

Shaping the digital future of FE and skills

September 2020

Contents

Introduction	4
1. Digital pedagogy	6
1.1 Learning design	6
1.2 Digital content	10
1.3 Digital exclusion	12
1.4 Staff capabilities and confidence	13
1.5 Assessment	15
2. The learner experience	17
2.1 Learner wellbeing	19
2.2 Online safety	21
3. Staff experience	23
3.1 Workload and wellbeing	23
3.2 Building communities and relationships	25
4. Digital leadership and system reform	26
4.1 Leadership priorities	27
4.2 System reform	28
5. Next steps	30
Acknowledgments	33

Introduction



In March 2020, colleges in the UK closed their doors and rapidly moved to wholesale remote learning and teaching. Emergency IT infrastructure and software was brought in at pace, along with fast-track digital upskilling for staff and learners. Such upheaval posed a challenge for many but most prevailed with their best endeavour.

Within a matter of days, most learners could log into live-streamed lectures or later watch the recording; they could download e-books, videos or other resources; and they could submit work online. Although this kind of studying was typical during lockdown, the use of technology was often simplistic and not always as engaging, exciting or collaborative as it could be. It sufficed as a stopgap but we need a more ambitious model for the future.

And at present, in the absence of readily available, affordable, accessible and engaging digital resources and assessment tools, such as immersive virtual reality, there are courses, such as engineering, construction, or hospitality and catering, which are impossible to deliver entirely online.

We can do better. However, improving online education experiences and outcomes will require a fundamental shift from merely transferring courses online to transforming digital learning, teaching and assessment. Shaping the digital future of FE and skills requires investment, insight and collaboration.

Working in tandem with the Association of Colleges (AoC), Jisc has been bringing together college leaders, teachers, learners, sector bodies and edtech experts to gather that insight. Through a series of leadership roundtables and research webinars, participated in by hundreds of practitioners from across the whole FE sector, together we have researched, collated and shared the best examples of innovative teaching, learning and assessment practice demonstrated during the pandemic crisis.

We aimed to establish a consensus on what “good” looks like as campuses are reopening, and offer recommendations to government, sector bodies and colleges themselves in order to realise the potential of technology to benefit the FE and skills sector now and into the future. This report and its recommendations

are the results of that research. A project focused on higher education, *Learning and teaching reimagined: change and challenge for students, staff and leaders* is running in parallel to *Shaping the digital future of FE and skills*.

By exploring some key issues – digital pedagogy, the learner and staff experience, digital leadership and system reform – we also tested six sector needs:

- 1 Funding to create a national online resource discovery base of high-quality interactive **content** specifically designed for vocational and skills-based delivery, including “bite-size” micro-credentialled content endorsed by industry sectors
- 2 Increased funding to ensure that access for all FE learners to online resources is safeguarded through resilient and reliable **connectivity**
- 3 Investment in the development and adoption of new **assessment** methodologies designed for secure remote participation
- 4 Capital investment ringfenced for the FE **digital estate**
- 5 **Continuing professional development (CPD)** support for sector professionals to augment education where appropriate, using digital assistants, automated workflows, data analytics, flexible working and reduced workflow
- 6 The digital infrastructure required to support the “**September Promise**”, which guarantees access to high quality education or training places this autumn to every young person who wants one

We know that FE is vital to the UK’s economic growth and productivity.¹ Embedding a digital-first culture and investing in digital skills will be critical to charting the UK’s course to recovery. We need to invest and inspire now to ensure no college and no learner gets left behind.

Robin Ghurbhurun

Managing director, further education and skills, Jisc

David Corke

Director, education and skills policy, Association of Colleges

Paul Cox, programme chair

CEO and principal, Eastleigh College

¹ [gov.uk/government/topical-events/the-uks-industrial-strategy](https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/the-uks-industrial-strategy)

1. Digital pedagogy



When COVID-19 hit and colleges moved into emergency remote-learning provision, a wide range of learning and teaching opportunities opened up. The extent to which individual colleges did, or could, respond to this challenge varied. Every college had its own individual digital starting point depending on its digital maturity, level of infrastructure, access to digital content, staff capabilities and confidence, and learner access to devices and connectivity. There was also wide variation within colleges at department and subject level.

In the following sections we draw together insights on these issues from our interactions with FE staff and learners, and research from the wider sector, along with examples of good practice from colleges and recommendations for the sector.

1.1 Learning design

The diversity of remote learning approaches can clearly be seen in a snapshot list from the AoC colleges and COVID-19 summer survey, which covers 109 colleges and found that in many colleges, all or most students under 19 continued their learning remotely in the summer term, with more than half of planned learning hours being delivered remotely. They did this through:

- > Timetabled live video lessons: 93% of colleges
- > Opportunity to book short sessions with tutors for personalised support: 86%
- > Weekly set activities and assessments for students to complete in their own time: 73%
- > Opportunities to work collaboratively with peers online: 69%
- > Timetabled pre-recorded lessons: 68%
- > Reduced timetable and shorter lessons to support independent study: 66%
- > Activities and assessments set weekly for students to complete via a structured timetable: 57%

The tools used also varied, according to staff in the Jisc webinars and as shown in the table at the end of this section, although Microsoft Teams has come strongly to the fore. However, the basics are still essential, such as clearly labelling materials and providing a simple structure for accessing course material.

The terminologies used to describe the variety of digital learning experiences frequently differ from college to college, and even within colleges, and include “distance” or “remote” learning, “blended” or “hybrid” learning, “campus” or “onsite” delivery.

Here we use “blended learning”, following the Jisc definition:² “Blended learning provides a combination of face-to-face learning and dynamic digital activities and content that facilitate any time/any place learning.”

The Welsh government’s *Strategic framework for learning delivery, COVID-19 resilience plan for the post-16 sector*³ provides a useful set of characteristics of blended learning:

- > Learning is planned to take account of the different modes of delivery to create coherent programmes with clear aims, objectives and assessment points
- > Learners are encouraged and supported to develop independent study and research skills, information literacy, motivation and resilience
- > Learners are provided with direction so that they know what to do and how to get help if they need it
- > Digital and face-to-face components are carefully planned to be integrated and complementary, and each enhances and enriches the other
- > Face-to-face time is prioritised for the delivery of practical activities that cannot be undertaken online, for peer collaboration and to provide “scaffolding” for remote learning, including formative assessment, feedback, redirection and guidance
- > Staff and learners understand what is expected of them, including how many hours of face-to-face, remote and independent learning are required, and any flexibilities around attendance and when they learn
- > Learning is differentiated to meet individual needs, additional support where needed and “stretch and challenge” activities
- > Digital inequalities and the barriers for vulnerable learners are considered in the planning and delivery of learning
- > Activities are designed to help learners and staff manage “screen fatigue”, including short, focused sessions, time for regular breaks and flexible timetabling
- > Learners understand when and how to submit work and are given prompt, constructive feedback on it
- > Learners have opportunities to work together and support one another
- > Learner engagement is monitored and there is a clear understanding of what good engagement looks like

Regardless of approaches and tools, what came across very strongly from staff and leaders was the need to Keep It Simple. This proved to be a fundamental principle in helping both staff and learners deal with complexity and change, and in order to deliver effective learning and teaching. The Core and More model, and the Essentials and Enhanced model⁴ can help organisations to make clear choices.

