

Understanding the Impact of Covid-19 on Remote Learning in the FE sector in London

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List of abbreviations

Acronym	Definition
AEB	Adult Education Budget
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ETF	Education and Training Foundation
FE	Further Education
GLA	Greater London Authority
IAL	Institute of Adult Learning
ILR	Individualised Learner Record
ITP	Independent Training Provider
LLDD	Learners with Learning Difficulties or Disability
VCSE	Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise
VLE	Virtual Learning Platforms/Environment

1. Executive summary

Executive summary

Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, London's adult education sector saw a shift in its approach to teaching and learning, requiring a swift pivot to online delivery methods. In response, the Mayor launched a £9m [Skills for Londoners Covid-19 Response Fund](#). This initiative aimed to bolster the capabilities of adult education providers, ensuring not only the continuation of skills development among Londoners but also addressing the challenge of digital exclusion. To gain a better understanding of the post-pandemic landscape, the Greater London Authority (GLA) commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to carry out mixed-methods research into the experience of learners in adult education and the quality of adult education provision in London.

Drawing on interviews with London-based training and education providers and focus groups with learners, as well as Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data and provider survey data, this study explored (i) recent trends in access to, and provision of, remote and online learning in London; (ii) learners' and adult education providers' experiences of remote and online learning, and its impact; (iii) employer use of remote learning to support workforce development and progression; and (iv) how policy and practice can support improved remote learning in London. Alongside the ongoing evaluation of London's AEB commissioned by the GLA, this work seeks to provide additional insight into provider and learner experiences of remote and online learning and identify examples of effective practice, linked to the available evidence base, to inform future delivery and identify any implications for AEB commissioning.

How remote learning is being used since the pandemic

Before the pandemic, remote learning provision among providers was limited and largely experimental, with few providers offering remote learning opportunities. Those that did, offered it for specific work or vocational-related courses, and often delivered them on a synchronous/live or blended basis outside of working hours, or in partnership with third-party providers. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the expansion of online delivery among providers, with 40 of the 42 providers surveyed introducing interactive, live classes during the pandemic. Many providers engaged in this study also began providing learners with technology, introduced their own online resources, and started offering pre-recorded classes.¹

Providers' decisions on whether to offer online or in-person delivery for different course types post-pandemic varied, with trends emerging based on the level and type of course. Generally, providers agreed that remote learning was now an established part of the landscape, and an option expected by learners. Online provision was more prevalent for higher-level courses, where learners typically had the digital skills, resources, and independent learning skills needed. Conversely, community learning, Functional Skills, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses were mostly brought back to face-to-face delivery, as these courses were seen as better suited to a

¹ Before the pandemic, only six of 42 surveyed providers offered devices like laptops, tablets, or iPads. Post-pandemic, this number rose to 30 providers.

classroom environment where tutors could closely monitor progress and reactions, and learners could benefit from a group environment. Courses offered online with an adult skills focus included Functional Skills qualifications in maths, Business Administration courses, Mental Health Awareness courses, Health and Safety courses, Customer Service, and Digital Marketing courses.

Benefits of remote learning

This study revealed that the adoption of remote learning platforms during and after the Covid-19 pandemic enhanced the experiences of learners and providers in three key ways.

1. Flexibility and convenience: Learners appreciated the flexibility offered by remote learning, allowing them to participate in learning around work or caring responsibilities and eliminating the need for travel. For one provider, the blended learning approach was successful in reaching out to NHS ancillary workers, allowing them to achieve functional skills qualifications while accommodating their shift work. Moreover, the ability to access learning material retrospectively was highlighted as a benefit for those who missed classes due to unforeseen circumstances. Many providers also appreciated the convenience of remote delivery which removed travel time, but also allowed them to recruit staff beyond normal travel-to-work boundaries.

2. Access and inclusion: Many providers found it beneficial in reaching learners living in remote locations, as well as providing personalised learning experiences. Furthermore, remote learning was found to have led to an increase in overall learner numbers and potential scalability of courses. Additionally, providers perceived online learning to be particularly beneficial for individuals who lack classroom confidence, have disabilities or mental health conditions, or who have not engaged in learning recently. Likewise, some learners noted that the virtual space can be less daunting, offering an opportunity to engage in a more comfortable environment.

3. Quality and curriculum: Many providers reported an improved ability to access and share teaching and learning resources, while some pointed to the enhancement of teachers' digital skills.

Providers also felt that online options could enhance provision by increasing modes of delivery, providing additional and more responsive content, and providing further opportunities for learner support. Importantly, some providers found that their online offer could be tailored more effectively for learners. For instance, a provider used machine learning to tailor feedback, course content, and delivery speeds. In addition, online portals allow for questions to be raised privately, which can be particularly helpful for shy students.

Challenges of remote learning

Of course, the introduction of online learning alongside face-to-face brought its own challenges, with the main ones identified in this study being:

1. Technical difficulties and digital infrastructure: Both providers and learners noted that unstable internet connections and insufficient device capabilities acted as barriers to effective remote learning. In addition, learners expressed that technical issues, such as needing additional support with digital tools, sometimes disrupted the flow of online sessions. While support mechanisms were put in place by providers — e.g., digital skills assessments and the provision of essential tools like tablets and data — providers encountered their own challenges with technical glitches and the unpredictable nature of software updates. While these had often mostly been addressed through technical support, initial experience of such difficulties could often be off-putting for people, and they felt there was always a risk technical issues could occur which would not be present face-to-face.

2. Safety and security concerns: Learners reported instances of unmonitored breakout rooms, inappropriate comments, and disruptions from third parties, highlighting the need for vigilance in balancing online learning efficacy with participant safety.

3. Learner interaction and engagement: Both learners and providers valued the spontaneous interactions of face-to-face learning, which online sessions — with their technical limitations — often failed to replicate (particularly for entry-level courses). Whether remote learning negatively or positively impacted less confident learners varied according to individuals' levels of confidence in digital and study skills, as well as personal preference; some providers noted that less confident learners found it challenging to navigate the self-access and self-study elements, but some remote learners mentioned they found the anonymity of online platforms less intimidating and more inclusive. Generally, compared to face-to-face, remote learning was perceived less beneficial for mental health and well-being, as well as the development of interpersonal and communication skills.

4. Course design, delivery, and staff training: Providers noted that the last few years have seen a substantial need for upskilling staff in designing and delivering online material, which required considerable investment of time and resources, and might also require external expertise e.g. to provide training or other professional development. Providers also mentioned that the attitudes of tutors towards remote learning varied, with some being more doubtful of its effectiveness. Typically the quality of teaching and learning was monitored through learner surveys, tutor feedback on engagement, and outcomes monitoring.

Suggestions for improving remote delivery

Providers and learners shared a number of suggestions to improve the current landscape of remote learning delivery in London:

Hybrid model: One suggestion from remote learners was the implementation of a hybrid classroom, granting learners the choice between online or face-to-face engagement. Such a model would cater to individual preferences and circumstances. Although full flexibility within each course presents practical challenges from a provider perspective, providers also recognised the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach, and advocated for a range of tailored and accessible options.

Maintaining learner engagement: Participants suggested strategies to address it, such as embedding more practical experiences within a course, collaborating with external partners for volunteering or work placement opportunities, and supporting learners to participate through translators or face-to-face options for those who find them more conducive.

Accessibility: Providers felt that ongoing investment was needed in maintaining and updating technology to tackle digital poverty. Remote learners mentioned the value of straightforward and reliable online systems that bolster interpersonal connections and of clear course promotion to avoid confusion.

Quality: Quality was a key area for improvement, with providers wanting to support ongoing commitment to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for staff, focusing on both the design and delivery of online learning, with an emphasis on pedagogy. Providers noted the importance of continuing to monitor developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and supporting employers and learners in discerning between different course types based on content and quality.

Knowledge exchange and collaboration: Providers expressed the desire for more information and discussion on effective practice in remote delivery. Several felt it was challenging to judge their provision's quality without understanding more about what 'best practice' looks like and how it is assessed.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, this report makes a number of recommendations for the future development of policy and practice in relation to remote and online learning in AEB provision.

Recommendation 1: Providers should ensure they have a clear rationale and strategy in place for their remote learning curriculum, including the initial assessment of learners' digital skills prior to enrolment in remote learning.

The GLA could support this by convening a time-limited provider forum as a space for providers to share approaches and receive support with any challenges, and sharing learning from the group across London's AEB providers.

Recommendation 2: Providers should continue to support London's adult education workforce with appropriate professional development opportunities in relation to delivering remote and online learning.

Providers should ensure that access to professional learning and development is available, particularly as technology continues to evolve. The GLA could support providers by monitoring workforce development needs to establish if there are additional needs within London's providers that should be addressed.

Recommendation 3: The GLA should ensure that adequate support is available to providers and adult learners with the costs of online and remote learning.

