

Report – Further Education & Training COVID-19 Response

Introduction

Following the announcement made on March 12th to close all educational establishments with immediate effect, the Further Education & Training sector, along with all other provision, was urged to put in place contingency plans to deal with the hiatus in teaching and learning. The sector demonstrated a swift and appropriate response to the immediacy of the situation, and the challenges compelled upon it at this time of crisis. This brief report is a compilation of responses garnered from over 400 Further Education & Training staff working directly with a broad and inclusive learner cohort. It is divided into three key areas:

1. Guidance Supports for Learners
2. ICT and the use of Online Resources
3. Approaches and Challenges within the Teaching and Learning Environment

Executive Summary

Full-time Further Education & Training provision have reported a high incidence of online learner engagement, however, providing vocational content poses some challenges. The use of such resources support learners to work independently, at their own pace and at a time that is convenient. The use of video conferencing, direct contact via telephone and email, as well as the use of social media, provides a sense of belonging and support, and allows for direct communication with learners. ETB Further Education & Training staff have demonstrated agility and responsiveness in the identification and use of new methods to support teaching and learning. Many challenges have been experienced, including the assessment of learners, maintaining learner motivation, overcoming social isolation, recognition of inadequate I.T. skills, and access to appropriate I.T. equipment and Internet connectivity.

Methodology

The questions focussed on a number of key areas and included the following themes:

- Current organisation of Further Education & Training staff provision including vocational specific content
- Provision of Assessment in a practical context
- Use and effectiveness of various online technologies
- Supports provided to learners, including Adult Guidance
- Challenges experienced by both learners and staff currently

The survey was disseminated through the ETBI Quality Network on March 24th and by April 3rd, a total of 415 respondents had returned the survey from right across the whole gamut of Further Education & Training staff provision. This comprised part-time and full-time provision as well as all aspects of training including contracted training and specialist training providers.¹

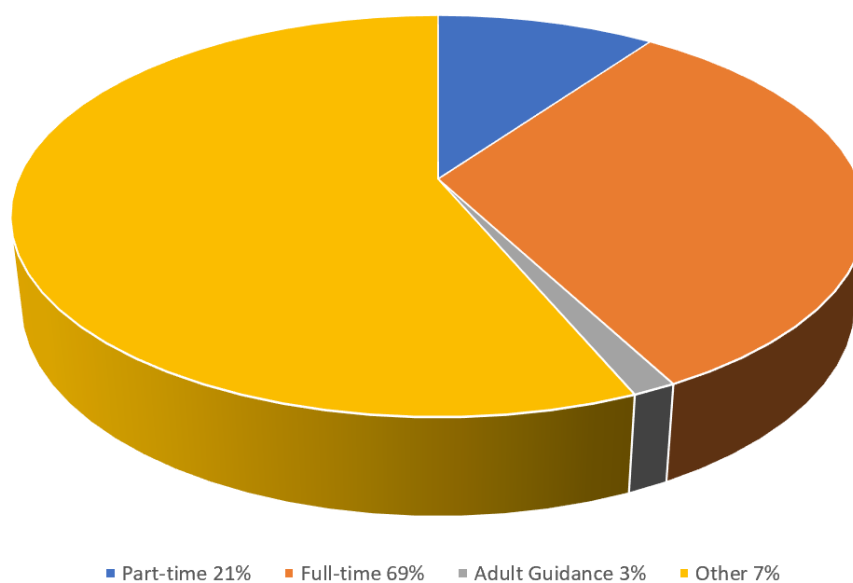


Figure 1 Spread of Provision

Respondents were spread across provision, with the largest cohort from ETB Colleges of Further Education & Training.

¹ Full-time applies to ETB Colleges of FE, Training Provision, VTOS, Youthreach, LTI, CTC. Part-time applies to Literacy, BTEI, Comm Ed, Evening Provision, Skills for Work, Prison Education.