Engagement was raised as an ongoing issue and learners offered very clear feedback on their preference for lessons to be short and informative, supported by peer collaboration activities. There is a need for careful consideration about the pace of learning online, including length of lessons, the speed and timeliness of feedback, and making lessons more fun/engaging. All webinar attendees agreed that a blended model – based on synchronous and asynchronous attendance and also enabling peer-to-peer working – is the way forward both during COVID-19 and beyond.

2 jisc.ac.uk/guides/creating-blended-learning-content

3 <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-07/strategic-framework-learning-delivery-from-september-2020-post-16.pdf>

4 ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/publications/2020/may/ucl-connected-learning-baseline

This tallies with the Ofsted review of what works in online education in FE and skills.⁵ It found that learners prefer “live” online lessons, where they can interact with the teacher and with one another, rather than recorded lessons. Splitting classes has made for more manageable live lessons, potentially allowing for more interaction with fewer learners. However, the review also found that teachers did not always use online learning sessions effectively to check on and develop learning. For example, by using online chat functions to replace what would otherwise have been a group discussion, they slowed down the pace of a session and made it more difficult for some learners to produce detailed answers to questions. Frequent active checking in with learners throughout the session can help to ensure that learners are fully engaged in the live learning.

Staff may need additional support in redesigning lessons to ensure they are as effective and engaging as possible online. There has been a focus on CPD for staff digital skills (of which more below), as there has been an urgent need to get teachers up to speed with remote learning tools and platforms, but it is vitally important that pedagogy does not get left behind when it should, in fact, take centre stage.

There are fundamental differences between face-to-face and online learning that need to be recognised so that teaching can be adapted. If learners are accessing learning independently, without a tutor on hand at that moment to explain things further, more structure and instruction are required to pre-empt learner questions. Timely and, possibly, more frequent feedback is also important.

“To be fully successful, staff need to embark on a degree of re-framing their teaching and support methods, in order to learn new approaches. This must be done with encouragement, care and support to ensure successful adoption if sustainable change is desired. It is easy to become overly focused with the development of the digital skills of staff, who may indeed need some CPD in these skills, over the pedagogical changes they will need to explore before successfully experimenting and adopting blended learning approaches in their own practice.”⁶

Stuart Laverick, principal and chief executive, Heart of Worcestershire College

Northern Ireland’s **South West College** drew on 10 years of delivering online learning to support staff and students through lockdown with a wide variety of tools and technologies to keep learners engaged and motivated. These ranged from video, quizzes and interactive animations to live classrooms, with recordings, discussion forums, blogs and web links for extended learning. All courses were delivered via Canvas and live classrooms, and were available on all mobile devices.

Student engagement was fully tracked using the built-in analytics on the virtual learning environment (VLE) and other learning platforms. The college has also developed a bespoke remote learning dashboard to track student engagement and facilitate timely intervention where a student is not engaging.⁷

⁵ <https://educationinspection.blog.gov.uk/2020/07/15/online-education-in-further-education-and-skills-learning-about-what-works/>

⁶ Corke, Frampton and Rhodes (2020) *Creating a post-COVID-19 edtech strategy*. AoC / Ufi. [aoc.co.uk/news/close-the-digital-divide-enable-digital-first-fe-sector-post-covid-argues-new-ebook](https://www.aoc.co.uk/news/close-the-digital-divide-enable-digital-first-fe-sector-post-covid-argues-new-ebook)

⁷ Read the full case study: [jisc.ac.uk/news/four-steps-to-better-online-delivery-the-south-west-college-story-17-jun-2020](https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/four-steps-to-better-online-delivery-the-south-west-college-story-17-jun-2020)



Heart of Worcestershire College (HoW) started lockdown with an established commitment to blended learning, having already developed its own blended learning model, SOLA, and built a library of blended learning resources through the Blended Learning Consortium.

HoW also has a robust digital induction that supports learners of all abilities with the right tools for them to engage, progress and thrive. Additional integrated tools for accessibility, such as Immersive Reader and Read Aloud, are introduced at induction to encourage learners to explore the technologies and build up a unique toolkit for their everyday academic life.

Behind all this lies the commitment of the leadership team to driving forward a digital culture, backed by significant investment in the HoW's digital estate, strategically focused on core requirements such as an "anytime, anywhere, any place" approach to accessing learning material and to provide tools to enable learners to participate regardless of level or ability.⁸

Tools highlighted	How the tools are being used
Microsoft Teams	Student engagement, collaboration, communication, live Q&As
OneDrive	Shared documents, formative assessment
Wakelet (Microsoft app)	Subject guide
Flipgrid	Recording and sharing short videos
Loom	Short instructional videos
G Suite – enabling Talk	Discussion around and between sessions
G Suite – Google docs	Feedback via comments
Google classroom	Assignments
Google forms/Microsoft forms	Feedback from learners
Google hangouts	Feedback through live comments, feedback via chat
Peergrade	Feedback
Showbie	Formative and summative assessment – complete workflow
Turnitin (1 via Moodle)	Summative assessment (and feedback)
Quizlet	Instant feedback from learners
Mentimeter	Instant feedback from learners
Video calls (recorded)	Feedback

⁸ Read more about HoW in Corke, Frampton and Rhodes (2020) *Creating a post-COVID-19 edtech strategy*. AoC / Ufi. aoc.co.uk/news/close-the-digital-divide-enable-%E2%80%98digital-first%E2%80%99-fe-sector-post-covid-%E2%80%93-argues-new-ebook

RECOMMENDATIONS

Jisc, Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and College Development Network (CDN), supported by inspectorates, need to:

- > Lead research into best practice-based guidelines for learner engagement online, to include
 - > class sizes
 - > pace of learning
 - > length of lessons
 - > monitoring
 - > speed and timeliness of feedback
 - > collaboration and interactivity
 - > live vs recorded
 - > making lessons more fun/engrossing
- > Further develop CPD support for staff in reframing their approach and build confidence in relation to teaching, learner support and lesson/course design (as distinct from skills in the use of digital techniques, tools and platforms)
- > Develop a framework for online learning delivery across UK (drawing on the Welsh government's *Strategic framework for learning delivery, COVID-19 resilience plan for the post-16 sector*)