This includes recognising delivery costs in relation to online learning, ensuring opportunities for capital investment and ensuring that providers are able to support learners, both through the discretionary Learner Support Fund and through facilitating access to digital exclusion programmes, such as Get London Online.

2. Introduction

Context

The Covid-19 pandemic had a significant impact on trends in adult participation in learning, and in the delivery of adult education programmes in London.

Public health measures introduced across the UK to combat the spread of Covid-19 resulted in the closure of London's Further Education (FE) colleges, adult education services and other training providers, and a requirement to rapidly move their learning offer online. This had a significant impact on the skills sector, with educators having to adapt their teaching methods to deliver remotely through online platforms, for example; Google Classroom, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams.

ILR data show that during the 2019/20 academic year The proportion of distance learning enrolments in London was 9%. This reflects that most enrolments would already have taken place prior to the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 and subsequent introduction of lockdown measures. ILR data shows the proportion of distance learning enrolments increased to 29% in academic year 2020/21, and during 2021/22 academic year continued above the level seen prior to Covid-19, at 18%. For the first 6 months of the 2022/23 academic year, the proportion was 15%.

Although London's providers proved responsive in adapting quickly to restrictions and transitioning to online and remote courses, there is evidence to suggest significant variation in the quality of online and remote provision. Research undertaken by Ofsted (2020)² found variability in the quality of online teaching ranging from engaging 'live' online lessons to teachers simply reading from slides. Moreover, surveys carried out by sector organisations such as the Association of Colleges (2020)³ have indicated that while colleges report that a majority of teaching staff felt very confident or moderately confident in delivering remote learning, some FE staff did not feel confident in key aspects of remote learning delivery, such as streaming in real time (22% of colleges) or directing learners to specific apps and websites (11%).

More widely, key additional challenges include the rapid pace of change and development in Ed-Tech. Research and evaluation to identify evidence-based effective practice in the use of EdTech and delivery of online learning is likely to lag behind sector-led innovation in response to the pandemic, resulting in the potential for a lack of consensus on what constitutes effective practice, particularly in relation to adult learners.

In this context, delegation of the £320m Adult Education Budget (AEB) to the Mayor of London provides an opportunity to identify and further explore effective practice in online and remote learning, with a view to expanding accessible, inclusive opportunities for adults to participate in learning online and remotely in future.

² Ofsted (2020) Remote education research. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/remote-education-research/remote-education-research#future-benefits-to-remote-education>

³ Association of Colleges (AoC) (2020) Colleges and Covid-19 Summer 2020. <https://d4hfzltwt4wv7.cloudfront.net/uploads/files/AoC-summer-survey-July-2020-FINAL.pdf>

The Mayor launched a [£9m Skills for Londoners Covid-19 Response Fund](#) to ensure Londoners could continue to develop skills to access new employment opportunities, gain confidence in digital skills, and support the broader social and economic outcomes of participation in learning. A proportion of this funding supported providers to expand and enhance their online provision. It also helped to build capacity in London's adult education providers to deliver more online provision and ensure they are equipped to reach learners who are at risk of digital exclusion.

Research objectives

This study looked at the experience of learners in adult education, focusing on the online delivery dimension, as well as the quality of online adult education provision in London, following the Covid-19 pandemic. The research aimed to engage London's AEB providers, adult learners and employers to identify:

- Recent trends in access to, and provision of, remote and online learning in London
- Effective approaches to successful remote learning, including facilitators and obstacles
- Learners' and adult education providers' experiences of remote and online learning, and its impact
- Employer use of remote learning to support workforce development and progression
- How policy and practice can support improved remote learning in London.

Defining remote learning

Although definitions vary, for this project L&W's research team defined remote delivery and remote learning in a broad sense to reflect the range of provision in adult education, including:

- **Synchronous (live) and asynchronous (self-paced) learning.** Referring to how and when knowledge is transferred to the learner e.g., whether the teacher/lecturer is present or if learner is working in their own time.
- **Blended or supported learning.** Courses which combine elements of in-person and online delivery.
- **Fully remote learning.** Courses and qualifications that can be completed without any tutor delivered instruction, and those that contain no in-person delivery.

This definition, and reference points in relation to effective practice in remote learning, were identified through a rapid evidence review at the outset of the project. This can be found in Annex 1.

Defining quality in remote learning

Although remote learning is sometimes seen as something very different to classroom-based learning, adult education providers work to the same quality standards regardless of whether or not learning is remote or classroom-based. Under the Education Inspection Framework (EIF), Ofsted judges the quality of education in adult learning programmes in relation to:

- the provider's curriculum, which embodies the decisions the provider has made about the knowledge, skills and behaviours its learners need to acquire to fulfil their aspirations for learning, employment and independence
- the way that teachers teach and assess to support learners to build their knowledge and to apply that knowledge as skills
- the outcomes that learners achieve as a result of the education they have received.⁴

Ofsted's *Further Education and Skills Handbook* (para 231) confirms that remote education is included in this definition. In 2021 guidance on what's working well in remote learning⁵, published during the pandemic, Ofsted noted that while there are differences in delivery, remote learning is a means to an end, and that '*everything we know about what a quality curriculum looks like still applies.*'

One implication of this is that providers carry out quality assurance of remote learning in the same way as they do for classroom-based learning. This typically includes ensuring a clear rationale and intent for the curriculum offer, monitoring learner outcomes data, observing the quality of teaching and learning, reviewing samples of learners' work, and conducting learner satisfaction surveys.

For the purpose of identifying examples of effective provider practice in this project, we undertook a rapid evidence review (see Annex 1) to identify key principles to be considered when assessing the quality of different remote learning offers and approaches. The review suggests that effective practice should:

- Begin with course design, and ensure digital learning is tailor-made for purpose and used to enhance the benefits and outcomes of the existing curriculum.
- Take account of learners' likely digital barriers and how to overcome these at both a tutor and institutional level, with in-built flexibility to be able to respond to the needs of different learners.
- Build-in ongoing feedback and assessment to ensure a positive learner experience and outcomes.
- Seek to engage the learner with the course, their peers, and the wider institution so they may benefit from all aspects of the learner journey.
- Be underpinned by strong CPD, the sharing of resources and effective practice, and senior-level support for digital strategy design, delivery, and quality assurance.

⁴ Ofsted (2023) *Further Education and Skills Handbook*, para 229

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-and-skills-inspection-handbook-eif/further-education-and-skills-handbook-for-september-2023#the-quality-of-education>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/whats-working-well-in-remote-education/whats-working-well-in-remote-education>

Research methods

The research took a mixed-method approach as follows:

- A rapid evidence review was conducted by the research team which explored available research and evidence on the transition to increased use of remote learning in adult education in recent years. The review focused on adult learning provision, with a particular emphasis on remote learning for essential skills and ESOL and evidence of effective practice available from March 2020 onwards. When exploring the findings, the review considers how applicable they are to London-based provision, and the needs of learners in London.
- Scoping phase research generated an understanding of current online delivery across the adult education sector in London and in the workforce through five interviews with key provider and employer-related stakeholders.
- ILR data from 2019/20 to 2022/23 (mid-year) revealed differences in online and in-person enrolments, according to funding model, qualification level and subject sector type. This was used to draw comparisons with the provider survey findings.
- A short, online survey of 42 learning providers, approximately one third of London's AEB providers, gathered insights into the changes and successes of remote learning provision during the pandemic. Responses were provided by a range of different provider types, including 11 FE Colleges, one Sixth Form College, 11 Local Authority providers, two Institutes of Adult Learning (IAL), and 17 Independent Training Providers (ITP). This survey was intended to gather a snapshot of provider experiences, using the findings to support the qualitative data. Due to the low base size, findings should be treated as indicative only.
- Depth interviews were conducted with 22 London AEB training providers to explore their approaches to online delivery since the Covid-19 pandemic. This included seven FE Colleges, eight Local Authority providers, two Institutes of Adult Learning, and five other provider types, (including ITPs and Voluntary and Community Sector). Providers were recruited from a range of provider types and varied in their volume of online delivery. Two additional interviews were carried out with employers to gather understanding of online delivery approaches in the workplace.
- Six focus groups were conducted with learners to reveal learner experiences of online and face-to-face delivery. Four of these took place online with learners experiencing online delivery while two took place in person with learners experiencing face-to-face delivery. Further details about the recruitment and methodology can be found in Annex 2.

