discussions in small groups will express some of the characteristics of the wider system to which those groups belong – in this case, the FE sector.
- Each Listening Post was a 45-minute group discussion conducted online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams®, with minimal facilitation.
- Participants contributed anonymously as representatives of the FE sector, sharing experiences from the perspective of their current roles within FE.
- A transcript of each discussion was produced which, in keeping with the zeitgeist of lockdown, was then *masked* (anonymised) and *hand-sanitised* (stripped of verbiage†). Quotes that spoke for the whole sector were *isolated* from each transcript.
- In the same spirit, a '*Rule of Six*' has been adopted for this report: material is organised into six sections each with six parts containing six quotes – all *socially distanced* across the page.
- Quotes taken from online interviews with Principals, CEOs and Senior Leaders are marked '*(Principal)*'.

Full transcripts of the Listening Posts are available on request from the author.

† 'verbiage' here means words or phrases such as 'so', 'sort of', 'kind of', 'you know', 'obviously', 'I think', 'just', 'really', 'yeah', 'okay' that are inserted into speech by the speaker as padding without adding to its meaning.

SIX THEMES

Engagement with People – the Network

1. NETWORK ACCESS

Community – how staff looked after students.

2. NETWORK CONNECTION

Communication – how staff interacted with each other.

Engagement with Practicality - Operating

3. OPERATING BANDWIDTH

Resources – how staff made use of the resources available to them.

4. OPERATING SYSTEM

Teaching – how staff assessed and addressed the needs of students.

Engagement with Purpose – the System

5. SYSTEM MODIFICATION

Adapting – how staff adapted their behaviour to meet the needs of an emerging situation.

6. SYSTEM TESTING

Complying – how staff adjusted to new expectations.

Each theme is explored in a separate section.

PRELUDE

When crisis strikes, all human systems – including FE colleges – are tested in three directions. The first tests the bonds of human connection – will people come together or fall apart? The second is a test of agency – will they keep pedalling or squeeze hard on the brakes? The third is a test of purpose – will they bend with the winds of change or hold steady on their course?

Learning from Lockdown reveals how staff in FE faced up to these tests: how they restored their network, kept operating and modified their system.

People – the Network

Network Access tells the story of how colleges came together. When students and staff could not come to college, colleges reached out to them. They replaced physical networks with virtual ones, expanded access to hardware and software, and worked to track down those not responding to their signals.

Network Connection describes how staff negotiated the challenges of working from home and living at work, finding new ways to manage and report, give and get help, fix problems and maintain morale. The proudest gains were in digital proficiency and management accessibility; the most keenly-felt losses were of switching-off times and *ad hoc* conversations.

Practicality – Operating

Operating Bandwidth shows how staff found the resources to keep going. Everyone got a taste of being a learner again, undergoing a rigorous examination of their flexibility, equipment and desire. Where staff could appreciate what they stood to gain, they surprised themselves at how far and how fast they could adapt. Where a cherished way of life was threatened, they dug in their heels a little.

Operating System is an account of how online lessons forced teachers to re-examine and reform their methods. No single approach suited everyone but, as new rules and approaches were tested out, students gave live feedback through the level of their

participation and compliance. This continued upon their return to campus, expressed by their responses to new rules about bubbles, wearing masks and social distancing.

Purpose – the System

System Modification explains how change cascaded from top to bottom of the sector but triggered corrective feedback from bottom to top. The system remains in flux while square prototypes are shaped to fit round holes. There are early rumblings of difference between conservative and progressive voices – the former proclaiming the indispensability of the classroom, studio and workshop, the latter propounding the possibilities of a virtual model, including more flexibility, new content and untapped demand.

System Testing explores a set of parallel conversations about oversight – not only between college leaders and Government, Ofsted and awarding bodies but between college managers and staff. The debate concerns what works best – delegated discretion or centralised control. Since lockdown makes everyone a learner, there is a chance to learn from past mistakes and experiment with something new.

In six sections, **Learning from Lockdown** shows the FE sector grappling with two fundamental dilemmas of pedagogy: should responsibility for learning lie predominantly with teachers or with learners, and in what conditions do they each work best?

Learning from Lockdown depicts a process of learning in its broadest sense – as any beneficial adaptation of people to conditions or *vice versa* – including instances where the most beneficial adaptations at one level may not be experienced as beneficial at another level.

Resolving those conflicts in the teaching process may depend on the extent of students' progress towards independent study, since FE's primary task is to manage a transfer of responsibility for learning from teacher to student. It does this by providing a potential space for development in which students can gradually experience the realities of adult life whilst being supported with a network where they can come together, resources to keep them going and direction to keep them on track.

Learning from Lockdown reports on the opportunities and risks, for both staff and students, arising from the extension of this potential learning space to include a virtual as well as a physical component. For higher-level learners and for staff, its potential is for growth – in independence, resourcefulness and self-direction; for lower-level learners, its potential is for disconnection – from social networks, tools for learning and sources of motivation.

If lockdown represents a potential space for learning by Government, Ofsted, awarding bodies and other stakeholders in FE, the key feedback from staff in this report is as follows: that positive change is only likely to occur when there are consistent two-way communications to keep everyone connected, adequate resources to maintain forward progress and clear incentives for those affected to bend in its favour. It is too soon to tell how far up FE this lesson is being learned.

Sandy Henderson, OPUS

November 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE LEARNINGS

"At the beginning, it was like 'whatever works, works'. Only now are we starting to experiment more."

KEY THEMES

COMMUNITY

Insufficiency, Disconnection, Inaccessibility
Vulnerability, Isolation, Disadvantage

COMMUNICATION

Homeworking, Updates, Protocols
Support, Wellbeing, Regulation

RESOURCES

Goodwill, Flexibility, Infrastructure
Funding, Adjustment, Collaboration

TEACHING

Behaviour, Divides, Potential
Engagement, Difference, Inequality

ADAPTING

Misunderstanding, Resistance, Technophobia
Interaction, Resumption, Assessment

COMPLYING

Trust, Consolidation, Accessibility
Inspection, Reduction, Growth

1/. NETWORK ACCESS (COMMUNITY)

Lockdown exposed a broad range of disadvantages for students – not only a lack of equipment and know-how but many kinds of distraction in their home lives that tested their resilience, desire and focus.

Key words: Insufficiency, Disconnection, Inaccessibility, Vulnerability, Isolation, Disadvantage

LEARNINGS:

1. That levels of access to laptops and internet accentuated the link between students' educational attainment and economic circumstances, increasing FE's need to reach out beyond the classroom and campus to support them.
2. That staff did far more than their formal duties required in re-establishing contact with students who disengaged from learning, demonstrating the broader role of FE in looking after its more vulnerable and ill-equipped students.
3. That teaching often fails when it makes incorrect assumptions about the learner, such as the assumption that students' attachment to social media indicated a general ease with technology.
4. That lockdown reinforced the importance of college as a social system, offering students respite from domestic problems, financial and emotional support and a range of positive influences and role models.
5. That face-to-face interaction is indispensable to students' educational and social progress because it gives them the mutual validation they need to mature into independent learners ready to make their way into work and society.

6. That college is a source of structure and routine without which students can easily flounder or lapse into indiscipline. Online learning must replicate these qualities as well as offering flexibility to those who want it.

2/. NETWORK CONNECTION (COMMUNICATION)

Lockdown blurred the boundaries between home and work, changing communication practices and their consequences, overwhelming some and isolating others.

Key words: Homeworking, Updates, Protocols, Support, Wellbeing, Regulation

LEARNINGS:

7. That lockdown may not have changed the roles of FE staff but it significantly altered their workplace, duties, workload and equipment as well as the channels and frequency of communication.
8. That communication is effective when it serves the needs of the audience as well as the speaker. This means communicating regularly and honestly, encouraging feedback, and making sure that the content is succinct and friendly in tone.
9. That changing circumstances can sometimes require rules to be relaxed, to prevent them giving rise to unintended consequences. Rules can provide cover for those unwilling to face the reality of a situation or accept responsibility for its consequences.
10. That organisations rely on staff using informal channels and soft skills to get things done, which may not be included in any job description yet are often the key factor in their employability and effectiveness.
11. That people do not respond to events uniformly or predictably as a group. Successful management – like teaching – involves personal attention to individual needs and differences.