Colleges need to:

- > Support staff to participate in CPD programmes that build confidence in relation to online teaching, learner support and lesson/course design

1.2 Digital content

Access to high-quality learning resources is essential for effective remote learning. While some staff noted that they were surprised how much content was available, a minority (30%) of staff we polled stated they did not have the resources they need. On the learner side, a significant minority (49%) of learners rated the quality of the online learning resources as very poor to average. Indeed, Jisc's digital experience insights data shows that only 32% of FE learners had access to e-books whenever they needed them and 71% had never had access to AR/VR or simulations.⁹

This chimes with the AoC summer survey findings, in which certain subjects were seen to enjoy high-quality and engaging digital resources and content (in particular, maths, computing and IT, business, health and social care, early years and childcare) but there were also some significant gaps. Subjects where colleges felt that high-quality content was lacking included construction, hospitality and catering, travel and tourism and some A-level areas. Where colleges did not consider that they had access to sufficient high quality and engaging digital resources, the most common reasons were: insufficient interactivity (58% of responses),

⁹ <https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-reports/>

inability to develop in-house digital resources (52%), inability to find suitable digital content or insufficient formative assessment (45%) and inadequate curriculum coverage (42%).

FE content webinars hosted by Jisc during lockdown also revealed three particular touchpoints. The first again pointed to the gaps in provision, especially covering foundation, level 3, and HE in FE. Secondly, resources for online inductions are lacking, yet online inductions will be the default method for providing college and library inductions and will, by necessity, become compulsory activities where previously they may not have been. Thirdly, there have been specific requests for resources to support learners' mental health and wellbeing. Wellbeing is covered further in Part 2 of this report.

At **Ashford College**, learning resource centre (LRC) coordinator Katie Butler realised that her team would have to get more creative with how they shared resources when lockdown came in. "From updating trusty Moodle pages and Prezis to editing XT Learns to incorporate more information on wellbeing, we've tried to take a more holistic approach," she says.

Using Moodle she created e-book shelves with click buttons on the cover with direct links to titles, and in Prezi an overview of everything the LRC does. It's now a highly visual interface and an engaging introduction to the LRC. XT Learns are curated resource hubs where students can access reliable resources on topics from mental health to British values. She developed a SharePoint page as a one-stop-shop for everything available from Ashford LRC, not only accessible to students but their caregivers too – ensuring that everyone is aware of, and has access to, the learning resources available.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government needs to:

- > Fund digital content creation for priority subjects and high-demand sectors identified by employers and professional bodies
- > Fund a centralised FE and skills digital content search and discovery platform that highlights high quality content

Jisc, ETF and CDN need to:

- > Develop template VLE courses that incorporate basic elements of digital pedagogy and good learning design

Colleges are encouraged to:

- > Share digital content via centralised search and discovery platform
- > Create content using Creative Commons licensing to enable greater collaboration and sharing, improving opportunities for sector maintenance, updating and resource development

¹⁰ Read the full case study: [jisc.ac.uk/membership/stories/no-campus-no-problem-how-ashford-college-has-embraced-new-ways-of-working-06-jul-2020](https://www.jisc.ac.uk/membership/stories/no-campus-no-problem-how-ashford-college-has-embraced-new-ways-of-working-06-jul-2020)

1.3 Digital exclusion

Digital exclusion and equity was raised consistently as a serious concern. Learner access to devices, equipment, connectivity and suitable space has been a pressing issue for colleges since lockdown, with 81% of polled staff concerned about students being disadvantaged due to poor access to technology or connectivity. Although some funding was available from government, 56% of colleges reported in the AoC summer survey that their existing and additional bursary funding from DfE has not enabled them to purchase laptops and/or connectivity (dongles) to support all their disadvantaged learners.

According to Jisc digital experience insights data,¹¹ 82% of FE learners personally own a smartphone but only 68% a laptop, 28% a desktop, 25% a tablet and 3% none of these. On first glance, this looks broadly positive but there are major concerns about digital exclusion. A small percentage of learners do not have access to any of these devices any and we cannot be sure that the specification of the devices that learners are using is appropriate for the activities they need to engage with and to make best use of the support and systems they need to access.

In addition to a lack of devices, or sharing them with other family members, connectivity is perhaps the biggest issue for learners. More and more learners are suffering from data poverty as they are unable to afford the data they need to access their learning.

Digital insufficiency does not only affect learners. A lack of suitable workspace in the home and equipment was highlighted as an area of concern for staff, too. Again, adequate connectivity can be an issue, particularly in more rural areas. It is essential to equip staff so they can shift to remote working seamlessly. They need access to equipment, remote access to organisational systems and content/software licensing relevant to their subject.

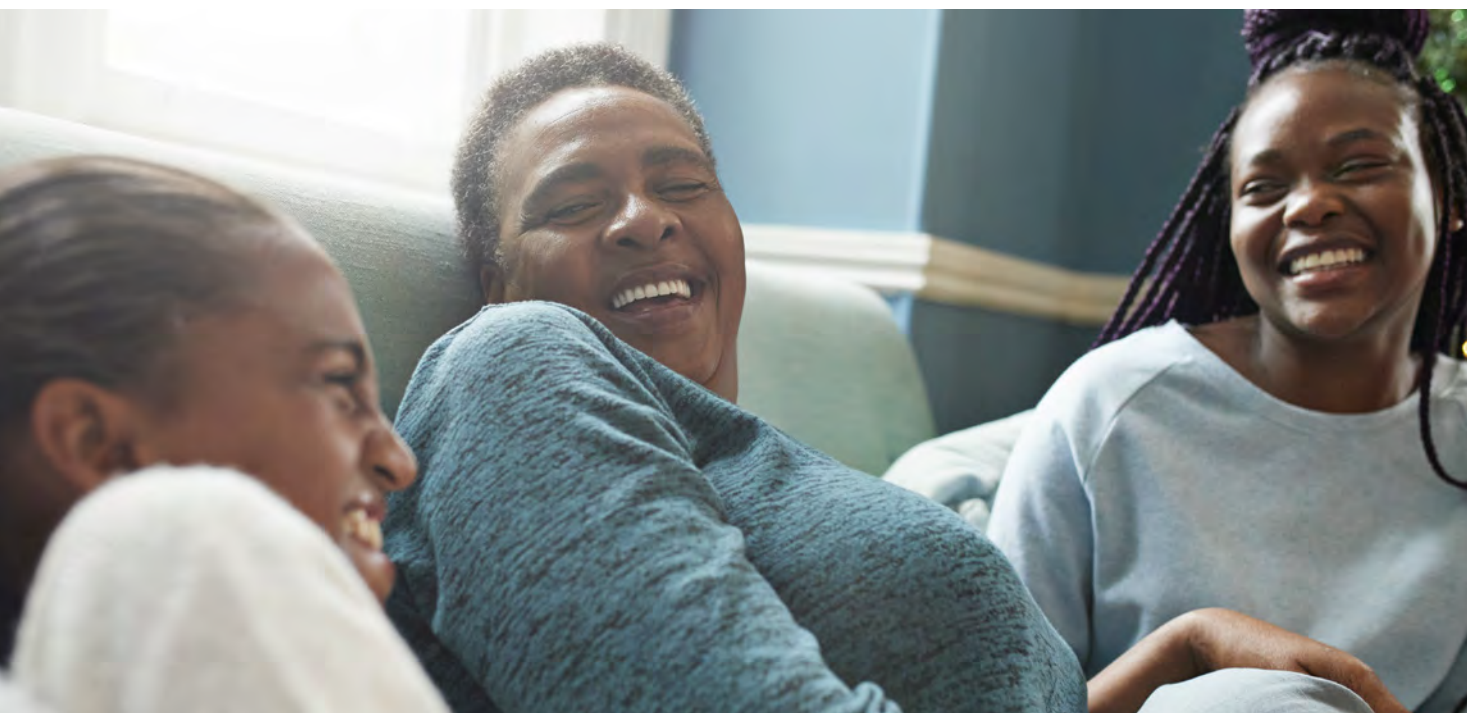
“I think it is important for the staff, as well as students, to be provided with adequate equipment and tools to do the job online. A PC, decent wifi and printer are things I should not have to purchase as an individual.”