Limitations

The main limitations to this research are:

- **Participant representation and sample size:** While the focus groups did capture diverse insights from learners engaged in Local Authorities, Institutes of Adult Learning, and Independent Training Providers, learners from FE Colleges were not represented. It should be noted that our sampling was purposive, aiming to provide rich insights rather than exhaustive representation. The sample size for depth interviews with education and training providers, though not as extensive as initially planned, still yielded substantive feedback and perspectives from a variety of provider types. Findings related to employers provide additional insight but should be treated with more caution.
- **Potential recruitment biases:** The focus group recruitment process, which was significantly influenced by providers (snowball sampling), may have introduced biases in the selection of participants for focus groups. Additionally, variations in individual comfort and proficiency with technology may have affected learners' experiences and feedback regarding remote learning.
- **Generalisation of survey findings:** As highlighted in the methodology, the online survey was a limited set of questions with the aim to capture a high-level overview of providers' remote delivery. The response rate was robust, capturing insights from approximately a third of all providers (N=42). Nevertheless, a closer examination of the respondents by type indicates that our sample might not be fully representative of the broader AEB provider base as (i) independent training providers and sixth form colleges are overrepresented, (ii) general FE colleges are underrepresented, and (iii) there is absence of special colleges. While the survey findings are valuable, they should be interpreted with caution when generalising to the wider population. A breakdown by type of the responding providers can be found in Appendix 2.

Report structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

Chapter 0 provides an overview of how AEB providers in London are delivering remote learning since the pandemic. This includes a comparison with any use of remote delivery prior to the pandemic, outlining the impact that successful approaches have on learning and delivery, as well as learner satisfaction with these approaches. A case study of best practice in online delivery by an FE college is presented in Annex 3.

Chapter 0 reveals the benefits of remote learning and delivery for providers, employers and learners, and draws comparisons with face-to-face learning.

Chapter 1 reveals the challenges that providers, employers and learners face with remote learning and delivery, also drawing comparisons with face-to-face learning.

Chapter 0 considers the current challenges of online delivery and provides suggestions for improvement, as suggested by providers and learners. Suggestions of improvement are made for providers, employers, as well as policy makers.

Chapter 0 details the conclusions of this report and provides recommendations at policy and practice level.

3. How remote learning is being used since the pandemic

Key chapter findings:

- Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, providers offered few remote learning opportunities. Opportunities tended to be for very specific work or vocational-related courses and/or providers viewed the provision as experimental with potential to expand in future.
- For most providers, the Covid-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the expansion of their online delivery, introducing synchronous (live) and asynchronous (self-paced) classes; providing learners with access to digital resources; providing access to self-study materials; utilising Virtual Learning Environments; and delivering online one-to-ones with tutors.
- While nearly all providers have brought back face-to-face learning options, almost all now also offer remote learning options as standard for some of their courses. Providers continue to operate a range of different remote delivery models, with an increase in blended courses and hybrid learning.
- Providers identified that sector subject areas well suited to remote delivery are Business, Administration and Law, as well as Health, Public Services and Care. Sector subject areas better suited to in-person delivery are Preparation for Life and Work, including adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision, as well as Arts, Media, and Publishing.

Recent ILR data reveals differences in AEB enrolments by delivery type. Since 2020, there has been an overall reduction in the number of online enrolments, and an overall increase in the number of in-person enrolments.

A breakdown by funding model reveals that Community Learning learners are more likely to enrol online compared to Adult Skills learners (see **Error! Reference source not found.** In 2019/20, just 11% of Community Learning learners and 8% of Adult Skills learners enrolled online. These percentages increased substantially in 2020/21 with 47% of Community Learning learners and 22% of Adult Skills learners opting for online enrolment. However, this surge in online enrolments for Community Learning has witnessed a decline in subsequent years; dropping to 25% in 2021/22 and further to 17% in the most recent year of enrolment. Concurrently, Adult Skills online enrolments also observed a reduction, settling at 15% in 2021/22 and 14% in the recent half of 2022/23.

Table 1: AEB enrolments by funding model and delivery type

Funding Model	2019/20		2020/21		2021/22		2022/23 (half)	
	In-person	Online	In-person	Online	In-person	Online	In-person	Online
Community Learning	123,840 (89%)	15,660 (11%)	60,480 (53%)	54,010 (47%)	88,390 (75%)	30,020 (25%)	51,880 (83%)	10,660 (17%)
Adult Skills	262,490 (92%)	22,770 (8%)	222,620 (77%)	64,270 (22%)	292,360 (85%)	52,900 (15%)	187,780 (86%)	31,250 (14%)
Total	386,330 (91%)	38,420 (9%)	283,100 (71%)	118,280 (29%)	380,750 (82%)	82,910 (18%)	239,660 (85%)	41,910 (15%)

Source: ILR data (2019/20 – 2022/23 (half))

Starting from 2019/20, in-person AEB enrolments have predominated over online across all qualification levels (see Table 2). From 2019/20 to 2021/22, online enrolments saw a notable surge, especially at Entry Level (from 3% to 14%) and Level 1 (from 7% to 30%). However, by the first half of 2022/23, online enrolments had diminished at Entry Level, Level 1, and Other Level, suggesting a significant shift back to in-person delivery. For instance, Entry Level's online enrolment was 6% in the first half of 2022/23, down from its peak of 14% in 2020/21. In contrast, Level 2 and 3 maintained relatively stable online enrolments since 2020/21. In the first half of 2022/23, the gap between in-person and online learners was most pronounced at Entry Level (94% in-person versus 6% online), and was the narrowest at Level 3 (78% in person versus 22% online).).

Table 2: AEB enrolments by qualification level and delivery type

Level	2019/20		2020/21		2021/22		2022/23 (half)	
	In-person	Online	In-person	Online	In-person	Online	In-person	Online
Entry Level	139,430 (97%)	3,720 (3%)	107,540 (86%)	17,530 (14%)	149,110 (93%)	10,980 (7%)	99,340 (94%)	6,130 (6%)

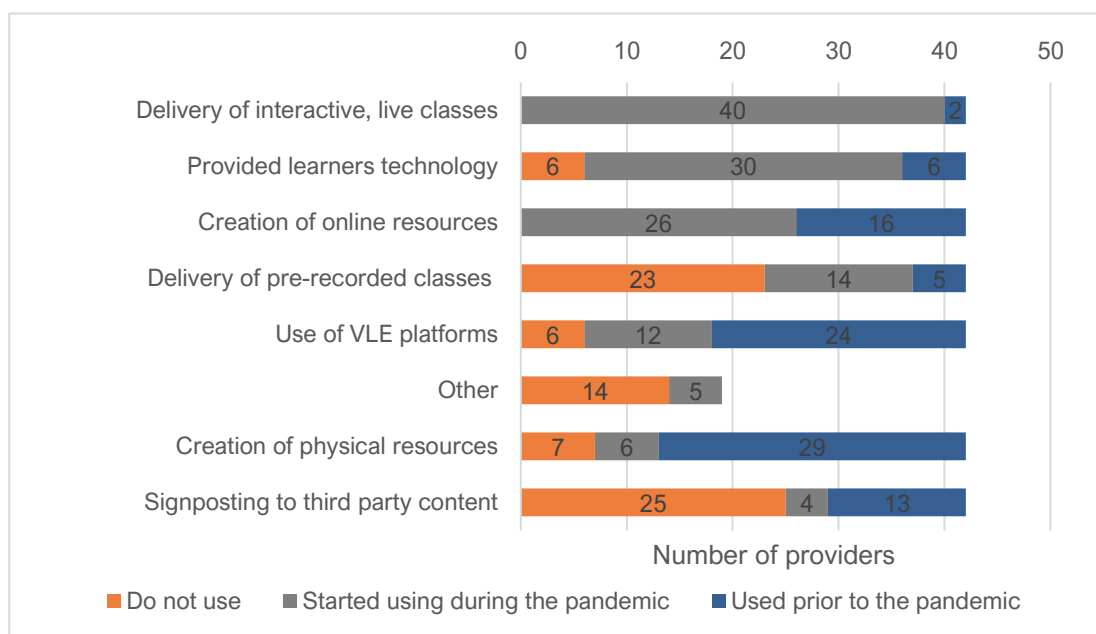
Level 1	68,220 (93%)	5,360 (7%)	57,240 (70%)	24,330 (30%)	73,310 (82%)	15,580 (18%)	42,880 (85%)	7,530 (15%)
Level 2	61,190 (81%)	14,600 (19%)	57,040 (71%)	23,470 (29%)	61,560 (70%)	26,180 (30%)	38,770 (71%)	15,500 (29%)
Level 3	3,450	-	4,760 (96%)	200 (4%)	8,640 (81%)	2,080 (19%)	7,630 (78%)	2,170 (22%)
Level 4	-	-	-	-	-	-	30	-
Other Level	114,040 (89%)	14,750 (11%)	56,530 (52%)	52,750 (48%)	88,130 (76%)	28,100 (24%)	51,010 (83%)	10,580 (17%)
Total	86,330 (91%)	38,420 (9%)	283,100 (71%)	118,280 (29%)	380,750 (82%)	82,910 (18%)	239,660 (85%)	41,910 (15%)

Source: ILR data (2019/20 – 2022/23 (half))

Pre-Covid remote delivery

Amongst the 42 providers surveyed, the most common remote learning provision used by providers prior to the pandemic include creation and dissemination of physical resources for learners e.g. printed worksheets, printed educational handbooks (29 providers), virtual learning environments/platforms e.g., Moodle (24 providers), provider's own online resources for learners e.g. online worksheets, online educational handbooks, educational videos (16 providers) and Signposting to online third party educational content e.g. FutureLearn (13 providers) (see Figure). Very few providers supplied learners with the technology to access remote learning e.g. laptop or tablet (six providers), delivered pre-recorded classes (five providers), or delivered online, interactive live classes via online conferencing software e.g. Microsoft Teams or Zoom (two providers).