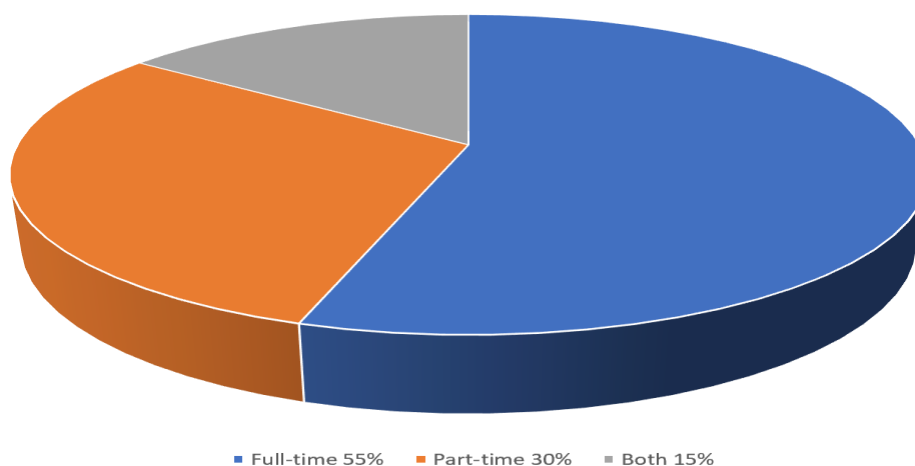


Figure 2 Distribution of Learners

Over 50% of respondents were working with learners in full time ETB Further Education & Training provision², 30% with part time³ learners and almost 15% were working with learners in a blended learning⁴ environment.

Guidance Supports for Learners

ETBs continue to offer Adult Guidance and Information supports to Further Education & Training learners in various formats. Online chats and telephone contact emerged as the most common form of communication and provision of support to learners accounting for almost 50% of contact. Learners are also supported via email, closed Facebook groups, Google ‘hangouts’ and postal contact. Direct website contact and local radio also used to support provision.

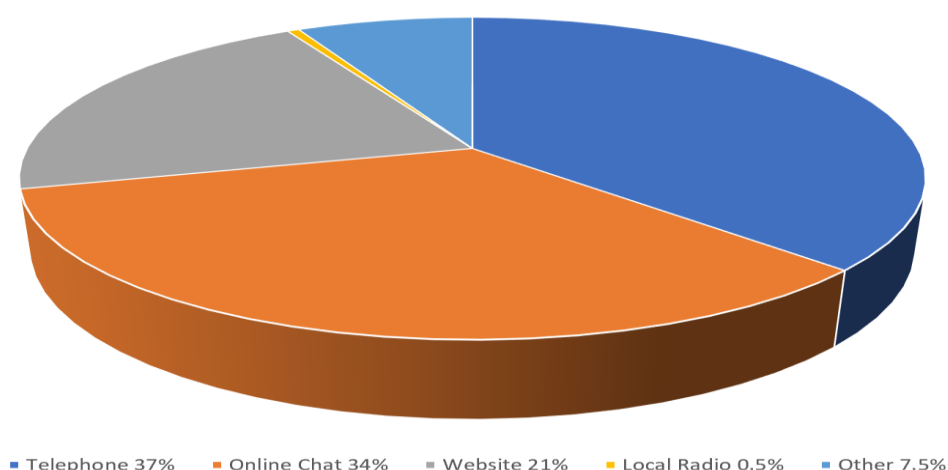


Figure 3 Adult Guidance and Information supports to learners

² College of Further Education and Training, VTOS, Youthreach, CTC, LTI, STP and Training Centre.

³ Community Education, adult literacy, BTEI and Evening Training

⁴ Electronic and online media as well as traditional face-to-face teaching.

Use and effectiveness of various online technologies in the continuation in the learning process

The use of online delivery in Further Education & Training staff has not been substantial to date, with technology being used primarily as a support or add on to traditional teaching methods. ETB Further Education & Training staff have now been catapulted into using ICT. The benefits and effectiveness of using online resources and engaging with ICT in a more significant way has been noted by respondents. Learners are learning to work more independently, which is a hallmark of learning in Further Education & Training, they can also work at their own pace and at a time which is convenient to their current living or work-life situation, particularly when material has been pre-recorded and can be accessed at any time. Platforms such as video conferencing provide a sense of belonging and community and allows for direct communication. ETB Further Education & Training staff are also enabled to give more direct one-to-one support to learners who may previously been unable or unwilling to engage more directly in a traditional classroom environment.

