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Digital and online learning in further education colleges:
autumn 2022 insights

Introduction

This report summarises the findings from link inspector engagement visits and calls made to further education (FE) colleges between October and December 2022 with a focus on online and digital learning. The report is based on the information discussed during face-to-face and online meetings with senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers, digital leads, and small groups of learners. The focus for discussions was online and digital learning in relation to extent of usage, recent developments, quality assurance, professional learning, and partnership working. The findings within this report build on those in our [Developments in remote and blended learning practice](#) (Estyn, 2021)_report.

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Extent of usage and recent developments

Over time, FE colleges have either returned fully to face-to-face delivery or have chosen to retain a very small amount of online delivery where appropriate. The rationale for moving back to face-to-face delivery is that it is preferable to both teachers and learners. Where remote learning is still in place, it is primarily on commercial and professional programmes, and some higher-level courses where learners and employers value this flexible approach. In a very few cases, colleges also offer part-time mathematics and English courses online.

Colleges are still benefitting from the investment in equipment and the resources that were developed during the pandemic with courses making use of the asynchronous materials that are now readily available. These digital resources are being used to support and enhance classroom delivery, to offer extension activities and homework, and to enable a flipped approach to learning whereby learners can access resources prior to lessons to prepare them for class-based activities and discussions. Likewise, lessons are sometimes recorded so that learners can revisit them or access them at a later date. However, in a few cases, staff report that this approach has reduced face-to-face attendance.

This embedded approach to digital learning is becoming well established across the sector with leaders and delivery teams recognising where and how this approach benefits and supports learning with teachers. Likewise, learners value the opportunities that digital learning offers. These opportunities include:

- teacher voice notes to accompany written feedback
- virtual bulletin boards
- web-based tools for collaborative activities
- the creation of digital based portfolios
- podcasting by staff and learners
- use of virtual reality headsets as a learning tool or as a way to provide applicants with an insight into college life pre-enrolment

Staff teams in colleges continue to experiment with different platforms and tools with a range being used across the sector. In a few colleges, learners and staff make use of more than one platform though there was not always a clear rationale in relation to when one is used as opposed to another.

In a minority of colleges, digital mentor roles have been created to support the development of digital content and skills and teams value having access to this expertise. In a few colleges, there is a central team who produce high quality digital resources for specific programmes.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance for online and digital learning is addressed through more than one route and varies from college to college. However, all colleges have an observation programme in place and digital learning is captured within this in the same way that other aspects of teaching and learning are. Where remote learning is still happening, these classes are observed within the observation cycle. In one college, a different form is used for online observations as they reported that traditional observations forms did not work effectively; these newly created forms allow for a focus on online classroom management and etiquette. In terms of quality processes aimed specifically at digital practices, in a few colleges teams have completed digital skills reviews resulting in all teachers having at least one digital learning developmental action point, and in one college teachers are required to set at least one online assessment per term.

In most cases, colleges recognise that there are no systematic ways or formal mechanisms in place to ensure the quality of digital and online learning and e-learning design across the board. This results in resources and techniques differing considerably depending on the skills of individual teachers and teams. However, in all colleges there is an awareness of the curriculum areas and teachers that are performing well in this respect, and equally those areas and individuals that need to develop their skills further.

Most colleges have digital teams or individuals in place to support with this aspect of the curriculum. What they offer varies significantly, ranging from specialist teams who can create content, to curriculum-focussed digital mentors who are allocated time for this role, to more informal peer support. Senior leaders are sensitive to the differing abilities and preferences, and furthermore recognise that some areas of the curriculum lend themselves more to the use of digital resources and delivery than others. In some cases, individuals and teams in colleges have developed digital learning strategies as well as guidance and protocols for delivery staff, but this is at different stages across the sector.

Learners enrolled on online programmes are given the opportunity to complete learner voice surveys in the same way as those who attend face-to-face classes, and in some cases remote focus groups are being held as part of the quality assurance process.

Colleges shared that the current approach is working well and that the intention going forwards is to continue to develop and utilise digital learning on programmes where appropriate, and to plan for online courses where there is a demand, and it meets learners' needs.