Figure 1: Remote learning provision used prior to and during the pandemic



Source: L&W Provider Survey. Base: All respondents (42).

Most of the providers interviewed offered very little remote learning prior to the Covid-19 lockdowns. Where providers offered remote learning opportunities this tended to be for very specific work or vocational-related courses, and delivered on a synchronous or blended basis to shift workers, typically in the evenings or outside of working hours. In a few instances these remote learning opportunities were delivered in partnership with third party providers, specialising in particular sectors or in delivering remote learning.

A few providers had also started using virtual learning environments/platforms (VLEs) as information repositories, with the intention of offering an extended or expanded learning experience, or to support e-portfolios.

"We tried to extend their learning through using digital content, it extended their learning by about an hour and half every week. So that was an hour and a half of learning that they did more than they would have done without the digital content." Provider, Local Authority Adult and Community Education

Providers who offered remote learning pre-pandemic characterised their provision as small and experimental, undertaken with a view to exploring the potential and practicality of online learning, and potentially expanding this in the future.

"It was an area the college wanted to explore. They were getting so many requests from people, they saw that there was gap that we should investigate." Provider, FE College

Changes due to Covid-19 pandemic

Amongst 42 providers surveyed, 40 providers introduced interactive, live classes during the pandemic, 30 started providing learners with technology such as tablets or laptops, 26 providers introduced their own online resources for learners, whilst 14 providers introduced pre-recorded classes (see Figure 1).

Most of the providers interviewed highlighted that the Covid-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the expansion of their online delivery, as the lockdowns prevented other forms of delivery. Providers used different types of approaches to remote learning, including: live and asynchronous lessons, typically using Zoom or MS Teams and recordings; self-study via learning materials accessed through a VLE; and online one-to-ones with tutors.

In most cases providers were able to maintain the majority of their offer online, and did this by:

- Ensuring learners had access to digital resources, hardware, funding for connectivity, and IT support.
- Utilising Zoom, Teams and Google Classroom for live delivery, supported by various VLEs, including Moodle, and Google Classroom.
- Making self-study materials available, including recorded lessons that could be accessed at convenient times for learners.
- Focusing on theoretical content where possible.
- Maintaining personal contact with learners through tutors wherever possible.

Courses that were noted as particularly challenging to deliver online during the pandemic included ESOL, basic skills, and courses with strong practical elements (often those in the community learning category such as floristry and pottery).

"I'm not going to say that I identified specifically areas where I think it was better at all. I think there were some places where it worked quite well, like our more academic provision where it's more knowledge-heavy and content-heavy, that was a lot of an easier transition. However, it was very difficult, I would say, with the more practical subjects." Provider, FE College

Providers emphasised the significant resource and staff time that was required to establish remote learning during this time, including time needed to upskill both learners and staff in using these technologies. They were mostly happy with what they had achieved during this period and how they had maintained learner numbers, although it was noted in some instances learners did disengage due to:

- A general preference to learn face-to-face to maintain motivation and engagement.

"We know that we lost about 10% of our learners when we moved online, because the whole idea of learning online was so anathema to them, they'd rather not do the course than do it online." Provider, Local Authority Adult and Community Education

- Low digital or independent learning skills.
- Not having access to good digital infrastructure or learning environments (including digital hardware, reliable wi-fi, or a quiet place to learn).

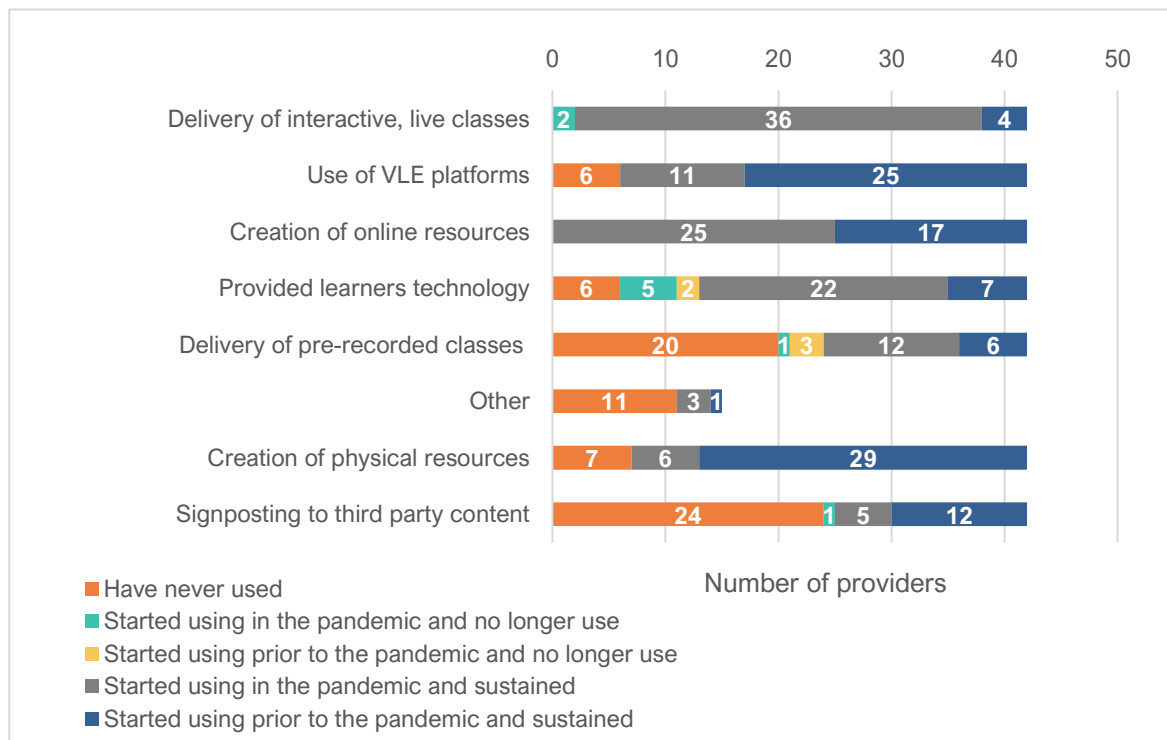
"Most of the learners just do not have the kit. They can't afford the broadband costs. Some of them live in pretty poor accommodation, so you're sharing, or they've got children. The children were also being home-schooled during that time. So, there were just multiple barriers. A good example is where I noticed when I was observing that there was one learner that was actually learning on the park, on his phone, because he has no decent accommodation to sit down and learn." Provider, ITP

Ongoing approaches to remote delivery

Types of remote learning approaches used

Almost all providers surveyed sustained the delivery of interactive, live classes using video-conferencing software, whether this was introduced prior to the pandemic (four providers) or during the pandemic (36 providers) (see Figure 2 **Error! Reference source not found.**). All providers sustained the creation and dissemination of online resources, whether this was introduced prior to the pandemic (17 providers) or during the pandemic (25 providers).

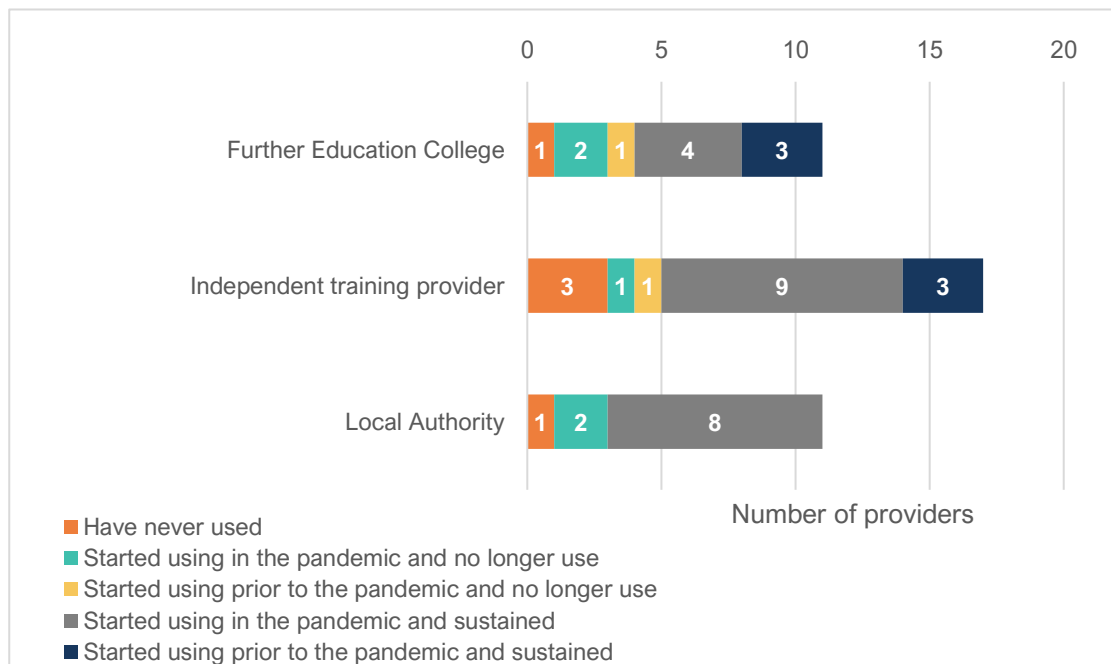
Figure 2: Remote learning provision sustained since the pandemic



Source: L&W Provider Survey. Base: All respondents (42).