The vast majority of ETB Further Education & Training staff are using online resources to engage with learners and to offer some level of continuation in the learning process. However, there are instances where this is proving difficult are primarily due to lack of access to appropriate hardware, and inadequate or no broadband access for both learners and staff. In contracted training, the level of engagement is higher in comparison with apprenticeships or evening training provision. It is notable also that learners at levels 5 and 6 tend to be more self-directed in terms of their learning engagement as opposed to learners at levels 1 to 4 who would generally require a greater level of support and maintenance.

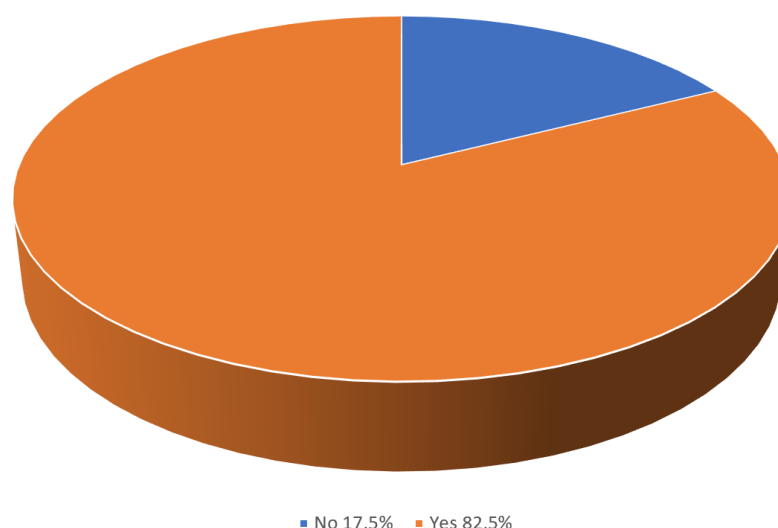


Figure 4 Use of ICT

A comprehensive range of platforms and resources are being used by Further Education & Training staff. These can vary depending on the degree to which either or both parties are familiar with and which can be accessed easily. The most effective online resources noted by respondents included:

- MS Teams
- Zoom
- Khan Academy
- Moodle
- Google Classroom
- Edmodo
- Duolingo
- Kahoot
- Instagram

Currently email is also emerging as one of the most commonly used platforms as it is easily accessible from most devices and can carry attached files and study notes within. Where learners have difficulty accessing online resources, materials are being printed and posted out.