Professional learning

The pandemic had a hugely positive impact in terms of investment in digital equipment and the development of teachers' digital skills resulting in improved content and more diverse and flexible learning opportunities for learners. Senior leaders within colleges remain committed to the digital agenda and this is reflected through the digital frameworks, skills audits, professional learning opportunities, resource investment, and ongoing support.

Colleges have provided and continue to provide learning opportunities for staff through several routes including:

- ensuring there is a digital focus within college training events
- providing online self-access learning opportunities such as the Microsoft Educator and Google 1 Educator programmes
- establishing peer learning project groups, involving external partners such as JISC
- appointing digital leaders/skills coaches to support teachers with developing content and skills
- working with other organisations across the sector

Teachers recognise and speak positively about their skills development and their appreciation of the support and expertise that has been made available to them. Likewise, leaders acknowledge the appetite for digital development across the workforce both within curriculum and business support teams and can identify the positive impact this is having on teaching, learning and assessment, as well as wider services.

Digital skills development is also addressed through performance reviews and appraisals with one college sharing that in future reviews and appraisals, all teachers will have at least one digital-related target included.

Partnership working

Colleges have shared their experiences and knowledge of digital learning through both formal and informal networks. For example, four colleges based in the south and west worked together to share training for staff on common digital platforms in use across the colleges. Similarly, two colleges in the south and south-east worked together on a collaborative project focussed on curriculum planning and lesson delivery within a digital context. In other instances, colleges have worked together on developments within specific curriculum areas. For example, three colleges in the south have been working together on curriculum content related to heart rate and electrocardiogram (ECG) technology within a psychology context.

There are further examples of wider partnership working including one college linking with a university to develop an action research project, links with the police to raise awareness of cyber safety, and work with organisations that create digital curriculum resources for the further education and skills sector.

Colleges also recognise the benefits of being part of the Colegau Cymru digital network and the impact of the Digital 2030 framework, [Digital 2030 A strategic framework for post-16 learning in Wales](#) (Welsh Government, 2019). Another example of collaborative working is colleges' contributions to the development of digital tools for bilingual teaching, learning, and assessment funded through the Professional Development Fund (now the Professional Learning Fund). A sector Digital Leads Network has been set up to support collaboration, with the first meeting held in autumn term 2022 and the next meeting planned for the spring term 2023.

JISC¹ has also played a pivotal role in relation to supporting digital developments across colleges. Staff in colleges highlighted the usefulness of JISC's digital elevation tool and insight survey. The JISC workshops and professional learning sessions were also cited as being a positive experience both in terms of supporting strategic direction, and operational delivery. However, there were mixed responses in relation to the quality of the JISC resources with some being described as fantastic and others as not very strong. Hwb, a Welsh Government led initiative with a dedicated post-16 area in which practitioners can access professional learning as well as sharing good practice and resources, was also mentioned though there was very little positive feedback and one provider expressed frustration with not even being able to find resources on this platform.

Self-reflection questions to support FE colleges in relation to online and digital learning developments

- Are there plans to share experiences and resources across the sector in relation to digital and online learning?
- To what extent have we considered what part digital learning should play within different learning areas and across the different types of provision over the next five years? What would be optimal and how would this vary across the college?
- Is there a strategy in place to ensure digital equipment funded through Welsh Government during the pandemic, can be replaced and updated as required? Likewise, has ongoing funding been identified to enable the continuation of digital specific roles among the workforces?
- Where more than one digital platform is used, is there a clear rationale for this?
- Within quality processes, are there plans to implement ways of measuring digital usage, content, and effectiveness in specific curriculum areas?
- What is the intention in terms of accessing support and resources through external bodies such as JISC and Hwb?
- How do teaching staff evaluate how well learners are engaging in online sessions and how do they check the extent to which learners are learning effectively during these sessions?

¹ JISC (www.jisc.ac.uk) provides a useful range of advice, guidance and training for staff in relation to online technologies and their use across the United Kingdom. Welsh Government annual grant funding to JISC enables post-16 learning providers in Wales to access a range of services, support and training directly from JISC.