12. That remote communication requires an additional psychological 'presence' to compensate for the lack of a physical presence, and is accompanied by an expectation of continuous availability that can make it hard to switch off.

3/. OPERATING BANDWIDTH (RESOURCES)

The sector's adaptability was an asset during lockdown but staff and students did not adapt equally to the change, due to limitations in equipment, skill and incentive.

Key words: Goodwill, Flexibility, Infrastructure, Funding, Adjustment, Collaboration

LEARNINGS:

13. That lockdown turned everyone into a learner and reminded them not only how uncomfortable learning can be but also that solutions come from making the best use of their own finite resources rather than focusing on what is lacking.
14. That the crisis showed FE that adaptability is not a weakness or a strength but a defining characteristic: a pragmatic approach to making the best use of finite resources.
15. That colleges, like their learners, are constrained by their own technological poverty but still able to patch together a functioning network – run, in effect, from hundreds of back-bedrooms – rather than use it as an excuse for under-performance.
16. That management, like teaching, requires the targeting of available resources where they are most needed. This involves distinguishing the most deserving from the most demanding.
17. That the key driver of change is a desire or need for change to happen. Colleges have learned that they are capable of achieving much more, much faster than they believed and can continue to stretch themselves in future.

18. That effective change is driven by an appreciation of its benefits and opportunities, offsetting any losses or threats. Remote working has potential to strengthen and expand communities, increase collaboration and enhance the scope for flexible working and a better work-life balance.

4/. OPERATING SYSTEM (TEACHING)

Online learning is a live experiment in which student responses provide instant feedback on every different type of teacher input, amplifying and dampening their ongoing approaches.

Key words: Behaviour, Divides, Potential, Engagement, Difference, Inequality

LEARNINGS:

19. That lockdown has confirmed the importance of students learning to develop a more confident presence as a key part of their future employability.
20. That students need additional support upon their return to campus, just as they did at the start of lockdown, to practise the core components of employability: showing up, respecting others, obeying rules and staying on task.
21. That a period of experimentation and collaboration is needed in order for staff to explore the suitability of various online learning methods for different courses and levels of ability.
22. That the difficulties in generating group discussion online may be overcome by more explicit steps to engage learners individually and encourage them to contribute, rather than relying on non-verbal cues that work in classrooms.
23. That online lessons do not so much require a change of educational objectives as a change in structure, utilising real-time and asynchronous resources to encourage both group working and independent study.
24. That teachers may be able to counteract the disadvantages of online learning for weaker students by modifying their approach during both face-to-face and online teaching time to suit the learning preferences of those students.

5/. SYSTEM MODIFICATION (ADAPTING)

The cycle of change initiated from above by Government and awarding bodies hindered implementation below and fuelled resistance from those most affected by it.

Key words: Misunderstanding, Resistance, Technophobia, Interaction, Resumption, Assessment

LEARNINGS:

25. That rules need to change in response to changing circumstances, but repeated rule changes can lead to disorder by causing misunderstanding, confusion and a loss of confidence in the rule-maker.
26. That change, however inevitable, will be most fiercely resisted by those for whom it threatens the death of a way of life. They will not be won over unless they can foresee potential benefits to balance out their losses.
27. That staff, like students, demonstrate a wide range of aptitudes and appetites for learning and will need time to practise and gain confidence in using unfamiliar skills.
28. That face-to-face relationships are important drivers of college culture, community and job satisfaction for many staff and students, and must be given due priority in the designs for college life in the future.
29. That the resumption of on-site teaching is not a return to normality but a second phase of change, with its own unequal distribution of impacts.
30. That the confusion over assessments and grades has created as many problems as it solved, by concealing an attainment gap between where students are and where they need to be in order to become employable.

6/. SYSTEM TESTING (Complying)

Lockdown may facilitate indirect changes to college procedures, highlighting the potential for looser oversight of staff as well as broadening the range of potential courses and students.

Key words: Trust, Consolidation, Accessibility, Inspection, Reduction, Growth

LEARNINGS:

31. That lockdown has provided an opportunity for managers to modify their approach to staff who have worked diligently during lockdown and shown they merit being accorded more trust and discretion over how they work.
32. That lockdown is the catalyst for a levelling-up in digital skills, giving all staff an opportunity to master new techniques and practices to support students and each other.
33. That new possibilities will emerge from paying attention to what students like and dislike about remote learning, allowing teachers to tailor their model to different courses and levels of ability.
34. That colleges, like students, are uncertain not only whether their work can be fairly assessed in exceptional circumstances but also whether this is their opportunity to press for change in the way assessments are conducted.
35. That the use of online delivery during lockdown has caused colleges to re-examine the relationship between teaching and learning, creating both an opportunity and a threat for teachers.
36. That FE can play a leading role in any post-Covid recovery if it is given support to be entrepreneurial and innovative by Government, Ofsted and awarding bodies.

1. NETWORK ACCESS (COMMUNITY)

"College is not as fun as it was – that's what they're telling me. It might be better for their education, but socially, they don't like it as much."

NETWORK ACCESS – SUMMARY

Lockdown exposed a broad range of disadvantages for students – not only a lack of equipment and know-how but many kinds of distraction in their home lives that tested their resilience, desire and focus.

- **Insufficiency:** Lockdown exposed levels of digital poverty that compounded the difficulties for disadvantaged students in keeping up their studies.
- **Disconnection:** A minority of students did not respond to contact or continue with their studies during the lockdown period, forcing colleges to try alternative means of communicating with them, not always successfully.
- **Inaccessibility:** Students' digital skills often do not encompass email, Microsoft Office or audio-video communications and, in some cases, their only means of accessing online lessons is via a mobile phone.
- **Vulnerability:** The closure of campuses deprived students of an escape from the difficulties of their domestic situations, including increased exposure to gangs, drugs, suicide, violence and poverty.
- **Isolation:** The biggest loss experienced by many students during lockdown was the interruption of peer-group interactions, both in a social and educational context.
- **Disadvantage:** Some students who lack independent learning skills have fallen further behind during lockdown and now face the double challenge of overcoming entrenched inertia as well as recovering lost educational ground. Others have responded well to having to rely on their own resources.

INSUFFICIENCY

Lockdown exposed levels of digital poverty that compounded the difficulties for disadvantaged students in keeping up their studies.

"It's a really lousy experience to see all of this making inequality more unequal, and to watch those students falling further behind." (Principal)

"That's been a huge challenge for us – determining who has got the right technology and who just says they haven't." (Principal)

"There's not enough money in FE for eventualities that you haven't planned for."

"I've been shocked – I don't know why – by the technology poverty. I didn't think so many people would struggle to access the right technology to be able to learn remotely. And still do."

"Students all left college before lockdown physically holding on to a 'how to' guide of how to access systems. We checked all the student contact details prior to them leaving and students were asked to confirm if they could log on to the system before they went."

"What we need now going forward is more investment in technology, and our ability to work remotely. Especially for disadvantaged students, who might not have broadband or even the English language skills to understand everything that's communicated online to them."

LEARNING #1:

That levels of access to laptops and internet accentuated the link between students' educational attainment and economic circumstances, increasing FE's need to reach out beyond the classroom and campus to support them.

DISCONNECTION

A minority of students did not respond to contact or continue with their studies during the lockdown period, forcing colleges to try alternative means of communicating with them, not always successfully.

"Other students have chosen to go off-grid; there are students who have just vanished; we have vulnerable students, a tiny handful, we've had concerns about and don't know where they are." (Principal)

"We had safeguarding referrals, we had students coming to us who had never struggled with mental health in the past, saying 'I can't get up, I can't get out of bed, I've got no drive to do anything'."

"I get phone calls from employers who haven't been able to get hold of apprentices for three days, and I'm ringing their parents who say, 'Yes, they're upstairs, what's going on?'"

"We had to do quite a lot of home visits because students were not engaging with us at all. It was getting to the point that we hadn't heard from them for a week or two, there was no answer on house phones, there was no answer from the parents."

