1.2. Improving learning in technological-advanced societies

SP - (18568) - VOCATIONAL LEARNING AND TEACHING DURING THE PANDEMIC: EXPERIENCES FROM COLLEGES IN BRITISH ISLANDS

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Short Abstract

Since the onset of Covid-19, education systems have been disrupted, with much teaching and learning shifting swiftly online to mitigate any loss of learning. The success of this switch to remote or online learning varied greatly depending on level, context, and individual learners (e.g. Green, 2020). In some cases, vocational and technical education have been disrupted heavily, since practical elements that often involve equipment and in-person demonstrations, are difficult to translate to an online context. Additionally Vocational Education & Training (VET), especially work-based learning was affected through shutdown of workplaces (Avis et al., 2020).

This research seeks to understand the ways in which further education (FE) colleges in island settings within the British Isles adapted their vocational and technical courses to online delivery during lockdowns due to the pandemic. Some island colleges have been providing online learning at higher education level for some time (Plenderleith, 2000; Simco and Campbell, 2011; Pancrioli et al., 2015) in order to maximise resources for learners in remote places. However, less is known about post-16 provisions and particularly courses delivered by colleges and that require practical or industry experience.

The research includes reflection on the pre-Covid VET delivery modes and explores how teaching and learning has changed during the pandemic, lessons learned, and colleges' plans for the future based on their experiences. It draws on the benefits and drawbacks of online learning for teachers, learners, and the college as a whole.

The research takes a qualitative case study approach with four colleges in different British island settings. Within each college, up to three courses were selected with level 1 to 3 qualifications across a range of sectors. The research included semi-structured online interviews, with course directors/lecturers, senior leadership team and students, giving an in-depth understanding of how provision is adapted and experienced online. The interview data is analysed using thematic analyses to draw out common themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis is ongoing and will be completed before the conference.

The findings suggest a range of both positive and negative experiences of online learning and teaching of VET courses depending on a range of factors, such as the course level and type, individual teacher/learner personal circumstances and prior levels of digital skills. For instance, level 1 and 2 learners have struggled more with engagement through online learning, especially those who started their course during the pandemic. Alongside the pedagogical innovations required to deliver online learning in technical subjects, colleges have developed strategies to support their disadvantaged and vulnerable young people. The pandemic highlighted digital poverty as an increasing barrier to tackle social inequality as it negatively affects, even prohibits, learning. Positively, the research found that the necessity for online learning has developed new levels of creativity for both teachers and learners. College-level findings indicate new proposals for online and digital strategies that support the future developments of the colleges.

The findings may have wider implications and benefit the wider educational community by outlining potential VET adaptations from these unique island college settings.

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