Webinar attendee

At the start of lockdown, **South Eastern Regional College**, in Northern Ireland, identified that not all staff and students had access to the necessary equipment or systems to enable them to participate and engage online. The college loaned out 330 PCs and laptops to students who did not have access to the technology to enable them to study online. The online service desk has also given staff access to IT support or mentored support while at home, plus training on how to use video technology to all staff and students, which has enabled teams to interact in a synchronous way.

However, “although we provided many [students] with the hardware and software they needed, some still had slow internet access,” says Michael Malone, director of curriculum and information services. Looking ahead, says head of learning academy Paula Philpott, “we hope the government can provide the necessary funds to address the technological deficits that exist so all students can avail of the benefits that online and on campus deliver”.

¹¹ <https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-reports/>



RECOMMENDATIONS

Government needs to:

- > Provide access to funding for digital devices and connectivity so no learner is disadvantaged

Colleges need to:

- > Regularly survey current learners and new learners in detail, prior to enrolment, about access to digital devices, connectivity, resources and suitable learning space
- > Provide access to devices/connectivity as required
- > Regularly survey staff and provide equipment and training based on the results

1.4 Staff capabilities and confidence

Across the sector, staff have stepped up to the challenge of remote learning and teaching. Many have felt positive about the shift, with feedback in our webinars indicating that 66% of respondents thought the digital shift had a positive impact on their team and 55% highlighting an increase in their levels of productivity.

However, while some staff thrive, others struggle with digital capabilities and confidence. In the webinars, staff confirmed that a significant minority of teaching staff were not confident and were concerned that they would not be able to deliver the quality of teaching they expected of themselves (49%).

It must be noted that the attendees at the research webinars were a self-selecting sample who were both already interested in technology-enabled learning and were digitally confident enough to take part in a webinar on the topic. They are not necessarily a representative sample.

Learners in the webinars also fed back that they had observed some of their teachers struggling with technology. This was echoed by hard-hitting comments from learners in the latest Jisc digital experience insights survey¹²:

“Some teachers do not have the adequate technological knowledge or confidence to make full use of such technology”

“We students timed one of the lecturers on how long it took for them to access the learning materials they needed and it took 35 minutes of a two-hour lesson.”

“It would be good if tutors had day courses of digital technology and how to use it so they could then help us in classes”

“Have tutors that know how to use the apps they recommend”

Organisations need to provide staff with opportunities to learn new skills and understand how those can be applied, to provide CPD opportunities and continue to share good practice. Many of those attending the webinars noted that the opportunity to learn, afforded by the crisis, has had a positive impact on staff confidence. While “bite-size” sessions were widespread, staff also emphasised the need for space and time to put learning into practice. Harlow College uses a coaching programme to support professional development and using advanced practitioners to build capacity.

Grimsby College is carrying out digital development discussions framed around 10 questions:

1. Is your weekly timetable published on Canvas/Teams and obvious to learners?
2. Do you use Canvas/Teams “announcements” to communicate with your learners?
3. Do you state the lesson aims and objectives clearly for each lesson/week/topic?
4. Can you evidence a variety of synchronous tasks/activities/assessments?
5. Can you show how you recap/link/sequence learning to a previous/future lesson when using online tools?
6. Can you evidence that your delivery meets the needs of ALL learners? Extension activities? Conference for 1–1?
7. Formative assessment opportunities are frequent and support learners to progress?
8. Are students “praised” individually for efforts and achievements on a group platform?
9. Is accessibility considered/addressed?
10. If your course is L2 or L3 and has purchased SOLA hours, is this built into the online delivery?

¹² Early data from the 2019/20 Jisc digital experience insights survey. The 2020 full report will be published in September. <https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-reports/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Jisc, ETF and CDN need to:

- > Develop a comprehensive digital pedagogy CPD programme for staff at all levels of digital capability and an emergency training programme for autumn 2020 for those staff lacking in digital confidence
- > Provide opportunities to learn from and share good practice

Colleges need to:

- > Give staff sufficient time to learn, practice with and implement technology
- > Provide coaching support for tutors who do not feel confident teaching remotely and provide reward and recognition for staff we are developing their digital practices and skills

1.5 Assessment

“In time, as we emerge from the pandemic, I would hope that the assessment boards, working with Jisc, will convene forward-looking teams to scope out what could be done differently and better in future: what are the lessons and opportunities of the ‘new’ world view of education? Policymakers, professional associations and membership bodies should also be involved in the process, and – critically – students.”