"When we were chasing up learners, we got parents ringing up saying 'he doesn't know how to get on'. We started providing our own little information service as to how they can get online and literally talk them through things."

"I know for a fact that there were definitely students on the courses that I was supporting that weren't contacted for the whole three months and made no contact and subsequently failed their courses."

LEARNING #2:

That staff did far more than their formal duties required in re-establishing contact with students who disengaged from learning, demonstrating the broader role of FE in looking after its more vulnerable and ill-equipped students.

INACCESSIBILITY

Students' digital skills often do not encompass email, Microsoft Office® or audio-video communications and, in some cases, their only means of accessing online lessons is via a mobile phone.

"There was an assumption by the college that, because most young people use social media and smartphones, they're digitally savvy."

"We overestimated the technical ability of some of our students – they are able to use their phone but some of them can't do much more than that – like logging on to a PC or a laptop, or using a college email. One student said 'What's an email?' and we thought 'Okay, we've made some wrong assumptions here'." (Principal)

"I've been able to get a lot of my students on to Teams, but if they're on their mobile phones, it's difficult for them to then say type an essay, or to complete activities."

"If you ask any student to open up a Word document and type something up in an email, it's like you're talking in a foreign language."

"I had a lot of people who said they couldn't get their son or daughter to do the online stuff."

"It's all very well to live-stream High-Definition content into someone's living room but, if they can't access it at the time that you're displaying, or they haven't got the machine to do it on or the internet bandwidth, it is going to cause problems."

LEARNING #3:

That teaching often fails when it makes incorrect assumptions about the learner, such as the assumption that students' attachment to social media indicated a general ease with technology.

VULNERABILITY

The closure of campuses deprived students of an escape from the difficulties of their domestic situations, including increased exposure to gangs, drugs, suicide, violence and poverty.

"For a lot of our students, it is respite from home too. College is the only consistent thing they have got in their lives and a lot of them desperately need to be at college because it's an escape from real life for them."

"One thing that came up was with students handling money. Since we've gone to a cashless system, they find it almost impossible because they can't see physically what they're spending. They're just using a piece of plastic."

"A lot of our students come from quite high crime areas and can get drawn into gangs when they aren't physically in the college. There are genuine safeguarding issues that I would worry about if this were to become more of a standard way of teaching."

"In our area, there is the risk of county lines and high levels of male suicide. When I asked our safeguarding lead how things were, she went, 'we've not lost one yet'. I thought, 'that's actually what it boils down to – not whether they are going to pass their assignments'."

"We have quite a lot of refugees who don't have bank accounts. College is providing them with cards so that they can access bus fares and food because, previously, they would have got a bus pass and meal vouchers. That is such a fantastic thing for an organisation to do."

"It was just panic; we had to reassure them that we would still be there to support them whatever their needs were and help get the student and their family through it – doing referrals, giving access to domestic violence helplines and anything like that so we could support them as if we were face to face."

LEARNING #4:

That lockdown reinforced the importance of college as a social system, offering students respite from domestic problems, financial and emotional support and a range of positive influences and role models.

ISOLATION

The biggest loss experienced by many students during lockdown was the interruption of peer-group interactions, both in a social and educational context.

“The thing that they were missing the most was the social interaction – having opportunities to catch up with friends, sit and have a coffee.” (Principal)

“What can be decisive in changing the prospects for a young person is whether they’ve got peers alongside them and a teacher looking out for them – just watching, seeing if their behaviour and demeanour has changed and things like that.” (Principal)

“Those key learners that everybody knows across the college are really missing being able to drop into the building to chat to somebody, talk to reception. They miss their friends as well; they need to be with their peers to learn as well as the fun social side of it, and get the learning support too.”

“If they had an offer from one college of three days in college and an offer from another college of one day in college and the rest online, that was quite influential in determining where they decided to go. And their mum and dad would have preferred them to be in college more too.”

“We need everyone just talking to each other. I do a check in and chat with learners. I’ve been talking to some learners for five months now, every week, checking in with them to see if they’re doing all right. I think we all need to talk.”

“It’s wonderful to see the buildings full of young people again.”

LEARNING #5:

That face-to-face interaction is indispensable to students’ educational and social progress because it gives them the mutual validation they need to mature into independent learners ready to make their way into work and society.

DISADVANTAGE

Some students who lack independent learning skills have fallen further behind during lockdown and now face the double challenge of overcoming entrenched inertia as well as recovering lost educational ground. Others have responded well to having to rely on their own resources.

“Mental health was recorded as on the rise right throughout lockdown. Returning has been difficult because students aren’t ready to do a full week in college or access learning online. We’re having to stretch students to achieve.”

“We underestimated the power of social interaction, and probably peer influence as well. Some of them missed the social interaction in their lessons too and having the opportunity to work together in small groups or do research on a project together.”

“Some groups can be really needy and a lot of it is sheer laziness. They’re not really needy. And I’m not talking about people who have proper problems.”

“Our learners need to be dragged through the paperwork and the classroom stuff; most of them want to be in the engineering workshop doing the practical. The vast majority are not independent learners – they don’t have those skills – so, when we set them work, most of them would not respond.”

“We have a large number of students with mental health issues. There is a constant influx who are very anxious about lockdown and about not having the resources because of tech issues or their course is studio-based. And a lot of them are trapped at home not able to see their friends – it’s a kind of double anxiety, isn’t it?”

“We have seen a little bit more resilience in learners because they’ve had to figure out some of their own issues instead of coming to members of staff straight away.”

LEARNING #6:

That college is a source of structure and routine without which students can easily flounder or lapse into indiscipline. Online learning must replicate these qualities as well as offering flexibility to those who want it.

2. NETWORK CONNECTION (COMMUNICATION)

"Working as a team within the college by email or phone call just makes it all clunky."

NETWORK CONNECTION – SUMMARY

Lockdown blurred the boundaries between home and work, changing communication practices and their consequences, overwhelming some and isolating others.

- **Homeworking:** Staff experienced homeworking as a mixed blessing, reducing distractions for some and human contact for others; adding to the workload for many whilst leaving others with time to plan and reflect.
- **Updates:** Staff generally appreciated management communications during lockdown, which helped to preserve cohesion as well as providing reassurance in the face of disruption and making college leadership seem more approachable.
- **Protocols:** Staff were hampered in their attempts to make contact with students by strict safeguarding protocols and forced onto the defensive by anxious and angry parents demanding clarity that was not available.
- **Support:** The loss of informal workplace contact during lockdown has created a fundamental change in the way many staff have had to work, through the removal of access to informal knowledge-sharing systems, and has revealed how much they rely on others for support in the *minutiae* of their daily work.
- **Wellbeing:** The focus on physical and mental wellbeing during lockdown revealed a wide range of responses and coping strategies. Paying attention to individual differences helped staff to feel cared for and created a sense of unity and purpose.
- **Regulation:** Staff quickly learned that remote working was not simply doing the same work from a different location – there were different demands and different expectations, making it hard for them to regulate their workload.

HOMEWORKING

Staff experienced homeworking as a mixed blessing, reducing distractions for some and human contact for others; adding to the workload for many whilst leaving others with time to plan and reflect.

"That's the hardest thing about working from home, losing that switch-off point."

"Everything got slower. My email box – I get so many emails every day. I could honestly spend all day just answering emails, but then I'd get nothing done."

"I'm not going to sit here and pretend I was teaching full time like I should have been."

"I have got all my admin jobs done and had time to think about it, instead of getting pulled into calamities and meltdowns which isn't an administrator's job."

"I can be on a Google Meet with emails pinging away in the background, my telephone rings, my mobile rings, I've got a WhatsApp message, a Teams message. All these communications channels opened at the start of lockdown and often the staff and students try every option if they want to reach you."

"There are not enough hours for what is needed. You are constantly doing a not good enough job in your head."

LEARNING #7:

That lockdown may not have changed the roles of FE staff but it significantly altered their workplace, duties, workload and equipment as well as the channels and frequency of communication.

UPDATES

Staff generally appreciated management communications during lockdown, which helped to preserve cohesion, as well as providing reassurance in the face of disruption and making college leadership seem more approachable.

"Working this way has almost normalised them, especially my conversations with the Principal which have historically been few and far between. I feel like we are quite good pen pals now."