Breakdown by provider types revealed that Local Authorities were more likely to sustain the provision of technology (such as tablets and laptops) to learners (eight out of 11 providers) than independent training providers (nine out of 17) and FE colleges (four out of 11) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Provision of technology sustained since the pandemic by provider type



Source: L&W Provider Survey. Base: All respondents (42).

Following the Covid-19 lockdowns and the return of face-to-face learning options, most providers interviewed have reflected on their use of face-to-face and remote learning delivery, and now have evolved their approaches for how they choose to deliver different course options, based on their experiences over the last three years and feedback from learners. Typically, the different approaches used reflected the nature of the course being delivered, the level of learning being undertaken, and the needs of specific learner groups - which we discuss further in the following section.

While nearly all providers have brought back face-to-face learning options, almost all now also offer remote learning options as standard for some of their courses. These opportunities typically included one or more of the following features:

- Synchronous interactive taught lessons, typically using Zoom or Teams.
- Self-study via learning materials accessed through a VLE.
- Blended courses, where learners attended some sessions face-to-face and others online.
- Hybrid classroom, where some learners attended face-to-face and others joined remotely.
- Fully remote self-access courses.
- Online one-to-ones.

Learners also typically describe live, interactive taught courses that are delivered on Zoom/ Microsoft Teams with PowerPoint slides to support tutor delivery. Learners at an ITP experienced some group work using breakout room functions, and some independent work, within these classes. However, independent work occasionally arose from faults in the breakout room system, relying on proactivity from the learner. Learners at an Institute of Adult Learning described the

collaborative nature of the classes, where interactions vary from the 'raise hand' function or unmuting themselves to respond verbally. While not directly linked to online delivery, one ITP learner group reported the use of interacting through a WhatsApp group with a project team.

A number of providers noted that alongside whatever remote learning they were offering, digital technology was now much more fully integrated into their provision generally, and that learners were making much greater use of digital technology too, for example using emails and messaging tutors via Teams, or submitting coursework and assignments online.

"Our VLE system is fully embedded into everything we do - at the very least, to give people access to resources and materials outside of classroom hours." Provider, Local Authority

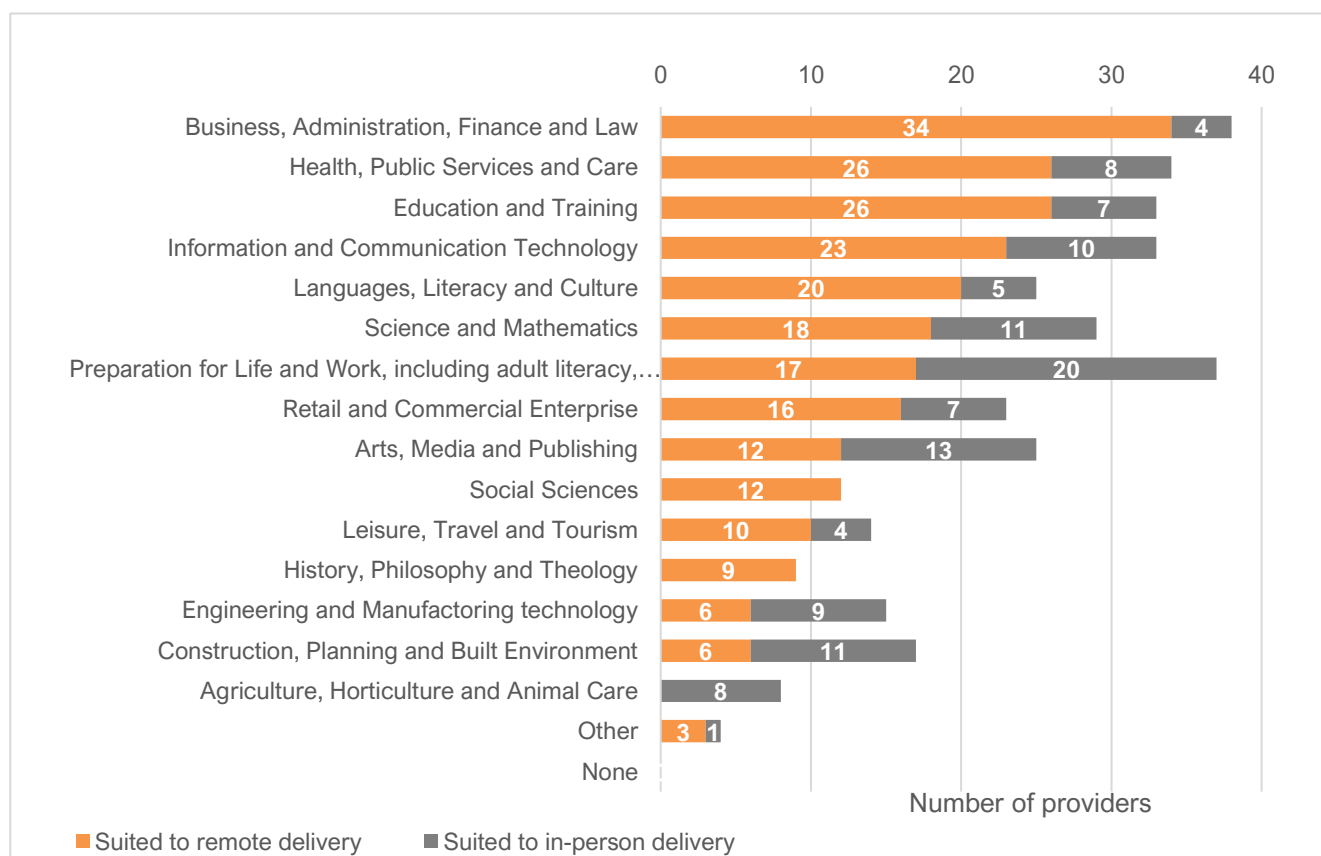
A small number of exceptions no longer offered any remote delivery options, including one local authority, who had decided to suspend all online provision in the coming year; they focussed on face-to-face provision while further consideration was given to enhancing quality in the planning and delivery of online options before rolling it out further.

"It's not necessarily because we don't think that the remote approach works, particularly at higher levels, but where we are organisationally, we want to be certain that the quality is there, in terms of planning and delivery, and the learning of students, before we move from face-to-face to remote. [First] we want to be able to guarantee that our learners are having the best possible experience in the classroom. And then we will consider, particularly at the level 3 course level, perhaps looking at doing a blended approach." Provider, Local Authority Adult and Community Education

Difference between curriculum areas

When asked which curriculum areas they believe are well suited to remote delivery, surveyed providers reported Business, Administration and Law (34 providers), Health, Public Services and Care (26 providers) and Education and Training (26 providers) (see Figure 4). They said that Preparation for Life and Work, including adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL courses were most suited to in person-delivery (20 providers), as well as Arts, Media and Publishing (13 providers). This point is revisited in Chapter 4, as part of the challenges involved in the remote delivery of ESOL and practical courses.

Figure 4: Curriculum areas well suited to remote delivery



Source: L&W Provider Survey. Base: All respondents (42).

Recent ILR data, revealing differences in AEB enrolments by sector subject area, broadly reflects the provider survey findings. For example, according to the ILR data, Business, Administration, Finance and Law, and Health, Public Services and Care are the only sectors that saw an increase in online enrolments from 2020/21 to 2021/22 (see Annex 4). Additionally, online enrolments in subjects that providers say are suited to in-person delivery drastically fell from 2020/21 to 2021/22, whilst in-person enrolments increased (e.g., Preparation for Life and Work, including adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL provision). A similar trend is shown with Engineering and Manufacturing technology, as well as Construction, Planning and Build Environment. **Broadly speaking, providers agreed that remote learning was now an established part of the landscape (in a way that it had not been pre-pandemic), and an option now expected by learners.** They also felt online provision was likely to become more prevalent in future, as technology develops and its use spreads in daily life, and as such were keen to embed and maintain digital technology in their organisations. The extent to which the use of online learning has been maintained varies by course type and level.