Steve Frampton, president, AoC

Given the inexorable rise of the digital workplace where jobs rely on collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, teamwork and other soft skills, we need to question whether the current assessment system is fit for purpose. Increasingly, learning and assessment will follow the learner, accessible at the point of demand, on site and remotely. It should aspire to fulfil the five principles laid out in the Jisc Future of Assessment report:¹³

- 1 **Authentic:** assessments designed to prepare learners for what they do next, using technology they will use in their careers
- 2 **Accessible:** assessments designed with an accessibility-first principle
- 3 **Appropriately automated:** a balance found of automated and human marking to deliver maximum benefit to students
- 4 **Continuous:** assessment data used to explore opportunities for continuous assessment to improve the learning experience
- 5 **Secure:** authoring detection and biometric authentication adopted for identification and remote proctoring

¹³ [jisc.ac.uk/reports/the-future-of-assessment](https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/the-future-of-assessment)

However, more work is needed to ensure the delivery of secure assessment. This inevitably involves balancing the security of locked-down and digitally proctored, or even simply timed, exams, against the needs of learners at home who may have unreliable and uncertain access to the necessary technology and appropriately quiet spaces. This balance is a conundrum that lies at the heart of current digital assessment. How can you make assessment secure, trustworthy and fair, but also adaptable to circumstances?

Assessment of practical and vocational subjects has become increasingly complex under COVID-19. One of the main challenges is around what evidence awarding bodies will accept, such as using a video to assess a learner doing a subject such as brickwork. In work-based learning situations, assessment in a real work environment is prescribed as the only form of assessment in most cases.

Beyond the constraints of awarding body regulations, there is the wider issue of how to make assessment more personalised, inclusive and reflective of the industry/sector the learner wants to work in, all the while retaining the rigour. The traditional system of assessment benefits a small proportion of learners, based on their ability to retain knowledge, but, approached differently, assessment could be far more reflective of a learner's skills, attributes and attitudes.

Bolton College, in its experiments with AI, wants to move beyond closed questions to explore whether students can provide answers and receive automated feedback based on model answers provided by teaching staff. Staff have been exploring the potential offered by natural language processing and natural language classifications platforms from the leading vendors in the field such as IBM, Amazon, Google and Microsoft. Initial results are promising, with positive feedback received from students and teachers. Students liked receiving real-time feedback, as they responded to open questions, and teachers stated that these services could lead to a reduction in marking workloads.

"The emergence of this new assessment tool enables teachers to make use of a richer medium for assessing their students. Our solution enables teachers to pose open-ended questions which can be automatically analysed and assessed by a computer. The ability to offer real-time feedback means that students can qualify and clarify their responses," says Aftab Hussain, ILT manager at the college.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government/Ofqual need to:

- > Adapt assessment methodology to fit digital pedagogy

Jisc needs to:

- > Bring together key stakeholders, including employers and awarding organisations, and benchmark assessment changes against the Future of Assessment report's five principles

Awarding organisations need to:

- > Develop new assessment approaches with employers including flexibility for hybrid delivery, such as just in time, simulated assessment and micro-credentials



2. The learner experience



A LEARNER'S STORY

"The start of lockdown worked really well. We went into lockdown on the Thursday, and on the following Monday we were immediately doing a full timetable, still learning new content with the same number of hours but on Microsoft Teams. It was quite seamless, though we did have the advantage that we had already using been using Teams in a limited way.

That lasted about three weeks. Then the college decided that, instead, we would just have one call a day, at 9am for 10 minutes, to register and check everyone was okay. It was as if we switched from everything to nothing. And assessments stopped. Nothing's been marked. At the end of term I had not had any kind of feedback since March.

I felt frustrated. I'm quite keen but it became hard to stay motivated because it seemed like there was no point, a waste of time. The college no longer seemed interested in us. They were assigning the work and then not marking it. Also, being in a classroom, in college surrounded by people, generates a level of purpose that doesn't exist online.

But I would commend my teachers for how quickly they adapted: from shutting down on Thursday to opening up online on Monday, everything was ready and everything was working."

Alfie, a BTEC student at a college in the south of England

Like Alfie, many learners are sympathetic to the plight of their teachers and supportive of their college – an NUS student survey¹⁴ found that 75% are confident that their institution is managing the crisis well – but are feeling frustrated about the impact on their learning. Three-quarters of FE students are concerned about the effect of COVID-19 on their course qualification, according to the NUS survey.

¹⁴ NUS (2020) *COVID-19 and Students Survey Report*.
nusconnect.org.uk/resources/COVID-19-and-students-survey-report

Finding the right balance in online learning sessions between length, timing and intensity to avoid “video conference fatigue” and disengagement is critical. Here’s Alfie again:

“If we have to go online next year, I think we need more, shorter sessions. Last time, I’d have three 70-minute sessions and after the first half an hour or so I’ve switched off. Maybe it’s just me, but I don’t have the attention and interest to stay on it that long, especially when they’re just going through a PowerPoint. I think having five or six half-hour sessions would be better.”

“So less death by Powerpoint, less video streaming – it would be better to be given the link to watch it before or afterwards – and more interaction, collaboration, tasks that encourage us to work together and get us talking, making the whole session seem more active.”

There was also concern around translating the “safe bubble” of the classroom to the online environment. While some learners found it easier to ask questions of teachers using the chat function in live lessons, others felt less “safe” engaging with webcams and microphones turned on (discussed further below). Teachers have needed to show empathy and compassion in terms of how lessons are taught and tasks set, finding alternative ways to set tasks and consolidate learnings in the context of their course.

Learners’ digital study skills have also come under the spotlight under lockdown. For example, learners on practical courses need very specific skills to translate what they are learning from a screen; all learners will need to be or become proficient at typing or speech to text, and capturing/sharing their learning in other ways. Managing time and task, note-making, using study apps, planning, recording and reflecting – all skills that might have been addressed directly on campus – have become more important in lockdown. Study skills and tutorial input need to be managed and learners need to be able to take advantage of them.

One of the key issues raised by learners in the research webinars was the limited personalised feedback provided during lockdown learning. They stated that learning was too one-way and didactic, leading to some anxieties around the gap in expectations about extent and speed of feedback.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Colleges need to:

- > Provide clear ground rules for online learning, to set learner (and staff) expectations
- > Focus learning design on interactive, collaborative active learning, or risk learner disengagement, and offer a variety of ways for learners to interact in online sessions
- > Provide guidance to learners on how to study effectively online and use technology to support their learning journey
- > Prepare learners for the digital workplace by embedding vocational digital skills relevant to their programme of study



2.1 Learner wellbeing

Student wellbeing has become a significant issue. ONS surveys¹⁵ during lockdown show that young people are more likely to report feeling lonely and less satisfied with their lives than older people. Among those aged 16 to 24 years who were unable to attend college because of the pandemic, around 75% felt that their future life plans will be negatively affected.