"The communications were really helpful. Every day, we knew exactly what time they were coming. They were interesting, they were informative, and they kept you feeling we were part of the group. We were all in it together."

"That's one thing I have really enjoyed – the normalising of the demi-gods that are the leadership team."

"Generally, the messages from management were few and far between. From my point of view, there was no contact at all to say 'how are you getting on?' 'Do you need anything?'"

"From the first day in lockdown, we looked at different ways we could communicate with staff. Off my own bat, I set up a YouTube channel, an Instagram Channel, put stuff on Moodle and emails. I was trying to think of ways you could reach staff as effectively as possible through different channels."

"The experience seems to be that we're being bombarded with communications, to be on the safe side. How many more times do you need to say this – we are all grown up and reasonable people. College has turned stating the obvious into a fine art."

LEARNING #8:

That communication is effective when it serves the needs of the audience as well as the speaker. This means communicating regularly and honestly, encouraging feedback, and making sure that the content is succinct and friendly in tone.

PROTOCOLS

Staff were hampered in their attempts to make contact with students by strict safeguarding protocols and forced onto the defensive by anxious and angry parents demanding clarity that was not available.

"We've had a couple of complaints but they've come from parents where we've had to say 'We are absolutely doing our best. What more do you want? We are following the guidelines to the letter'."

"We were not issued with college mobiles so we weren't allowed to contact the students for safeguarding reasons. That made it very hard to communicate with students who may be dyslexic, or may have problems getting on the Wi-Fi."

"First, we weren't allowed to use personal email because it was a safeguarding issue. Then, we are told 'you have to use personal emails because you have to get in touch with them to make sure they're okay'."

"They did not allow us to phone the students from our own phones, and they did not allow us to use Zoom, for safeguarding reasons or for policy reasons. I didn't but I am aware of a few staff who did do that even though we weren't allowed to."

"This is what I would say to angry students and angry parents: we find out what's happening when you find out. We don't have a secret channel or a backchannel to Boris or Gavin Williamson. We are literally finding out the minute you do."

"A lot of parents felt some of the decisions were very rushed and didn't have the confidence to send their kids back."

LEARNING #9:

That changing circumstances can sometimes require rules to be relaxed, to prevent them giving rise to unintended consequences. Rules can provide cover for those unwilling to face the reality of a situation or accept responsibility for its consequences.

SUPPORT

The loss of informal workplace contact during lockdown has created a fundamental change in the way many staff have had to work, through the removal of access to informal knowledge-sharing systems, and has revealed how much they rely on others for support in the *minutiae* of their daily work.

“A lot of stuff gets sorted out just by having a quick word with somebody in the same room which, when that’s taken away, really does feel like you’re working in the dark.”

“You can’t have a passing conversation about it in the corridor so you’ve got to find a mutual time, arrange a meeting, send an email, do this and that. The ad-hoc-ness of it all is missing, which makes working really difficult, I find.”

“If you want help from somebody, it’s quite difficult to explain what you want by email.”

“Not having those moments of contact I probably found harder than trying to get to grips with home working. It was the contact with real people – everyone was upset that they couldn’t see members of their close family but, for a lot of us, the people we work with are our family.”

“There are things you pick up from being in college that you just won’t pick up and you don’t know you’ve not picked up at home.”

“I think those little moments of communicating in the office are really, really valuable. You notice when people are looking a little bit stressed or overwhelmed, by seeing it in their body language and on their faces. You can know whether it is going to be useful to say, ‘can you just do this for me?’ or whether you need to hold off.”

LEARNING #10:

That organisations rely on their staff using informal channels and soft skills to get things done, which may not be included in any job description yet are often the key factor in their employability and effectiveness.

WELLBEING

The focus on physical and mental wellbeing during lockdown revealed a wide range of responses and coping strategies. Paying attention to individual differences helped staff to feel cared for and created a sense of unity and purpose.

“You just have to take such careful account of people’s sensitivities - the worry that some people feel, the lack of worry that other people feel. And at every stage, you’ve got to be really compassionate and really sensitive.” (Principal)

“People are very different: some are stressed out, really struggling, others are pretty comfortable and then others are blasé about it. There’s a whole host of different psychological consequences running alongside all of those practical issues.” (Principal)

“What they’ve done well is constantly revisit their plans throughout this time, to check how everything’s working and how people are feeling.”

“Our faculty meetings have been about trying to calm that down and reduce the panic in everybody.”

“You are spending so much time reassuring everybody. But the expectations are still the same that the results will be delivered.”

“There was no support from the college at all. You are now doing remote – just dropped in it with no support.”

LEARNING #11:

That people do not respond to events uniformly or predictably as a group. Successful management – like teaching – involves personal attention to individual needs and differences.

REGULATION

Staff quickly learned that remote working was not simply doing the same work from a different location – there were different demands and different expectations, making it hard for them to regulate their workload.

"No one was prepared for suddenly working at home, but we were expected to behave in the same way without having the training to do that. You don't have that guiding hand you get in the office."

"Staff said it was exhausting for them – far more tiring to deliver all day online than it was to physically do it face-to-face." (Principal)

"Having to have difficult conversations with staff or exam bodies or colleagues through Zoom was difficult, because you get 'Sorry, I didn't quite get that' or 'you're breaking up'."

"I've been on Zoom for five hours at different points across the day, and I come off feeling absolutely drained. And there's a whole other kind of energy that you need."

"Do I really want to spend another two hours on the screen? Has everyone got Zoom fatigue? Have people had enough of being in front of a screen?"

"Teams has provided us with so many other brilliant opportunities. And one of the downsides is that it makes you available 24/7. Students are so used to putting things on chat and getting something straight back from their mates."

LEARNING #12:

That remote communication requires an additional psychological 'presence' to compensate for the lack of a physical presence, and is accompanied by an expectation of continuous availability that can make it hard to switch off.

3. OPERATING BANDWIDTH (RESOURCES)

"Colleges have coped because we have had to be flexible for many, many years."

OPERATING BANDWIDTH – SUMMARY

The sector's adaptability was an asset during lockdown but staff and students did not adapt equally to the change due to limitations in equipment, skill and incentive.

- **Goodwill:** Colleges relied on staff goodwill and flexibility to switch their teaching online, adapt their teaching methods and provide feedback on the pros and cons to inform future digital strategies.
- **Flexibility:** Staff are proud that their adaptability and experience at making the best of finite resources has gained recognition and that FE is seen to have responded well to the operational challenges of lockdown.
- **Infrastructure:** Technological diversity was revealed among staff, especially those involved in teaching practical courses who, before lockdown, had little use for a laptop. Some staff also encountered problems gaining access to online college resources not set up with home-working in mind.
- **Funding:** Lockdown surfaced the extent of technological diversity among students, with bursaries being redirected towards laptop and dongle provision although insufficient in scale and scope to meet the needs of all students.
- **Adjustment:** Colleges are grappling with the complexities of change and the delicate task of establishing who is best equipped to seize new opportunities and who needs help adapting.
- **Collaboration:** Remote working has paradoxically helped to bridge geographical boundaries, establishing new communities of interest among staff occupying different buildings or sites, and created opportunities for flexible working that would not otherwise have occurred.

GOODWILL

Colleges relied on staff goodwill and flexibility to switch their teaching online, adapt their teaching methods and provide feedback on the pros and cons to inform future digital strategies.

“College is like a lot of organisations in being caught with its pants down and having to learn new things very quickly. That’s understandable.”

“Like a lot of organisations, it has been hollowed out, and what the college does is rely on the goodwill of the staff and support staff to make things happen.”

“There was no adjustment of expectations, no adjustment for a new delivery model; it was expected that things would be synchronous, lessons would be at the same time, that there would be the same timetable, and that learners would hand in the same level of work. It baffled me that nobody realised that that wasn’t a good idea.”

“I think it’s quite important for us to experience the frustration of learning. It’s really easy to fall into thinking ‘I know what I’m doing and that is the way I’m going to do it’ and forget about other people’s perspectives and what they might struggle with.”

“There is no right and wrong way to do it – everyone has had to learn what we can and what we can’t do. We have probably decided what we don’t like doing quicker than what we do like.”