The continuation of remote learning delivered using online synchronous and asynchronous lessons as part of a blended, hybrid or fully remote package, was particularly notable for providers who offered courses at higher levels (Level 3+) where these online approaches

were still frequently used to deliver these. Providers noted this was because they typically found learners at the higher levels had the digital skills and resources, and independent learning skills needed for this approach. Qualitative responses to the survey also indicate that higher level learners (studying for qualifications of level two and above, or with higher proficiency in their chosen courses) were more suited to remote learning.

Providers offering community learning, Functional Skills in digital and English, and ESOL courses, particularly at Entry Levels and pre-Level 3, had mostly brought this provision back to face-to-face delivery. This was predominantly as they felt these courses were better suited to face-to-face delivery due to learners on these courses typically benefiting from a classroom environment where tutors can closely monitor their progress and reactions, and learners can benefit from the group environment.

“We don’t do very much remote delivery, now. We’ve found that the learning experience is much better in a face-to-face environment. It’s a much more meaningful shared experience, between learners and then between learners and their teacher. You can pick up more easily on people who are struggling, as a teacher, and you can stretch the more able, when you’ve got people in the classroom....People at Level 1 and Level 2 don’t have the confidence with the technology, and with being empowered to take responsibility for their own learning, in a way that people who are more highly educated or have got more confidence with the technology might, our cohorts at Level 1 and Level 2, and at entry levels, progress much better [face-to-face].” **Provider, FE College**

A few providers also felt there would not be sufficient demand for online ESOL courses due to learner preference for face-to-face options (due to a preference for some of the pedagogical and social benefits of learning English face-to-face), particularly at the Entry Levels, for it to be feasible. Conversely, wider Modern Foreign Language courses were seen by some providers as preferable online, as these would be made more accessible and feasible for the individuals taking part in these.

“Where people have got better skills and are more confident, then it can work. We’ve got quite a substantial Modern Foreign Languages provision which is totally online [and leads] towards qualifications.” **Provider, FE College**

Providers offering employment-related skills opportunities were more mixed in how these were delivered, with more of these courses being offered with either online delivery, or a blended learning approach. Work-related courses were often offered online, and were seen as more accessible for individuals with busy lifestyles or taking part in shift work. Examples of these courses included: Functional Skills qualifications in maths, Business Administration courses, Mental Health Awareness courses, Health and Safety courses, Customer Service, and Digital marketing courses.

However, the likelihood of these courses being delivered online was often determined by the level and nature of the target group, with online options typically not being seen as appropriate in lower level employability provision for people with low level English speaking, reading, and writing skills, or people with low digital skills or limited access to digital infrastructure.

Qualitative survey findings, set out in the next chapter, echoed that learners studying on ESOL courses (and therefore speaking English as an additional language) and learners with fewer digital skills are less suited to remote provision, and also included learners with Learning Difficulties or Disability (LLDD). Disadvantaged learners and lower-level learners were also perceived to find remote provision more challenging.

4. Benefits of remote learning

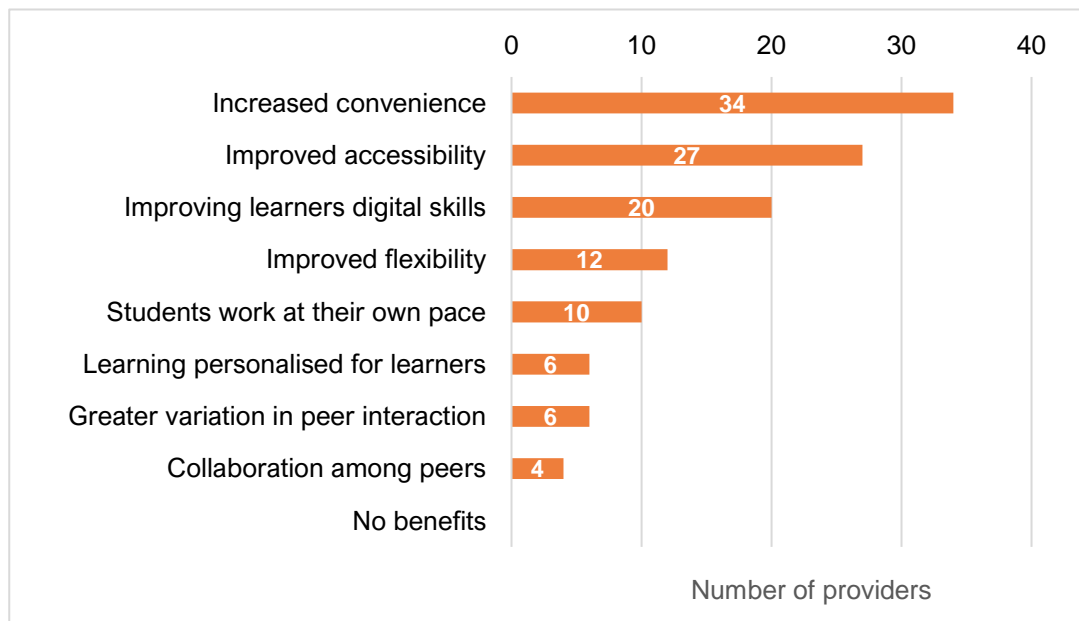
Key chapter findings:

- Learners and providers both experience benefits relating to the flexibility and convenience of remote learning. Learners are able to work around other commitments such as work or childcare, increasing overall levels of learner engagement and performance.
- Remote learning can foster inclusive environments for learners who may have disabilities, mental health conditions or lack confidence.
- Providers found operational aspects of remote delivery successful. Firstly, it allows increased scalability and greater learner enrolments as a result. Additionally, providers can offer more CPD for staff, recruit from a wider pool of candidates, tailor courses more effectively, and ensure greater support for learners, increasing the overall quality of learning.
- Learners benefitted from increased digital confidence, improved digital skills and greater employment prospects as a result.
- Learners were generally satisfied with modes of remote delivery, felt supported with digital support and found platforms simple to use. They were positive about tutor engagement and live classes, and felt connected with others despite distant learning.

Flexibility and convenience

Amongst 42 providers surveyed, the most commonly reported benefit for learners was increased convenience e.g., removal of travel time to a physical location (34 providers) (see Figure 5). Twelve providers also acknowledged the benefit in increased flexibility e.g., more subject options for learners to choose from.

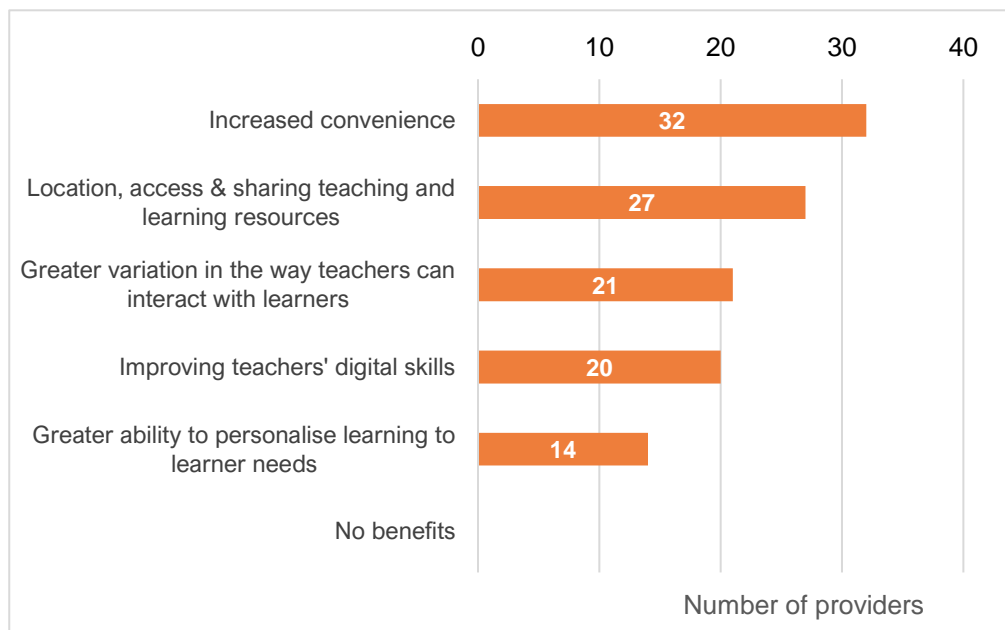
Figure 5: Benefits of remote learning delivery for learners, as perceived by providers



Source: L&W Provider Survey. Base: All respondents (42).