Financial changes have also had an impact, with 88% of colleges citing evidence of increased student hardship. Sources of income, such as part-time jobs, may have ended, with the forced shutdown of pubs, restaurants and shops disproportionately affecting the jobs of younger people, or there may be increased financial hardship within the family. Changes to transport arrangements, such as the removal of the free Oyster card for 16-18-year-olds in London, may increase the pressure.¹⁶

In addition to general anxiety around COVID-19, its effects and its implications for their futures, learners also have more specific anxieties around their studies. According to an NUS student survey, of the 40% of FE learners who have a vocational component to their course, three in four believe the COVID-19 outbreak will have a negative impact on it. And eight in ten of the 30% of FE learners who have a placement as part of their course believe it will be negatively impacted.

There may also be specific anxieties around online learning. The digital inequalities discussed above will add to the pressure for some learners, along with a lack of quiet space to study. The different demands of online lessons may be stressful, as learner Alfie explains:

“Quite a few of my friends and peers expressed the concept of Skype anxiety, where they didn’t want to share their webcam or microphone or whatever. And they found that the security and comfort of being in the classroom isn’t translated online. So online they found it harder to engage with teachers and answer questions, and their willingness to engage was less than in the normal classroom because they were a bit more scared of getting it wrong and what would happen when you get it wrong.”

¹⁵ ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/articles/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsonyoungpeopleingreatbritain/3aprilto10may2020

¹⁶ tes.com/news/government-urged-save-free-london-travel-16-18s

Colleges have been taking learner wellbeing seriously. According to the AoC Survey, 94% of colleges agreed that there was an additional demand for mental health and wellbeing services for students during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, and 97% of colleges have put additional mental health and wellbeing support in place for their students as a result.

The AoC found that colleges are supporting learners in a range of ways:

- > Providing information and signposting to external support organisations (96% of colleges)
- > Adapting existing support services to deliver remotely (95% of colleges)
- > Providing regular opportunities to discuss wellbeing with staff (91% of colleges)
- > Providing guidance about self-care (89% of colleges), providing online skills sessions – eg mindfulness, coping strategies (84% of colleges)
- > Commissioning new online or telephone support services such as counselling (45% of colleges), providing opportunities for peer support (41% of colleges)

Ashford College

Along with sharing helpful resources and materials (such as promoting popular e-textbooks and subjects), the learning resource team at Ashford College has made an effort to share more content to help with wellbeing, such as links to podcasts and helpful articles.

“It’s important to keep that conversation going. It’s important that learners know there’s support and advice out there,” says Katie Butler, Ashford College learning resource centre. “In fact, the most popular Instagram posts have been the ones promoting wellbeing podcasts. Due to the increased engagement, tutors have started pointing students to the social media channels for updates and useful content. On top of that, tutors have been getting in touch with us so we can share their recommended wellbeing resources, sites etc.”



East Coast College

"We ensure all students participate in a wellbeing programme as well as providing support services that enhance student resilience and personal development. Both initiatives are responsive to needs and teach students how to look after themselves," says Stuart Rimmer, chief executive officer, East Coast College, and chair of the AoC Mental Health Policy Group.

"Emphasis on wellbeing and support in student induction and tutorials led to 57% of 2018/19 mental health disclosures by the end of term one, enabling the college to provide effective support early in the student journey.

"Materials online have been found to be restorative and develop the communication and mental health literacy of students. Their main focus is preventative (not crisis) and fulfilling a signposting function. We use materials provided by the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust, the Mental Health Foundation, Action for Happiness and Mind."

2.2 Online safety

The shift to online learning communities may increase the risk of online bullying and harms, so online safety, security and safeguarding have never been more important. But before the wholesale move to online as a result of COVID-19, only 63% of learners said they were informed by their colleges about staying safe online.¹⁷

For teachers, meeting with learners online may cause concerns about breaching boundaries or questions about etiquette. It's important to ensure that both staff and learners are protected and understand how to maintain boundaries online.

Jisc has produced a guide¹⁸ to communicating with learners online that covers many of the potential pitfalls, such as use of social media, reminding learners to dress as they would at college when using webcams, guidelines around recording sessions and being mindful of language used that could be misinterpreted online.

COVID-19 has also opened new vulnerabilities for cyber attackers to exploit and there has been an increase in phishing attacks (attempts to steal usernames and passwords).¹⁹ It is also harder for a college's IT team to provide the same level of IT security to remote users as can be delivered on campus, pointing to a growing need for increased vigilance and user education to avoid learners and staff falling victim to scams.

Westminster College provides all learners with an online agreement to sign, covering aspects such as online bullying, privacy and online etiquette, so learners are clear about what is expected of them and know where they can go for further support.²⁰

¹⁷ <https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-reports/>

¹⁸ <https://coronavirus.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2020/03/18/are-your-staff-digitally-ready-to-communicate-with-learners-online/>

¹⁹ jisc.ac.uk/blog/coronavirus-scams-how-to-spot-them-16-mar-2020

²⁰ <https://forms.office.com/Pages/ShareFormPage.aspx?id=StRKfpD-s0CahUHzcmxQyYXWacJGEJpGpkc3GSWvs0ZUMjIFWjI0RjU0VlI2Ulg0UTROMjVVRVJVWS4u&sharetoken=OQry0VCH8FjJfdvns1Rn>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Jisc needs to:

- > Work with NUS to provide more guidance on how to minimise learners' specific anxieties around online learning

Colleges need to:

- > Embed online wellbeing alongside safeguarding as part of their learner induction
- > Review online safety and safeguarding policies to ensure they adequately cover the new blended learning context
- > Consider introducing agreements for learners covering safety, security and etiquette



3. Staff experience



3.1 Workload and wellbeing

In the research webinars, feedback about staff experience was surprisingly positive with praise for the agility and adaptiveness of staff and learners during this period. However, 73% also indicated their workload had increased or significantly increased as a result of the pandemic.

Staff are having to manage increased workloads and balance that with family life. In some instances this is a result of having to prepare multiple plans in the event of different scenarios and in other instances it's a result of working with unfamiliar processes or systems. Teachers may be experiencing high pressure and feel unable to switch off at the end of day. For many the working day has been stretching longer. As one webinar attendee put it: "We're all exhausted!"

A key concern was the intensity of change. Can the sector's agility, flexibility and enthusiasm in response to COVID-19 be sustained? There is understandable concern about the return to college in September and how it will be managed safely.

Before the coronavirus outbreak Jisc carried out a teaching staff survey²¹ which provides insights into how teaching staff are using technology and how they feel they're being supported. One key finding from the report is that FE teaching staff in particular get most of their digital support from other teaching colleagues. With the shift towards remote working, organisations need to think about what peer networks can be put in place to create opportunities for staff to collaborate and work together.²² Regular communication with staff to check how they are feeling and coping and to see if they need any extra support can make a huge difference.