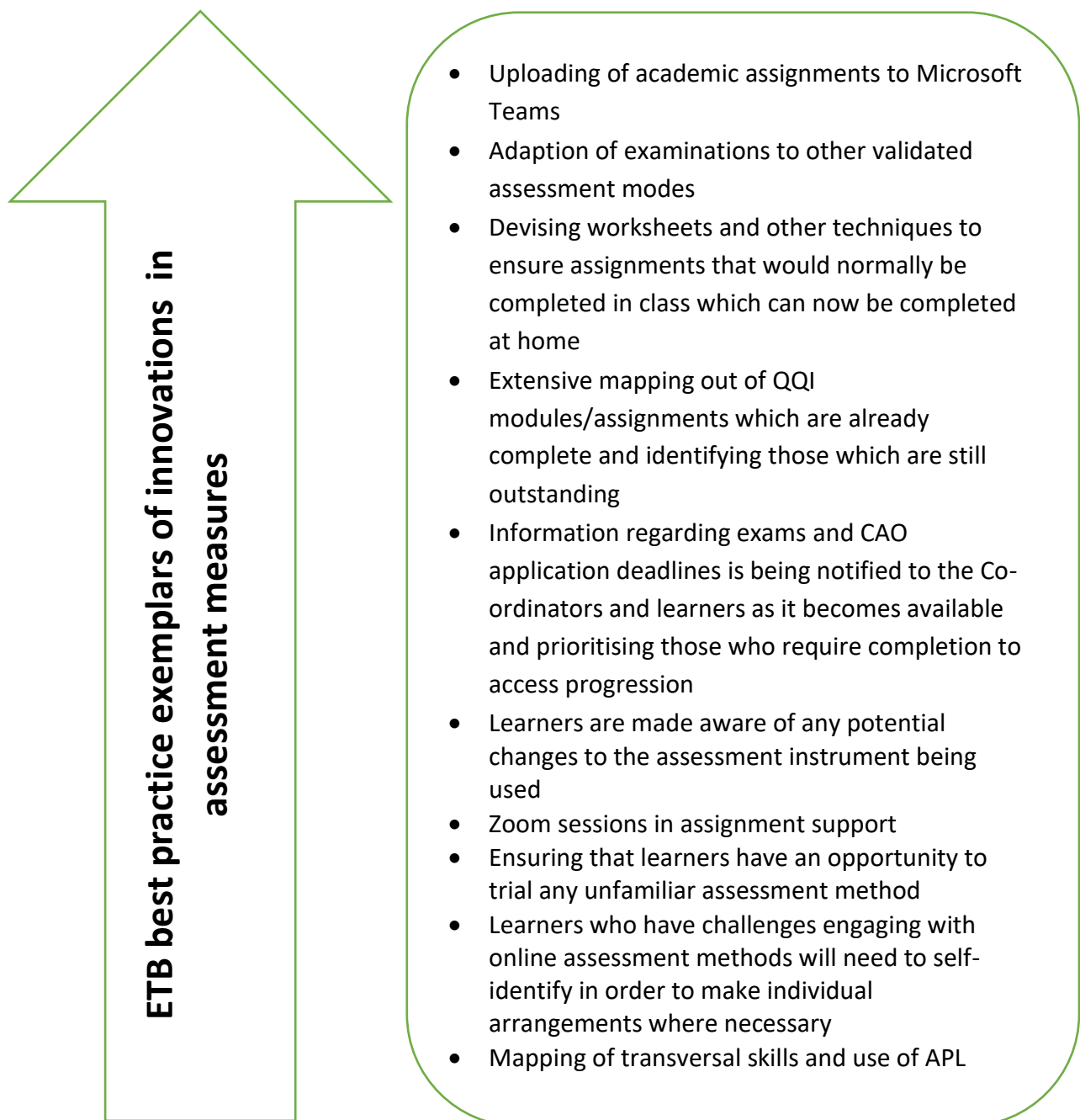
ETB Further Education & Training staff have noted that there is a growing sense of information overload and a pressure to compete in information provision. The importance of being aware of quality over quantity in terms of access to and sharing of appropriate and relevant material and platforms is reinforced. Exemplars of ETB supports to Further Education & Training learners since the suspension of face to face delivery are depicted below.



Exemplars of ETB Supports to Further Education & Training staff and learners since the suspension of delivery