“The programmes that we put in place and developed fairly quickly were always seen as stopgaps to keep people engaged and support their immediate needs. We never considered them to be anything more than a bridge back to more traditional modes of learning.”

LEARNING #13:

That lockdown turned everyone into a learner and reminded them not only how uncomfortable learning can be but also that solutions come from making the best use of their own finite resources rather than focusing on what is lacking.

FLEXIBILITY

Staff are proud that their adaptability and experience at making the best of finite resources has gained recognition and that FE is seen to have responded well to the operational challenges of lockdown.

“You do the best you can, because that’s what FE’s always been renowned for.”

“The FE sector is really adaptable, which is why it’s probably done really well in this pandemic because it’s so used to last-minute changes and lots of changes of policy.”

“I think that is a characteristic of FE that we all make the best out of a bad situation, because that’s what we’re doing constantly. We’re maximising what we’ve got.”

“We’re all things to all people. That’s often a problem but it’s helpful in this situation.”

“When you get a step back from it, though, and see what’s happening elsewhere, I really do think that our organisation has done a really good job of carrying on regardless.”

“You’re making it all up as you go along. There’s no playbook, everything is new, everything’s different. And you’re having to improvise and solve problems constantly. Every day there’s a new complexity, a new permutation, a new concern, a new challenge.” (Principal)

LEARNING #14:

That the crisis showed FE that adaptability is not a weakness or a strength but a defining characteristic: a pragmatic approach to making the best use of finite resources.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Technological diversity was revealed among staff, especially those involved in teaching practical courses who, before lockdown, had little use for a laptop. Some staff also encountered problems gaining access to online college resources not set up with home-working in mind.

"I don't think we realised how much equipment and technology we needed to support people."

"We are not a wealthy college and so our infrastructure is just not strong enough to handle this kind of remote working."

"Our IT systems are not as up to scratch as they could be, so a lot of staff are working from home without a staff mobile; a lot of members of staff didn't even have a laptop. There was no backup plan."

"A lot of staff have better tech at home than in the workplace – you would think it would be the other way around."

"College has got the infrastructure to deliver the courses online but they block everything until you ask for it to be unblocked. If you don't know that something exists, you don't know that you can use it – that should work the other way around."

"The network that we have in place at college wouldn't allow people to have use of the network at home."

LEARNING #15:

That colleges, like their learners, are constrained by their own technological poverty but still able to patch together a functioning network – run, in effect, from hundreds of back-bedrooms – rather than use it as an excuse for under-performance.

FUNDING

Lockdown surfaced the extent of technological diversity among students, with bursaries being redirected towards laptop and dongle provision although insufficient in scale and scope to meet the needs of all students.

"I would love to give everyone Chromebooks but, in FE, it's a massive struggle. You have to deal in what's available – if there's meant to be some money there, I don't know where it is."

"For students who might not have access to technology at home, we've provided a bursary for laptops and Wi-Fi dongles. If their home environment isn't conducive – say because five people are sharing the same room – then our library centres are open." (Principal)

"I have had a lot of parents saying 'My social worker says that you'll give my daughter a laptop' – demands for things we just don't have but I understand that they need."

"At the start of lockdown, it was very tricky to get hold of devices at such short notice. Obviously, China had stopped manufacturing anything that had a chip in it. It became very problematic to get hold of laptops, PCs, phones, barriers that read swipe cards, everything. The IT department tried their best but were inundated."

"We're trying to get them a laptop if they've got a bursary but everything's changed now – you have to apply online if you need a bursary, and our students can't apply online."

"We were getting loads of emails saying they had been told that all households would get their wi-fi upgraded and we were having to say 'No, you won't get that'. We were held personally responsible for that."

LEARNING #16:

That management, like teaching, requires the targeting of available resources where they are most needed. This involves distinguishing the most deserving from the most demanding.

ADJUSTMENT

Colleges are grappling with the complexities of change and the delicate task of establishing who is best equipped to seize new opportunities and who needs help adapting.

"A really good thing that's come out of this is having to be pushed into the technological future."

"It takes a long time for leadership to make some sorts of cultural change but, when you're faced with a very small set of adverse situations, you can do it. You're looking for some key drivers within that situation to start the ball rolling."

"We are still just pinching ourselves in disbelief that our switch from face to face to online enrolment actually worked, and we've got 10,000 students enrolled." (Principal)

"If someone had said 'You're moving to online learning', people would have wanted about five years to lead into that, whereas we had five minutes. It was fight or flight and that helped a lot of things."

"We had about 10 Teams groups set up before lockdown; we've now got 1,200 Teams groups."

"We didn't transition to online learning in a perfect seamless transition, delivering high-quality learner experience and education; we did the best that we could."

LEARNING #17:

That the key driver of change is a desire or need for change to happen. Colleges have learned that they are capable of achieving much more, much faster than they believed of themselves and can continue to stretch themselves in future.

COLLABORATION

Remote working has paradoxically helped to bridge geographical boundaries, establishing new communities of interest among staff occupying different buildings or sites, and created opportunities for flexible working that would not otherwise have occurred.

"We've now introduced this flexibility into people's lives, where they've realised that they can get the job done and juggle childcare and everything else that's going on in their lives."

"It's brought the team together as well: we work across different campuses and, previously, there was an 'us and them' attitude between the sites."

"When we've come back into teaching this year, there's been so much more fluid communication with students and the parents so we have come back stronger, in some ways."

"Working in a college is an extremely social environment. We interact all day, every day with students, staff, people that work in different offices. We are really a unique establishment because, very often, it doesn't feel like work, it just feels like you are amongst people you want to be around."

"Before, when people put in flexible working requests, a high percentage weren't accepted for business reasons. We have started to get some already – people are starting to think differently."

"In Teams, no one's got a campus setting so we're all in it together."

LEARNING #18:

That effective change is driven by an appreciation of its benefits and opportunities, offsetting any losses or threats. Remote working has potential to strengthen and expand communities, increase collaboration and enhance the scope for flexible working and a better work-life balance.

4. OPERATING SYSTEM (TEACHING)

"We tried to bring the apprentices round to the mindset 'step away from the games console for a little bit and actually focus on some career development'."

OPERATING SYSTEM – SUMMARY

Online learning is a live experiment in which student responses provide instant feedback on every different type of teacher input, amplifying and dampening their ongoing approaches.

- **Behaviour:** In negotiating a new way of working, boundaries were set by students as much as by staff in defining what behaviours are acceptable and what are not.
- **Divides:** Lockdown exposed technological, social and educational divides among students that are still evident upon their return to campus, through declines in attendance, behaviour and focus.
- **Potential:** Teachers are exploring the potential of online teaching but also debating whether it is better suited to delivering live content or to coaching and supporting students over the 'final mile' of applying their understanding in practice.
- **Engagement:** Teachers have learnt to overcome the lack of visual cues from students in online teaching by introducing more explicit ways of engaging them so that they do not tune out or become distracted and can instead maintain a psychological presence even when their concentration might be wavering.
- **Difference:** There is no consensus among teachers about the best approaches to teaching online, but there is broad agreement that it offers much flexibility as an adjunct to the classroom.
- **Inequality:** Teachers are concerned that the switch to online learning benefits those who are already flourishing and disadvantages those struggling in their domestic lives, educational needs or English language skills.

BEHAVIOUR

In negotiating a new way of working, boundaries were set by students as much as by staff in defining what behaviours are acceptable and what are not.

"We have had kids turning up to remote learning in their underpants, in their pyjamas, doing things that are inappropriate online. We have had to evolve remote learning etiquette."

"They were struggling quite a lot at the start – it was really difficult for them to get their head in the game. So we needed to give them a 'how to work from home etiquette' and business protocol."

"We are working with a generation of students with very low person-to-person confidence in building relationships. They will not answer a telephone call, they will only text you. It will get to the point where they won't want to leave their front door. Their confidence will be so low, they won't go to a job interview if it's face-to-face."

"The main issue we had was with cameras, because so many students for various reasons, completely understandably, didn't want their camera on. For a teacher, it is really hard to engage and give engaging lessons when you are talking to letters on a screen."