²¹ <https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-reports/>

²² <https://coronavirus.jiscinvolve.org/wp/2020/03/18/are-your-staff-digitally-ready-to-communicate-with-learners-online/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Colleges need to:

- > Communicate with and update staff regularly to reassure them of the measures in place to keep them and their learners safe
- > Put supportive measures in place to monitor staff workload

Derby College

Pulse surveys have been used effectively, initially to assess how staff were feeling and whether or not they required additional support. This gave the college a really good steer on what they should be prioritising. The second pulse survey focused on how people were adapting: 91% said they were adapting well and only 7% said they were struggling.



3.2 Building communities and relationships

“If we imagine new students arriving for induction on campus, we would want the buildings, rooms and people to be welcoming and create an inclusive experience. Now, more than ever, the digital estate is as much part of the organisation as the physical estate and the digital experience is not a bolt-on or something that simply supplements life as a learner there. It’s important to give care and attention to designing an induction experience that will bring all of your learners together.”²³

Building professional relationships with learners and helping them to form relationships with their peers was a key concern for staff at the research webinars. They were particularly concerned about this in relation to new learners in September who may have been out of education for some months and will have no established relationships with teachers and peers.

A new Jisc guide to planning induction²⁴ notes that, because of the pandemic, induction may be less about immediately familiarising learners with a campus or a building and more about ensuring they know what to expect from learning, socialising and developing throughout their time at the college. Whether learners are on campus or not, induction programmes need to bind them together and build foundations for user groups that can become communities and friendships.

“While delivering wholly remote learning, **Heart of Worcestershire College** has ensured that ‘community channels’ are available across cohorts within Microsoft Teams to enable learners to build on the vital social aspect of their time. Feedback from staff and students confirm that community channels, or a small amount of time for informal conversation allocated before lectures, enables lessons to be more focused.”²⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

Colleges need to:

- > Plan for a digital-first induction that creates relationships with and between learners and prepares them to learn online

²³ www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/planning-induction-for-autumn-2020

²⁴ www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/planning-induction-for-autumn-2020

²⁵ Corke, Frampton and Rhodes (2020) *Creating a post-COVID-19 edtech strategy*. AoC / Ufi. aoc.co.uk/news/close-the-digital-divide-enable-digital-first-fe-sector-post-covid-argues-new-ebook



4. Digital leadership and system reform

What does a minimum standard of technology-enabled learning look like? That was one of the key questions to come out of the Jisc roundtable of FE leaders. There is a clear need for a *baseline* agreed by the sector itself and a consensus emerged that a blended experience designed to be accessible by the most disadvantaged should act as the baseline. While some colleges are at the front of the pack in terms of digital maturity and innovation – and we highlight emerging best practice from some of those colleges in this report – it is vital to ensure that no college gets left behind.

Achieving this baseline will require a change in **roles**. Online delivery requires multidisciplinary teams to work together: course design needs more than teachers; course support needs a range of roles; course provision needs a meld of pedagogy and technology; and different kinds of learning need very different approaches. Student-staff partnerships are also an effective approach to driving change and innovation in the use of digital in the curriculum.

There may also be issues of **scale**. Some courses, such as English and maths, are large enough to make it cost effective to get to grips with provision. Others may be smaller or much more specialised and require collaboration or commercial partnerships to be viable.

Leaders have a responsibility to equip **staff** so they can shift to remote working seamlessly, ensuring that they have access to the equipment they need as well as remote access to organisational systems and content, and software licensing relevant to their subject.

Equally necessary is to create an environment where staff feel trusted and supported and are given time and space for CPD and professional exchange.

The technical **infrastructure** needs to be in place to ensure robust connectivity, cloud-based provision, IT management systems and critical services protection to deliver fast mitigation if systems come under threat.

Finally, effective **communication** was highlighted as one of the major benefits of increased use of technology, providing more opportunities for staff to engage with dispersed teams, to collaborate effectively, share good practice and elicit feedback from team members. Effective online communication also helps to democratise the conversation – allowing more people to “have their say”. This encompasses more than sharing good practice – learners need to be brought into those conversations, too.

4.1 Leadership priorities

College leaders’ priorities in this period and beyond cover:

Inclusion and accessibility:

- > Learner hardship is a growing concern
- > Digital divide: access to devices, connectivity and learning spaces
- > Learner wellbeing and retention risk

Assessment:

- > Awarding organisations and regulators adopting new ways of working
- > New approaches including flexibility for hybrid delivery, such as just in time, simulated assessment and micro-credentials

Funding, audit and quality: updated guidance/flexibility on:

- > Attendance monitoring: guided learning hours (GLH) / planned learning hours (PLH)
- > Audit and individual learner accounts (ILR)
- > Quality of online delivery, monitoring impact, sharing best practice and implications for inspectorates

Staff confidence and consistency:

- > Digital capability of all staff
- > Need for differentiated digital professional development and coaching for staff struggling to cope with transition to online, from developing confidence to nationally recognised innovation
- > Provision of additional support for staff who feel digital is not for them and are at risk of leaving FE
- > Preparing new staff for digital delivery of PGCE online/digital components
- > Access to high-quality interactive digital resources that are transferable across awarding organisations and accessible in a range of settings

When lockdown kicked in, **Luminate Education Group** provided a quick, seamless transition for its large group of colleges and schools around the Leeds area, so that staff and students could continue to work and study from home. It had only two weeks to prepare but testing proved the systems were in place and had the resilience to cope.

The priority from the start was to ensure learners could keep learning, in which the ITSS service desk played a pivotal role. As the Luminate service is cloud-based, a seamless transition to home working was possible, with familiar ways to get service desk help. Some Luminate staff already worked across several locations, so remote logins had been implemented to give them access to business systems. Luminate had also already deployed Google G Suite to support teaching and learning, which continued using Google Meet. In addition, over the last four years, Luminate had issued more than 4,000 mobile devices, including Chromebooks and laptops for students to study at home.

“Having staff with a can-do attitude and having the right tools in place have been key to our success. Over the past five years we’ve embraced a hybrid approach of on-premise and cloud technologies from Microsoft, Adobe, Apple and Google to keep our staff and students working and studying. The speed at which we had to implement wholesale remote working was unprecedented but we’ve proved over recent years that we can deliver learning remotely just as efficiently as we can on site,” says Graham Eland, group IT director.

4.2 System reform

The challenges and priorities faced by college leaders feed into the need for wider system reform of the sector. What are the funding and service requirements for effective digital transformation?