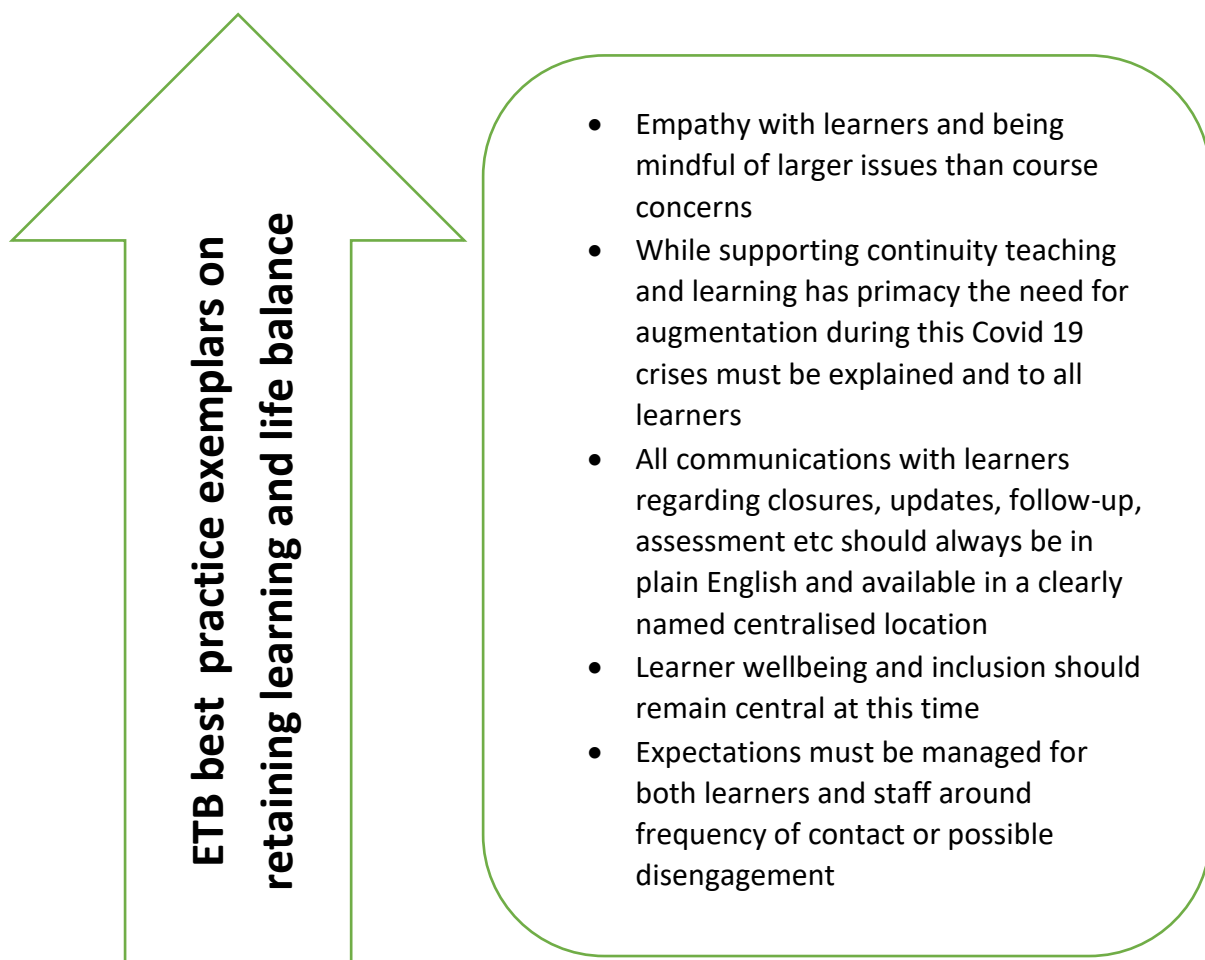
- Creation of video and online resources through Moodle, MS Teams and other available online media, including YouTube and closed Facebook pages
- Instructors and teachers are being supported directly by TEL team and Programme TEAM online and are upskilling for more effective delivery and use of ICT
- Provision of Professional Development online for staff
- Maintenance of communication channels though digital and non-digital means including:
 - Printing and posting of physical course content and material
 - Regular phone contact, or through class WhatsApp group
 - Email and texting learners, including via PLSS
 - Counselling service offered to learners via telephone providing emotional and therapeutic support, and to ensure that the transition to working at home is effective and is as smooth as possible for all concerned
 - Moodle, iClassroom, Zoom classes
 - Online ESOL and Literacy tutorials
 - YouTube for practical demonstrations, including for example, Cookery, Art
 - Peer group communications and accessing learner networks
 - Use of local radio

QQI have acknowledged that the sector has done itself proud in the way it has responded quickly and flexibly to allow learners to continue on programmes where possible, and even to progress towards awards this Spring and Summer. This has involved providers having to radically adapt the way they deliver content and assess learning and has resulted in contingency plans being put in place by each ETB to ensure that there is clarity and assurances given to learners regarding programme completion and certification. Exemplars of ETB Best Practice exemplars of innovations assessment measures to support Further Education & Training learners since the suspension of face to face delivery are depicted below.