"Some learners set the camera so just the top of their head was showing so that, if they didn't feel completely confident that they were part of the group, they didn't have to show their full faces."

"There's an inherent distrust between student and teacher when you're teaching online, by the very nature of it being so trackable. If we make them turn their cameras on or come out of their breakout rooms on time, or if we run a plagiarism checker on every assignment, we're effectively saying that we don't trust them. We need to be mindful of the impact this could have on the learner."

LEARNING #19:

That lockdown has confirmed the importance of students learning to develop a more confident presence as a key part of their future employability.

DIVIDES

Lockdown exposed technological, social and educational divides among students that are still evident upon their return to campus, through declines in attendance, behaviour and focus.

"The ones who tend to be committed in class are also committed at home. That's a big thing – it does tend to emphasise the divides that already exist."

"It's a different kind of naughtiness. It's nothing to do with the curriculums but a lot of students are not settled yet."

"Students have openly said, they're not bothered about masks, about sanitising – they're not bothered about COVID. Which is obviously very scary."

"Since we've been back, behaviour has been a real issue. A lot of students have been out of a structured format since February. They are bouncing off the walls; you can see that in the corridor."

"I don't know if it was a psychological thing because they didn't have that last day of school, they didn't have the prom – the majority of them are not ready to be at college. They need everything doing for them. They're struggling with homework, and struggling in classes."

"Coming into college, particularly for lower-level students, their attendance is significantly higher than going on Zoom. The difference from the figures I've seen is significant."

LEARNING #20:

That students need additional support upon their return to campus, just as they did at the start of lockdown, to practise the core components of employability: showing up, respecting others, obeying rules and staying on task.

POTENTIAL

Teachers are exploring the potential of online teaching but also debating whether it is better suited to delivering live content or to coaching and supporting students over the 'final mile' of applying their understanding in practice.

"This academic year, there is perhaps a new found appreciation of face-to-face learning for students." (Principal)

"Teams delivery is like a lecture – you can get a lot of people on where you're delivering content, where you're delivering knowledge. On-site, you have smaller groups, almost like seminars, to reinforce that knowledge. Then you have tutorials where you're working with individuals around progress, like the traditional University model." (Principal)

"I'm trying to do something very different with how I'm teaching online and, openly, the head of the centre said to me 'You will be the death of my centre'."

"Nothing will replace that practical element – face-to-face feedback and assessment, building that relationship with a student and making sure that they're supported. I can read body language better face-to-face than on Teams so it's been damaging not to have that face-to-face element."

"We have to change expectations – the role of a teacher is not to deliver content; the role of the teacher is to educate and change and shape lives. Now we're online, we don't have to keep delivering content."

"We spend a lot of time face to face delivering content. But someone said to me 'Don't pretend that Google doesn't exist. If they can learn it off Google, what's the value in you going through it?'"

LEARNING #21:

That a period of experimentation and collaboration is needed in order for staff to explore the suitability of various online learning methods for different courses and levels of ability.

ENGAGEMENT

Teachers have learnt to overcome the lack of visual cues from students in online teaching by introducing more explicit ways of engaging them so that they do not tune out or become distracted and can instead maintain a psychological presence even when their concentration might be wavering.

“You can be in a remote lesson but that doesn’t mean you’re actually progressing in your learning. You might be visibly there and do the task but there isn’t deep learning taking place.” (Principal)

“It’s becoming much more a matter of encouragement and demonstration and modelling behaviour, to create that dynamic where people will try it for themselves, and not feel anxious about it going wrong or falling over.” (Principal)

“Microsoft Teams does lead you down that lecture-style approach and it’s hard to get them involved in group discussions because they don’t want to speak.”

“Online discussion was much harder to get going. Lecturing to them was easy; they were great. They were attentive and that was fine. And then they’d ask sensible questions at the end. But trying to get discussion going, I found much harder than in real life.”

“When you’re in a room together, there’s an awful lot of almost invisible visual clues that allow everyone to notice when someone is going to speak or wants to make a point or is feeling very fidgety or not listening. You just don’t get that on the screen.”

“We tried to establish a model that allowed learners to focus not only on their screen time but also on going online at key points to get or upload information, and then work independently.”

LEARNING #22:

That the difficulties in generating group discussion online may be overcome by more explicit steps to engage learners individually and encourage them to contribute, rather than relying on non-verbal cues that work in classrooms.

DIFFERENCE

There is no consensus among teachers about the best approaches to teaching online, but there is broad agreement that it offers much flexibility as an adjunct to the classroom.

“We understand now that live content is the most coveted by learners rather than passive type learning.”

“You churn through a lot of content when you’re delivering online and it is time-consuming to put together. We’ve started trying to invest in more off-the-shelf content because we recognise the pressure that developing content brings.”

“Never lead on the technology. It’s got to be ‘is the technology the right solution for how we are delivering this training?’”

“There are four key things when you’re teaching: check what they know, give them some content, get them to do some work and work through it for any mistakes, and then check what they know at the end. I don’t believe that’s any different whether you’re online or face-to-face.”

“Teachers are developing resources that they can put up for catch-up online, but quite a lot of the learning is still interactive between students problem-solving together.”

“If a student can’t attend or if something crops up or whatever, what’s stopping that session being on Zoom as well so you can access off campus.”

LEARNING #23:

That online lessons do not so much require a change of educational objectives as a change in structure, utilising real-time and asynchronous resources to encourage both group working and independent study.

INEQUALITY

Teachers are concerned that the switch to online learning benefits those who are already flourishing and disadvantages those struggling in their domestic lives, educational needs or English language skills.

"Online learning is definitely more advantageous for the more academic than the technical subjects. It was more effective at levels three and above than it was at levels one and two."

"Some [students] that do have the technology are quite openly admitting 'This is not the way I learn best. I need a teacher looking over my shoulder, telling me to get on with it and challenging me when I'm distracted'." (Principal)

"An awful lot of students are liking the blended learning model – in some cases too much. Certain groups of students are saying, 'I'd rather come on via Teams. I don't need to come on site', especially if it's a rainy day." (Principal)

"What lockdown definitely highlighted was the disparity between the students who had their own space to get on with work and the ones living with multiple generations who didn't. There was a massive achievement gap."

"It does suit some learners better – the ones that feel quite anxious in the classroom, who don't like that crowded environment in a classroom. They have engaged quite well, because they feel that they can be a bit more anonymous, they can get that more one-to-one support, and get on with their work without other people being around."

"I honestly believe that the good students are so much further ahead than if they had been coming into class because they have had to become independent learners."

LEARNING #24:

That teachers may be able to counteract the disadvantages of online learning for weaker students by modifying their approach during face-to-face and online teaching time to suit the learning preferences of those students.

5. SYSTEM MODIFICATION (ADAPTING)

"It's interesting how staff were behaving like students. I include myself in that - during meetings, playing a game on my phone."

SYSTEM MODIFICATION – SUMMARY

The cycle of change initiated from above by Government and awarding bodies hindered implementation below and fuelled resistance from those most affected by it.

- **Misunderstanding:** Lockdown reinforced the belief that FE is insufficiently understood in Whitehall. Persistent changes in Government advice created a considerable administrative burden on top of the uncertainty, diverting leaders' time and attention away from urgent priorities.
- **Resistance:** Lockdown prompted a resistance to change from a minority of staff, especially teachers who wish to preserve their customary way of working.
- **Technophobia:** The challenge of adapting to new remote delivery platforms has been embraced by the majority but resisted by a minority of teachers who find excuses for not undergoing training.
- **Interaction:** Many staff mourn the loss of face-to-face interactions with students or colleagues, recognising that they are the most rewarding element of their role.
- **Resumption:** Returning to campus has created a different but less-well-publicised set of challenges for staff, with a similarly uneven burden of anxiety and hardship to those caused by lockdown.
- **Assessment:** The diverse approaches of awarding bodies created problems for staff and students, with even those who benefitted from grade inflation being left ill-equipped for their next course.

MISUNDERSTANDING

Lockdown reinforced the belief that FE is insufficiently understood in Whitehall. Persistent changes in Government advice created a considerable administrative burden on top of the uncertainty, diverting leaders' time and attention away from urgent priorities.