There is a clear need to review inspection, auditing, funding and accreditation through the lens of online learning and remove any barriers that currently exist:

- > **Assessment:** there is a need for greater flexibility in the system – it is largely geared for academic progression, when the current narrative is focused on skills. An additional challenge is flexibility of awarding organisations towards remote assessment. Options to explore include just in time assessment and methods that replicate the workplace, such as peer assessment, which has been flagged as a success emerging from lockdown. Micro-credentialling also needs further investigation
- > **Monitoring attendance** for funding purposes is an aspect of the funding and regulatory system that needs to change with blended learning, particularly differentiating between attendance of online lessons and engagement with the course
- > **Monitoring the impact** of online learning – Ofsted is starting to look at its systems for monitoring but this should be agreed in collaboration with the sector
- > **Quality assurance** of content and online materials

There are also current inequalities in digital infrastructure and provision across FE colleges. Jisc highlights the need to level up connectivity and the quality of online provision:

- > Level up college primary connection speed and cyber security across England
- > Ensure all English colleges have failover/resilience (a backup connection) enabling them to confidently take advantage of a digitally enabled environment
- > Provide sector-wide access to high-quality digital content, for the future workforce, through the creation, curation and negotiation of digital content

The Commission on the College of the Future has taken a systems-level approach with its recent vision²⁶ of a strategic remit for colleges to empower people with opportunities for lifelong learning and support, to boost productivity and to strengthen every community’s sense of place.



It argues that, to achieve this vision, colleges of the future will have a clear and recognised position in the education and skills system. They will need to work collaboratively with each other and across the wider education and skills system in new ways, and governments across the UK will be there to support, with relationships built on trust and a shared destiny.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government needs to:

- > Allow funding for planned learning hours delivered by online learning
- > Review and update PGCE and Initial Teacher Training qualifications to incorporate digital pedagogy
- > Pilot funding of micro-credentials as part of National Skills Fund similar to the Finnish model²⁷
- > Collaborate with sector agencies, building on Ofsted research findings to look at what works for online delivery
- > Support innovative uses of technology, which can, for example, help minimise the spend on local transport for learners
- > Ringfence dedicated capital funding for digital infrastructure, devices, digital content, resources and connectivity
- > Ensure funding for training, equipment and support for individual staff

²⁷ <https://microcredentials.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2019/12/WP3-Interviews-with-Key-Stakeholders-Decision-Makers-Overall-Summary-Report.pdf>

5. Next steps

We urge government, sector bodies and colleges to note and act on the recommendations below. In phase two of *Shaping the digital future for FE and skills*, Jisc and AoC will take action in the areas highlighted as sector body responsibilities. Jisc and AoC will also continue to bring the sector together for insight and collaboration into realising the potential of technology to benefit the FE and skills sector now and into the future. Key areas for further discussion include solving the challenge of access to high quality and engaging digital resources and content for practical subjects.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

- 1 Allow funding for planned learning hours delivered by online learning.
- 2 Review and update PGCE and Initial Teacher Training qualifications to incorporate digital pedagogy.
- 3 Pilot funding of micro-credentials as part of National Skills Fund similar to the Finnish model.
- 4 Collaborate with sector agencies, building on Ofsted research findings to look at what works for online delivery.
- 5 Support innovative uses of technology, which can, for example, help minimise the spend on local transport for learners.
- 6 Ringfence dedicated capital funding for digital infrastructure, devices, digital content, resources and connectivity.
- 7 Ensure funding for training, equipment and support for individual staff.
- 8 Fund digital content creation for priority subjects and high-demand sectors identified by employers and professional bodies.
- 9 Fund a centralised FE and skills digital content search and discovery platform that highlights high-quality content.
- 10 Provide access to funding for digital devices and connectivity so no learner is disadvantaged.
- 11 (With Ofqual) adapt assessment methodology to fit digital pedagogy.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SECTOR BODIES

Jisc, Education and Training Foundation (ETF) and College Development Network (CDN) need to:

- 1 Lead research into best practice-based guidelines for learner engagement online.
- 2 Further develop CPD support for staff in reframing their approach and build confidence in relation to teaching, learner support and lesson/course design (as distinct from skills in the use of digital techniques, tools and platforms).
- 3 Develop a framework for online learning delivery across UK (drawing on the Welsh government's *Strategic framework for learning delivery, COVID-19 resilience plan for the post-16 sector*).
- 4 Develop template VLE courses that incorporate basic elements of digital pedagogy and good learning design.
- 5 Develop a comprehensive digital pedagogy CPD programme for staff at all levels of digital capability and an emergency training programme for September 2020 for those staff lacking in digital confidence.
- 6 Provide opportunities to learn from and share good practice.

Jisc needs to:

- 7 Develop a centralised FE and skills digital content search and discovery platform which highlights high quality content.
- 8 Bring together key stakeholders, including employers and awarding organisations, and benchmark assessment changes against the Future of Assessment report's five principles.
- 9 Work with NUS to provide more guidance on how to minimise learners' specific anxieties around online learning.

Awarding organisations need to:

- 10 Develop new assessment approaches with employers including flexibility for hybrid delivery, such as just in time, simulated assessment and micro-credentials.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGES

- 1 Share digital content via centralised search and discovery platform.
- 2 Create content using Creative Commons licensing to enable greater collaboration, sharing, and improving opportunities for sector maintenance, updating and resource development.
- 3 Regularly survey current learners and new learners in detail, prior to enrolment, about access to digital devices, connectivity, resources and suitable learning space.
- 4 Provide access to devices/connectivity as required.
- 5 Regularly survey staff and provide equipment and training based on the results.
- 6 Support staff to participate in CPD programmes that build confidence in relation to online teaching, learner support and lesson/course design.
- 7 Give staff sufficient time to learn, practice with and implement technology.
- 8 Provide coaching support for tutors who do not feel confident teaching remotely and provide reward and recognition for staff we are developing their digital practices and skills.
- 9 Provide clear ground rules for online learning to set learner (and staff) expectations.
- 10 Focus learning design on interactive, collaborative active learning, or risk learner disengagement, and offer a variety of ways for learners to interact in online sessions.
- 11 Provide guidance to learners on how to study effectively online and use technology to support their learning journey.
- 12 Prepare learners for the digital workplace by embedding vocational digital skills relevant to their programme of study.
- 13 Embed online wellbeing alongside safeguarding as part of their learner induction.
- 14 Review online safety and safeguarding policies to ensure they adequately cover the new blended learning context.
- 15 Consider introducing agreements for learners covering safety, security and etiquette.
- 16 Communicate with and update staff regularly to reassure them of the measures in place to keep them and their learners safe.
- 17 Put supportive measures in place to monitor staff workload.
- 18 Plan for a digital-first induction that creates relationships with and between learners and prepares them to learn online.

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Derby College	London South East Colleges	South Staffordshire College
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