ETB Further Education & Training staff were conscious of encouraging learners to engage in self-care, healthy living habits and mindfulness practice. This was particularly evident in those who work with vulnerable and socially isolated adults, those recovering from addiction, dealing with homelessness, as well as young people in Youthreach and LTI settings, where the refuge and nurturing provided by the staff and colleagues has now been removed. A cautious and thoughtful approach is required in order to ensure that learners do not feel overwhelmed, anxious or stressed by current circumstances, and further potential disruption to their learning journey. The unique social aspect of further education and training which is integral to a more rounded and holistic learning process, will hopefully become more appreciated when we exist this crisis.

The ETB Further Education & Training sector remains strong and focussed, constantly adapting to a rapidly changing environment. While cognisant of reminding both learners and staff alike that retaining a healthy balance between working, learning and living, the following points are worthy of consideration:



Approaches and Challenges within the Teaching and Learning Environment

This is a time of unprecedented challenge to individuals and to society as a whole. The environment is rapidly changing and both learners and providers are being propelled into situations which are new and testing. Many difficulties and challenges have been identified by the respondents, particularly the following:

- Motivation within the home environment
- Lack of sufficient I.T. skills
- Access to I.T. equipment or inadequate Internet
- Overcoming a sense of social isolation
- Balancing caring or family responsibilities with trying to continue engaging with the learning process

Relative to the non-vocational areas of teaching and learning, providing vocational and practical content is proving to be a challenge. In some instances, this is not possible to provide in areas such as craft apprenticeships, woodcraft and some aspects of culinary and hospitality practice. Concerns have also been raised about the ability to complete work experience and work placement. However much of these have been subsequently addressed through local application of national guidelines through QQI. Where placement has not yet commenced, work placement in certain Healthcare and Childcare field areas will be postponed.

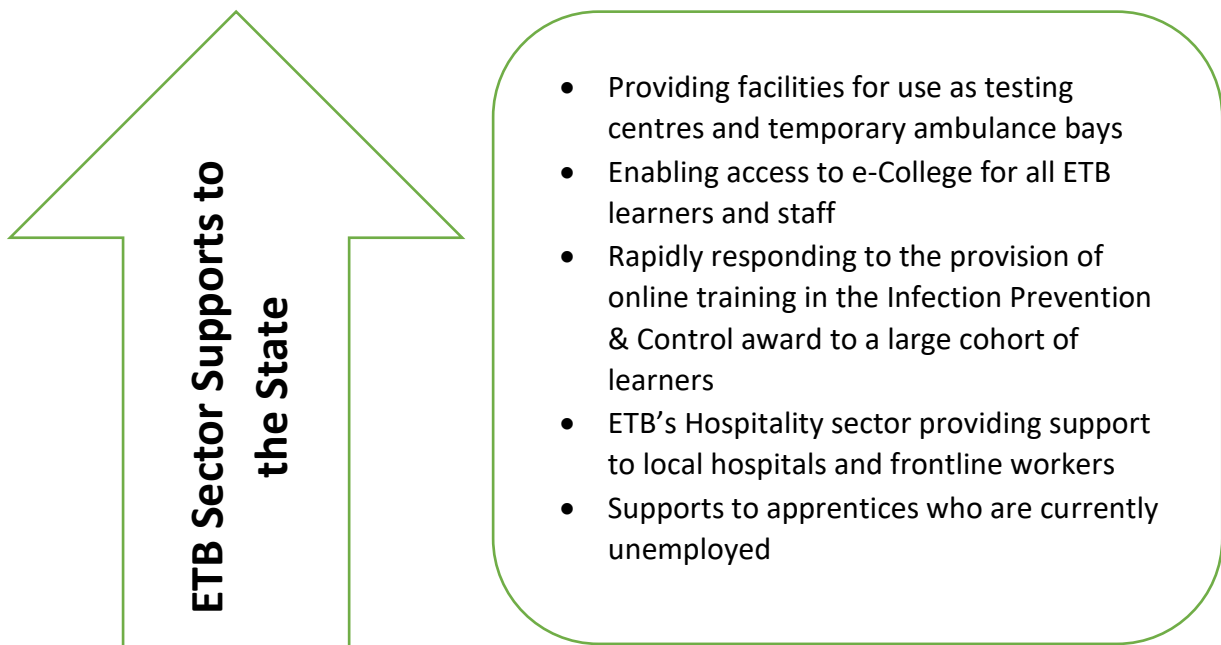
Making provision for assessment is also proving to be a challenge in many instances. Many of those who wish to submit coursework for June certification to support their CAO application, have the majority of assignments completed. In many Further Education Colleges, the bulk of examinations are generally held in April, at the conclusion of the academic term. Where the use of online examinations is not an option, assessors have had to amend and adapt the format to an alternative assessment method and a pro-rata mark is being applied in many instances to reflect the work already completed by learners, where appropriate to do so. These typically include written assignments, however critiquing a skills demonstration carried out by the assessor, and producing short presentations are also noted as options offered to learners. Many have noted that they are awaiting updates regarding CAO deadlines.