"We have pretty much had to reinvent the wheel for everything, and with the changing goalposts from Government, it has been really challenging."

*"Government do not understand that FE is far more complex than primary schools. Bubbles work fantastically well if you're in a primary school; they do not work in an FE college."
(Principal)*

"The continual chopping and changing of advice and guidance around assessment meant that being agile and quick to adapt sometimes didn't actually help you – by the time you had put a plan in place and executed that plan, there was another U-turn."

"I have very little complaints about the agencies that manage our sector; I think they've done a sterling job in many respects, and have been very good at keeping funding going to the sector."

"The Government have been useless at supporting the FE community. It's like working with quicksand."

"I don't know whether more senior people within the DfE realise what they're asking for sometimes and how much effort goes into generating it, which might be taking away from delivering learning, running the organisation, making sure that we're financially stable – because, of course, we need to do all of those things as well."

LEARNING #25:

That rules need to change in response to changing circumstances but repeated rule changes can lead to disorder by causing misunderstanding, confusion and a loss of confidence in the rule-maker.

RESISTANCE

Lockdown prompted a resistance to change from a minority of staff, especially teachers who wish to preserve their customary way of working.

"One of the difficulties in lockdown is that things aren't quite as transparent. And that is a hiding place for quite a few people."

"We've had a minority of teachers who have tried to hide a little bit, said they have done a remote lesson when they haven't, sent the students off to do some work and then caught up with them at five o'clock. That's not remote teaching." (Principal)

"None of us are very comfortable with going to a dark place and having to learn a new skill. But we do it out of necessity."

"I'm not so sure what a lot of people have been doing for the last six months; it does beg a few questions, if I'd be really honest."

"Even for management, this is all learning. And that's what we've said as a college – we're all learning. I don't expect everything to be perfect. Let's try and embrace it and learn together. But we've got to keep learning."

"Basically, they have gone straight back to their old ways and are not embracing this new stuff. And it might be through confidence, it might be knowledge or it might be through just sheer bloody mindedness."

LEARNING #26:

That change, however inevitable, will be most fiercely resisted by those for whom it threatens the death of a way of life. They will not be won over unless they can foresee potential benefits to balance out their losses.

TECHNOPHOBIA

The challenge of adapting to new remote delivery platforms has been embraced by the majority but resisted by a minority of teachers who find excuses for not undergoing training.

"I came into teaching because I didn't want to do computer work."

"It's always the same people who come and it's always the same people who are open and willing to try all these different techniques. And it's never the ones saying 'We don't get supported' or 'I've not had this training, or that training'."

"I wouldn't say I've had no training but I ignored the training because I didn't think I needed it. And then of course, it became absolutely essential."

"I need more training, but I'd like IT training that is face to face, rather than online. Like my students, I need to sit down with the person I do the training with so I can try things and they can say 'yes' to doing that or 'no, you're doing that wrong'."

"There was definitely a divide of those who shut down completely, who said, I don't know how to do this, I've not been trained, I don't have the time. And I have heard of other staff who refused to engage. But then there are those who bite the bullet and fully go in headfirst."

"I put together bespoke training packages. We had a week of intense training for beginners, and then intermediates and so on. Again and again, the people who said that they were beginners didn't come to the training."

LEARNING #27:

That staff, like students, demonstrate a wide range of aptitudes and appetites for learning and will need time to practise and gain confidence in using unfamiliar skills.

INTERACTION

Many staff mourn the loss of face-to-face interactions with students or colleagues, recognising that they are the most rewarding element of their role.

"I like face to face – both teaching and talking to employers, and talking to other teachers, sharing cake – simple stuff that you can't do now either. And I found it terribly difficult. I didn't like being on a computer."

"A lot of staff have really struggled because they've missed their team, and the encouragement and the conversations because, at home, you haven't got someone to bounce ideas off."

"We have seen resistance from some of our additional learning support teams who are attracted to that role because they like physical interaction, and the emotional side of supporting young people – that's what drives them to come to work every day." (Principal)

"My manager is a sociable, outgoing guy. He has said, quite openly, 'I like seeing the students. I like coming in. I like seeing my team. It's taken all the joy out of it for me'."

"A lot of my colleagues got into teaching because they are absolutely passionate about being face-to-face with those young people, and it's really affected them."

"And although the fun of working from home was great in the first week, when the reality kicked in, it became a nightmare and got to a point where I hated having my job encroach on my home life."

LEARNING #28:

That face-to-face relationships are important drivers of college culture, community and job satisfaction for many staff and students, and must be given due priority in the designs for college life in the future.

RESUMPTION

Returning to campus has created a different but less-well-publicised set of challenges for staff, with a similarly uneven burden of anxiety and hardship to those caused by lockdown.

"I must admit, when we first came back, it got the ticker going a little bit when you went in the class, because you didn't know what to expect."

"We need to make sure that people can't use shielding as an excuse to not come in."

"From a staff point of view, being in a bubble with eight autistic kids asking the same question 20 times without being able to go off and have a cup of coffee or get away from that group is very emotionally challenging."

"I work with guys with health conditions and learning difficulties and the bubble thing is working brilliantly for us: the guys are getting so much more continuity because they are getting the same teacher in the same room."

"They seem to go deaf when I put a mask on my face. And you have to tell people to put their hand up when they're talking because you can't tell who's talking to you and who's not. It can be very hit and miss."

"It's felt a little bit like a GP surgery on occasions with people reporting symptoms and asking what they should do when their brother-in-law has tested positive."

LEARNING #29:

That the resumption of on-site teaching is not a return to normality but a second phase of change, with its own unequal distribution of impacts.

ASSESSMENT

The diverse approaches of awarding bodies created problems for staff and students, with even those who benefitted from grade inflation being left ill-equipped for their next course.

"Ofqual could have done a lot more to make the awarding bodies standardise. One of the mistakes they made was letting the awarding bodies decide that themselves."

"A number of students busted a gut to get work in before the submission date. And to then be told it didn't count towards their final grade, rankled. There was nothing that the college could have done, because it was done by the BTECs."

"On 24 hours' notice, we were Amazon Prime-ing waxing kits out, getting students to wax intimate areas of their poor family members, and send me these somewhat personal videos so that they could get qualifications. And there I am going, 'I'm a safeguarding officer, is this right?' But we took those risks."

"I honestly, genuinely think this year, we've got a truer reflection of what the grades should be. Normally, at the end of the year, we need to help Little Johnny get slightly better grades, because all we focus on is statistics. At the end of the day, we need to get a certain amount of statistics and pass rates, or we go on notice to improve."

"They might have enjoyed working remotely but the quality, from what I'm seeing, is not there. I'm having to talk to them as if they were level one or level two students because the building blocks aren't there."

"My biggest concern is that we are not in a position to prepare them for the reality of an exam. They can submit work online, but I don't know if they're doing it under timed conditions, if they're turning spellcheck off or if somebody else is helping them."

LEARNING #30:

That the confusion over assessments and grades has created as many problems as it solved, by concealing an attainment gap between where students are and where they need to be in order to become employable.

6. SYSTEM TESTING (COMPLYING)

"I'm trying to drive this forward and say 'I can run online courses, give me the tools that I need'."

SYSTEM TESTING – SUMMARY

Lockdown may facilitate indirect changes to college procedures, highlighting the potential for looser oversight of staff as well as broadening the range of potential courses and students.

- **Trust:** One potentially healthy development is that managers have had to relax their controls during lockdown and trust staff to achieve their targets and objectives.
- **Consolidation:** Colleges need time to consolidate changes made during lockdown – to facilitate a levelling-up of digital skills and evaluate the opportunities presented by a new learning landscape.
- **Accessibility:** Colleges are assessing the possibilities for new courses and new teaching formats to build upon their learning from lockdown.
- **Inspection:** Interim visits by Ofsted have aroused anxiety and suspicion, especially among staff in struggling colleges. Others have welcomed their visits as well-meaning efforts to share good practice and acknowledge the efforts made to safeguard and educate learners in testing circumstances.
- **Reduction:** Some staff view the future with apprehension as it threatens a reduction in the need for teachers, through greater use of pre-recorded and shared digital content.
- **Growth:** Lockdown has revealed the potential for reaching new audiences seeking online learning, especially adult learners, and for new courses capitalising on growth opportunities in an economic recovery.