Similarly, the most commonly reported benefit for providers was increased convenience in terms of aspects like removal of travel time (32 providers) (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Benefits of remote learning delivery for providers, as perceived by providers



Source: L&W Provider Survey. Base: All respondents (42).

The flexibility offered by remote delivery for learners and providers was also seen as a significant benefit by the providers interviewed. Providers noted that for learners remote

learning offered the flexibility to take part in learning around work and/or caring responsibilities. It also created efficiencies for learners by reducing or eliminating travel-to-learn time and costs.

"I think it's the flexibility that it allows particularly adults to have in their lives. They have, often, lots of competing priorities, work and care responsibilities, doing the food shop, and the whole complexity of life. Having an aspect of a course that's delivered online, where they've got those relationships established in a face-to-face environment, it's much easier to translate that onto a learning platform." Provider, FE College

For others, they may prefer the experience of learning online in their own environment, or learning in an asynchronous way at their preferred times and speeds.

"Some people prefer learning online. So, for some people, it's a pedagogic choice. They like the flexibility, they like learning on their own, they're motivated." Provider, Local Authority

Several providers also identified that this increased flexibility had enabled them to increase overall levels of learner engagement and performance, by enhancing their learner offer and experience.

"One of the positive, tangible outcomes has been actually increasing our attendance rates by 3.5%." Provider, Local Authority

"Online works. We have really good success rates, achievement rates, and our progression rates are really good. So we're happy with [our approach to online learning]." Provider, ITP

Online learners were drawn to the convenience and flexibility offered by remote delivery. It was **noted that this mode of study was beneficial to them as it meant they were able to fit it in around work and caring commitments** and it meant they did not have to pay wider transport or commuting costs to travel to a learning provider.

"It doesn't feel much different in terms of delivering the material. But it does save a lot of time and effort, and money as well in travelling because when you go online, you just sit down on your laptop or iPad and you just log in. Whereas if you go in person, it does take time travelling. And you spend money to reach there, whereas [remote learning] was really convenient." Remote learner, ITP

The additional time afforded by remote learning had enabled some learners to engage with further learning opportunities. In the words of one participant:

"There was a point where literally I was able to do three courses simultaneously. [...] I was only able to do all of that because I wasn't then having to go to, like North, South and East London every week." Remote learner, Institute of Adult Education

In focus groups with face-to-face learners, the cost of travel to learning settings was highlighted as a challenge, particularly for those completing multiple courses simultaneously. Furthermore, face-to-face learners noted that attending courses in-person could be difficult at times, particularly for those with caring responsibilities. It was considered a benefit of remote working that learning material could be accessed retrospectively if a class was missed due to illness, for example, whereas this is not always possible with face-to-face delivery.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity was reported as a benefit amongst surveyed providers, where 27 out of 42 view improved accessibility as a benefit for learners, for example, learners that live in remote locations being able to access the learning (see Figure 5). Additionally, 14 providers said that remote delivery allows them greater ability to personalise learning to learner needs, for example by using AI to tailor course content to learner levels and speeds.

Most providers interviewed were particularly positive about their ability to ensure their approaches were also inclusive for those who may experience digital poverty, and had increased their ability to address this by providing laptops and tablets to learners who needed these, as well as providing funding to support access to data where required. Many had received funding during the Covid-19 lockdowns which had been used to purchase more IT equipment, which was still being used and returned as needed by learners.

Providers also suggested that online learning opportunities can be particularly beneficial for supporting individuals who lack classroom confidence or potentially had not engaged in learning recently and would benefit from a ‘taster’ experience.

"It opened a window, it opened a door and that's really, really important. For some, the familiarity and the accessibility [of online learning] means that they are more likely to come to a face-to-face and they are more likely to consider progressing." Provider, ITP

Providers particularly felt this was a key motivator for people who may have disabilities or mental health conditions, who may not be confident engaging in learning face-to-face.

"There are individuals that when they have some difficulties and disabilities, that they find that this is a stepping-stone to support. So we have had some learners with some high anxieties and mental health concerns where stepping out of their house has been a barrier for them." Provider, ITP

Amongst learners, remote learning was also seen to overcome barriers to participation, particularly for those with caring responsibilities.

"Online is amazing, really. I think this is one of the things that we got from COVID, one of the good things we got from that pandemic. It just opened this world of online learning and doing lot of things that people didn't think [...] could be possible. And some of us, especially those who are mothers and carers who want to improve their skills and take themselves to the next level, it does help a lot." Remote learner, ITP

It was noted by some learners that speaking to a group and sharing opinions in a virtual space felt less daunting than doing so face-to-face. One learner liked that when using online learning platforms, it was less obvious to others when they had made a mistake or were not quite understanding something. Considering this, learners reflected that for those who are less confident, or who experience social anxiety, remote learning may be a more appealing option.

"Face to face is a bit different but through the video call I've pushed myself to be confident to say answers I think are the answers and my opinions and inputs, but yes, I think that's what I've gained, confidence to speak what I think and say what my opinion is, yes." Remote learner, ITP

Widening the pool of those able to engage with learning was perceived to enrich the learning environment and overall experience. Interaction with other learners was enhanced with the use of breakout rooms, group work and instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp.

"I think there's a level of accessibility to it. I was [likely] interacting with people who for different reasons wouldn't have been able to have that access for childcare or care responsibilities and things like that. And I love the idea that I'm in a space where it has been opened up to more people." Remote learner, Institute of Adult Education

Operational delivery

Amongst the 42 providers surveyed, 27 reported improved ability for providers to locate, access and share teaching and learning resources with learners, and 21 reported greater variation in the way teachers can interact with learners (see Figure 6). Eight out of 11 Local Authority providers reported improvements in teachers' digital skills, compared to five out of 11 FE colleges and 6 out of 17 independent training providers.

A range of benefits for providers in terms of operational delivery were noted by providers interviewed. Successes tended to be highlighted in four areas, including: increasing learner numbers, course scalability, and feasibility; enhancing provision through different modes of delivery, a focus on quality in course design, and increased course tailoring; widening opportunities for staff recruitment; and reducing capital spend.

Scalability and feasibility of provision

As noted previously, **a key benefit of remote learning was that it offered an additional way through which learners could engage**. This led to increased learner numbers overall and the potential for scalability of courses. Increased learner numbers were typically driven by engaging learners from wider geographical areas (who may not be able to travel for face-to-face courses), by engaging people who may not be comfortable in a classroom environment, or not able to attend face-to-face classes due to work or caring commitments.

Some providers, particularly pre-employment providers and those delivering across multiple locations, noted the efficiencies that remote offered to learners, through reduction of travel-to-learn costs, and to the providers themselves through reduced venue-hire costs.

Blended learning to support shift workers

One Local Authority provider had found success using blended learning to support NHS ancillary workers achieve Functional Skills qualifications while accommodating their shift work.

The programme targeted NHS workers in local hospitals in relatively low-paid, insecure, outsourced jobs e.g. cleaners, and hospital porters, who are seeking to enter more secure employment requiring Level 2 Functional Skills.

The provider offers the programme in a blended way, allowing them a combination of on-site [face-to-face] contact time in the learning centre in the hospital, and some taught content online. This approach enables individuals to access learning in ways and at time convenient to them.

In some instances, the online approach ensured the viability of delivering some courses, which may have otherwise not been feasible to run face-to-face due to low numbers. In addition, a few providers noted that learner numbers may increase if learners register on multiple courses or additional subsequent courses which they may not have been able to schedule face-to-face.

"If we recruit under 10 students, we would have to go to the 8 we did recruit saying, 'Sorry, it's not running, however, with remote delivery we've been able to recruit many more people.' So, there's actually more on offer to people, there's more that they can take up in their locality because they're actually accessing things online." Provider, FE College

Enhancing provision

Providers felt the increased feasibility of online options meant they could enhance their provision by providing new, additional and more locally responsive curriculum content, and providing further opportunities for learner support.

"It's given us an ability to develop more relevant curriculum as well. So we've started courses in things like data analysis and coding - that we just weren't equipped to do [previously] - that are local skills shortage areas." Provider, Local Authority

Modes of delivery

As noted previously, while most providers felt some community learning and adult skills courses were still more effective when delivered face-to-face, it was still felt that some use of remote learning (using blended or hybrid models) was beneficial so learners could benefit from the advantages it can offer e.g. flexibilities for busy learners, and digital upskilling. These approaches were only possible where learners had the relevant language and digital skills, and access to digital resources, and were often more focused on employment-related courses.

A number of providers reported use of the hybrid classroom specifically with a view to maintaining the community of the classroom. This included local authority providers with a focus on community learning (several of whom had made significant investments in hybrid classroom technology), and an apprenticeship provider, for use in situations where employers were reluctant to release learners for face-to-face. One provider (an institute of adult education) used hybrid classroom technology to connect remote tutors with face-to-face learners in specialist subject areas where no local tutor was available.