Many have signposted the fact that learners, and indeed some teaching staff, have inadequate or no ICT equipment or have no access to quality broadband. Poor connectivity is not exclusive to remote or rural areas; however, it is more likely in areas outside of the urban environment. Where learners have identified difficulties and challenges in dealing with ICT issues, ETB Further Education & Training staff have responded by providing work packs by post. Difficult personal circumstances have been thrust upon learners with little forewarning, including childcare responsibilities, unemployment and financial stress within the family situation, as well as possibly dealing with illness and social isolation add to the stress and difficulties experienced by learners. Lack of dedicated space in which to study results in

decreased motivation within the home environment. Many respondents have expressed concerns over the wellbeing of many of their learners. It was also noted that due to the speed at which the circumstances arose, there was little if any time to prepare adequate material for learner prior to closure, and consequently, little time to prepare and upskill for the necessary online interventions.

ETB Sector Supports to the State

It should also be acknowledged that the ETBs have demonstrated a high level of support to State bodies during this crisis. This is particularly notable in relation to supports to the HSE through making facilities available for testing centres for example. Some further illustrations are noted below.



Additional Outcomes

One point that stands out is the dedication of survey respondents, many of whom are contacting learners daily. Support is not simply about providing access to coursework however and many staff stressed that they are available to talk to and reassure learners. This was appreciated by many learners, some of whom were pleasantly surprised by the continuity of contact. ETB FET staff have arranged set times within class hours for more formal group communication, while being available at other times for informal individual communications. Other respondents mentioned having a dedicated telephone number being made available for learners to call for emergency purposes, or if experiencing difficulties using technology, as

it was considered important for learners to be able to initiate conversation if required. This has been promoted through various means, including ETBs websites, facebook, County Council Social Inclusion facebook page, Community Call, Volunteer network, among the samples provided.

Many respondents commented on the need to be aware of learners' access to both the Internet and to Internet capable devices and to use a communications medium that is appropriate to learners' circumstances. Accordingly, telephone calls and texts, as well as email, are the most common methods of providing guidance and support, including texting through the PLSS system. Some respondents stated that they have set up groups via email or WhatsApp chat, which facilitate both staff-learner contact and learner-learner contact. A number of providers have sent postcards to learners and vulnerable groups who are not on social media, to reduce the sense of isolation and loss of contact with their learning community.

Conclusion

The current situation has provided an opening to introduce and develop TEL and blended learning into programmes which may not previously have availed of such an opportunity. It also highlights the immense journey which both staff and learners have to travel in order to become more I.T. literate, using the vast array of technologies and platforms available right across the learning environment. ETB Further Education & Training staff have created very innovative ways to get the most interesting, relevant, stimulating, engaging material to their learner cohort in an accelerated time period.

Responses from the sector indicated clearly that ETB Further Education & Training staff are committed to provide continuity of learning however, limitations are more evident in some areas of ETB Further Education & Training with staff working with more vulnerable adults and young people. This crisis has emphasised the urgency to have contingency strategies going forward. It also underscored the flexibility and responsiveness of ETB Further Education & Training staff to a quickly evolving and dynamic situation.

Useful Resource Links

[ETBI Library](#)

[QQI updates](#)

[SOLAS updates](#)

[NALA's Plain English Guidelines at a Glance](#)

[ITEC updates](#)

[City & Guilds updates](#)