TRUST

One potentially healthy development is that managers have had to relax their controls during lockdown and trust staff to achieve their targets and objectives.

"You can't monitor every lesson, you can't watch attendance rates, you have to adapt to a leadership process that's much more heavily based on trust." (Principal)

"It takes a degree of braveness for a manager, who is used to being in control of their metrics and able to influence events, to let go of all that and say 'No, I'm just going to give you a computer and ask you to do these things. And we're just going to have to hope for the best, but we'll check in and find out.' For some people, that loss of control has been really very troubling." (Principal)

"A lot of our leaders and managers have struggled with the whole business of lockdown, because they're not able to monitor what people are doing anymore."

"It's making a lot of managers reflect on their management style."

"You just have to accept the fact that everybody is going to have a new experience and trust them to do their best, support them to try and make it all happen and stand alongside them as best you possibly can. You just can't manage everything: it's so atomized now. It's 1,000 homes that our college is being run from." (Principal)

"You felt you needed to be visible as well. Just in case your line manager was on there, you needed to show you weren't just sitting in the fridge."

LEARNING #31:

That lockdown has provided an opportunity for managers to modify their approach to staff who have worked diligently during lockdown and shown they merit being accorded more trust and discretion over how they work.

CONSOLIDATION

Colleges need time to consolidate changes made during lockdown – to facilitate a levelling-up of digital skills and evaluate the opportunities presented by a new learning landscape.

“Something that has been highlighted during lockdown is the huge divide in digital skills among staff members. And finding one person within each team who’s competent enough to disseminate information.”

“We are thinking about which teachers do which skills better, and mixing up teams a little bit more than we would have done in the past.” (Principal)

“Staff are overwhelmed as they are and they would be more overwhelmed if I opened up the box of hints and tricks and tips, because it would genuinely blow their minds. It’s finding the right solution for the right staff member – but they’ve got to ask for help, they’ve got to receive the help and they’ve got to commit to delivering what they’ve learned and not seeking their old ways.”

“You’re looking at a very different kind of teacher who delivers online to a teacher who delivers in the classroom – it’s a completely different set of skills.”

“There’s a thing about upskilling people in different areas – having an IT champion in every classroom. It is very hard to take all the staff to training and upskill them but you could upskill one person who becomes the mini IT guru in that team, and then feeds that information back.”

“I’ve learned so much in such a short space of time. I’ve been making videos, and I run a YouTube channel, which I would never ever have foreseen.”

LEARNING #32:

That lockdown is the catalyst for a levelling-up in digital skills, giving all staff an opportunity to master new techniques and practices to support students and each other.

ACCESSIBILITY

Colleges are assessing the possibilities for new courses and new teaching formats to build upon their learning from lockdown.

“When Ofsted visited, they said ‘some of your students are really benefitting from the fact that, on Teams, they feel it’s a less threatening space and are more willing to engage in that virtual space because it suits them so much better.’” (Principal)

“Online learning is definitely more advantageous for the academic than the technical subjects. It is more effective at levels three and above than it is at levels one and two.” (Principal)

“There are people out there who just haven’t got the confidence to go into college for whatever reason but are very happy to engage online because they do it on the Xbox or social media much better. So, this is a vehicle to reach the isolated.”

“More learners with more disabilities have come on to the online courses because it is accessible.”

“I have taught a number of learners who have shared that, actually, it’s opened a lot of doors for them in a strange way. They wouldn’t be able or they wouldn’t always feel confident or comfortable in travelling out to wherever we may be running a certain course. But the fact that they can go upstairs after work and attend has made it a lot more accessible for them.”

“I’ve seen adult learners loving the fact that we’re doing blended learning – it is almost like a weight off their mind because they don’t have to think about childcare every second week.”

LEARNING #33:

That new possibilities will emerge from paying attention to what students like and dislike about remote learning, allowing teachers to tailor their model to different courses and levels of ability.

INSPECTION

Interim visits by Ofsted have aroused anxiety and suspicion, especially among staff in struggling colleges. Others have welcomed their visits as well-meaning efforts to share good practice and acknowledge the efforts made to safeguard and educate learners in testing circumstances.

“There is a role for Ofsted in all of this but I doubt it will be for them to stand back and allow a bigger diversity of practices to bloom.” (Principal)

“Why on earth are Ofsted coming around now? Why inspect colleges weeks before half-term in the toughest term of the year? There’s no adjustment, no reframing, no communication and no recognition of the challenges that further education is facing. It’s ‘These rules still apply so we will still measure you by these rules.’”

“We had a really positive experience with Ofsted. They were really, really engaging. They saw a broad range of lessons, they dipped into lessons remotely; they talked to staff; they talked to students. And we found it very positive and learnt a lot about how we could improve online delivery.” (Principal)

“If you look at the initial reviews Ofsted has done of colleges’ responses to COVID, it didn’t paint an overly shiny picture.” (Principal)

“They’re never going to win the narrative that they are the good guys and they are coming to check that everyone’s doing an amazing job and they just want to share success when they are throwing no notice inspections in the week before half term.”

“It feels like we’re only doing it to do what Ofsted say. We need to be thinking ‘what are we doing so our learners are successful?’”

LEARNING #34:

That colleges, like students, are uncertain not only whether their work can be fairly assessed in exceptional circumstances but also whether this is their opportunity to press for change in the way assessments are conducted.

REDUCTION

Some staff view the future with apprehension as it threatens a reduction in the need for teachers, through greater use of pre-recorded and shared digital content.

“There are some really good examples in college but probably every other college in the country is doing something similar. We could have a central resource looking at these things.”

“You could have one teacher teaching large groups of students, in which case you don’t need as many staff. That is something that we have thought about, actually. We could look at whole different ways of delivering and think about how many we need.” (Principal)

“We’ve gone from a very individual teacher plans for lessons to a collaborative planning approach. Initially, that went down like a lead balloon with some lecturers.” (Principal)

“A group of colleges have come together to develop a common digital curriculum that will be rolled out to all of our students –ensuring that every learner leaves college with a level of digital competency regardless of their course.”

“We have a vision for the future whereby – depending on the type of programme – students can access from anywhere in the world.”

“We had a debate with the union about a month ago to talk about performance rights of teachers. They wanted some assurance from the college that we weren’t going to take all their online content and lectures and use it for commercial gain, to sell online content without their permission.” (Principal)

LEARNING #35:

That use of online delivery during lockdown has caused colleges to re-examine the relationship between teaching and learning, creating both an opportunity and a threat for teachers.

GROWTH

Lockdown has revealed the potential for reaching new audiences seeking online learning, especially adult learners, and for new courses capitalising on growth opportunities in an economic recovery.

"We're going to be a key player in helping rebuild the economy with our vocational courses and we need some light shone on that."

"Other sectors are really growing, such as security, cleaning, logistics and the care sector – all taking on more people. We have to build the bridges for people leaving those contracting sectors to get jobs in the expanding sectors." (Principal)

"We could have regional assessment centres that allow people from a certain geography coming to an assessment centre to undertake an assessment when the rest of their programme is online. There are market development opportunities and there are product development opportunities." (Principal)

"We want to push business start-ups post COVID as part of the economic recovery."

"I wondered if there was a possibility of people in prison joining in remotely – not serious offenders but people who have been put away for not paying a fine or something and who need to continue their education. Maybe that's somewhere we could expand into."

"I'm so excited by the possibility that this is our time to change how FE looks for forever. We've been underfunded, under-supported, under-recognised and under-appreciated for the role we play in education. This is the time for FE to stand up and shout 'We've got the tricks to pay the bills here'."

LEARNING #36:

That FE can play a leading role in any post-Covid recovery if it is given support to be entrepreneurial and innovative by Government, Ofsted and awarding bodies.



An Organisation for Promoting
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OPUS - An Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society is an educational charity (no. 282415) founded in 1975 to promote understanding of society. It encourages reflective citizenship as a way for people to take more personal and collective responsibility for the common good – through active involvement in society and its institutions, rather than self-interested behaviour.

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ABOUT FETL

The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

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