Several pre-employment providers were using blended learning and reported that remote learning offered learners valuable digital skills development, and also enabled participation by employers, who were able to join remote sessions that they would not have been able to attend face-to-face.

Increased quality in design and delivery

Several providers noted that remote learning requires its own skills, resources, and approach, significantly different to face-to-face provision. As such, **some providers are constantly improving and evolving their approaches, providing CPD for staff, and ensuring flexibility and support for learners to ensure high quality.**

In some instances, providers had worked closely with partner organisations to bring in online content designed by pedagogical specialists in this area, this was particularly useful for both asynchronous standalone online content which learners could work through at their own pace. Most learners felt that remote delivery has the same impact as in-person delivery, equating their online experience with an in-person environment.

Where blended options, or both face-to-face and online options were available, providers were keen to ensure the experience and monitoring was of similar quality for learners; however, they were engaging.

"Our online delivery is very much like classroom delivery. We do it through Teams and through the VLE." Provider, ITP

"They're able to set tasks for the whole class [to] do online. It's very easy to track and monitor what they're doing." Provider, FE College

There was general agreement among providers that remote learning required significant (and ongoing) investment in technology, curriculum development, and learner support, and also that the face-to-face norms that tend to inform existing funding and quality assurance regimes are not always a good fit for remote provision, for example providers noted that class sizes of 10 or 12 can work well online, whereas class sizes of 20 may not. One provider noted that the size of the group depended on the nature of the class being delivered e.g. was the lesson a lecture (which is more suitable for larger numbers) or focusing on skills development (where smaller groups are preferable).

"If you're lecturing, you can deliver to very large numbers of people, but if you're trying to develop a skill and you need the students to have meaningful practice, it's challenging." Provider, FE College

Some providers monitored ongoing quality through learner experience and satisfaction surveys, as well as tutors monitoring overall engagement in lessons and learner outcomes.

Creating a tailored offer

Some providers found that their online offer could be more effectively tailored for learners, by:

- Using online portals which can allow questions to be raised privately.
"Some of the shy students actually quite liked that distance and some of them felt quite comfortable putting things in chat rather than speaking up." Provider, FE College
- Providing one-to-one tutor support sessions online.
- Harnessing the benefits of machine learning/AI to tailor feedback, course content, and delivery speeds.

Use of machine learning to support a tailored offer

A Further Education provider was offering remote GCSE English and maths, and Access-to-HE provision to adult learners typically in work and often with caring responsibilities.

Noting poor face-to-face achievement rates, this provider designed an online approach using machine learning to provide high-quality, personalised instruction spread manageably across the week, with tutors to address any problems and provide motivational support.

The provider noted that outcomes online were now better than those of comparable face-to-face provision.

(See detailed case study in Annex 3 for further information)

Staff flexibility and recruitment

Providers noted that many staff valued the flexibility that remote learning offered them in terms of when and how they worked. Providers also welcomed the opportunity to recruit staff beyond normal travel-to-work boundaries, drawing on a wider range of potential tutors and speakers who would not need to travel to attend sessions. In addition, it was noted that remote provision made it easier for busy employers or guest speakers linked to programmes (particularly pre-employment programmes) to participate.

"It also means we've got more to choose from in terms of that recruitment, we can pick and choose the right people and we can be potentially more inventive with the curriculum that we want to be able to offer." Provider, FE College

Reduction in capital costs

Several providers had also found that there were significant cost reductions and logistical solutions for them by offering remote learning options, due to reduced need for venue hire, or limited availability of classrooms. This was particularly important for providers at a time of rising rent and hiring costs, particularly those who may not have a fixed delivery site.

Development of learners' digital skills

Amongst the 42 providers surveyed, 20 report improvements in learners' digital skills (see Figure 5). However, there was substantial variation by provider type, where approximately seven out of 11 Local Authority providers reported improvements in learners' digital skills, compared with eight out of 17 independent training providers and four of 11 FE colleges. This might be linked to the higher proportion of Local Authority providers that provide learners with technology to access remote learning (see section above on ongoing approaches to remote delivery).

Some providers who were interviewed saw online opportunities as important to people's personal lives, as they were encouraged to develop and utilise their digital skills, which supported digital inclusion e.g. in dealing with local authorities, utility companies, schools, and healthcare providers.

"The skill of using the internet competently is transferable. [It can give learners] confidence to apply for council tax rebates [for example]. It enables digital inclusion." Provider, Local Authority

Similarly, **providers felt that a key benefit their approach had was creating an overall increase in learners' digital skills across all levels and courses,** even when the course was mostly face-to-face in nature. Providers did this through introducing digital assessments, inductions, and training as standard for all learners (even when their primary mode of learning is face-to-face), and

embedding some online and digital opportunities in their courses through emails to tutors, and having some resources and assignments online, this was particularly notable on ESOL courses, one ESOL provider noted that:

“Having come back, although we don't do online teaching with our students, we still set lots of assignments in Teams or Moodle, we use lots of quizzes, we try to use digital means as much as we can to engage them.” Provider, FE College

Providers, particularly those from the Local Authority sector, felt that digital skills were now crucial for people's day-to-day lives post-pandemic, and as such were keen that their learners could all use email systems on online portals, so that they would be able to use these if needed in the future. It was noted that this could also help support individual's wider employability skills.

Use of Google Classroom to improve digital confidence

One Local Authority Provider emphasised the benefits using Google Classroom had on their approach to remote delivery and encouraging the wider use of digital technology. They felt the use of Google Classroom as their VLE gave them particular benefits which would help increase people's confidence with and use of digital technology, including:

- Offering additional security for live meetings (especially when people raised concerns about Zoom during the pandemic).
- Allowing all learners and staff to have a provider-specific email address.

To ensure this approach was effective, the provider emphasised the need to ensure both staff and learners were fully trained and supported to use the technology. They continue to offer in-person digital training to new learners to support them to understand how to use the technology, and emphasised this type of digital training needs to be done face-to-face to be most effective.

“There's a whole spatial element to it that is just very difficult to do, you can't even tell if the learner is looking at the same screen as you, for a start, never mind, you think, 'Top left corner.' You know, doing all of that, and they've got a different view because they're on a different device.”

Learner employment prospects

Most providers thought employability skills and employment prospects were key areas where remote learning could benefit learners, due to their digital upskilling as a byproduct of their course. In particular, it was felt that the use of emails and online communication platforms (such as Teams and Zoom) would be particularly beneficial for employers. One Local Authority

provider even noted that they had included increased digital skills as an outcome for all their courses that include remote learning elements.

"We've kept that as learning outcomes for learners who are on blended learning courses, so that there is formal recognition that those skills were learnt as part of the course, and actually they're all now very important if you want to get any kind of job." Provider, Local Authority

Some providers also noted that having these skills would make employment opportunities more accessible to them at the recruitment stage, as employers were using remote interviews more frequently since the Covid-19 lockdowns.

"The main benefits are flexibility and also the digital skills development, especially for adults who are looking for employment, because the majority of employers now will do an online interview before they will do an in-person interview, so they get that skill, and they get a little bit more security about talking to somebody [online]." Provider, ITP

Some learners also recognised this benefit of employment opportunities. For example, one learner described how engaging with remote learning had helped them to feel more confident with attending online job interviews and preparing for remote working.

"I would say building confidence because I'm kind of a shy person and when it comes to turning on the camera as well I'm a bit shy. I think it helped me with talking to people online, having conversations, I think it helped me a lot. Now, obviously, the department I work in, sometimes we have to turn our cameras on when we're in meetings and I think that obviously helped me as well with my confidence." Remote learner, ITP

For those engaging with remote learning, one of the main motivations was the opportunity to gain digital skills and become more confident using online platforms. One learner explained how they were initially nervous about the prospect of completing an online course but were determined to challenge themselves to become more comfortable with the technology and communicating in a virtual space. Another learner hoped that engaging with online learning would help boost their confidence with joining and participating in virtual meetings.

Using digital tools in a learning context helped learners feel more knowledgeable about using platforms like Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and more confident about engaging in virtual meetings. This benefited them in a learning context, but for some, it was also valuable at work and in their personal lives (see section below on employment prospects).

"When it comes to any Zoom or Teams meetings, I do think it's an acquired skill just to truly be confident on there. I think that's really what's helped with being able to do this online."

Remote learner, ITP

Learner satisfaction with approaches

Overall, learners were generally satisfied with their online courses, including the delivery modes and techniques. Introductory conversations and information with digital tools and resources, as well as additional IT support with connectivity issues and accessing digital resources, increased learner satisfaction with the implementation of remote delivery. Learners generally noted that online platforms were simple and easy to navigate, such as Google systems.

"It wasn't complicated to use. I felt like it was perfect. Like, it was simple. To me, personally, I thought it was all laid out well, Google Docs, and very easy to understand." Online learner, ITP

They were particularly positive about the delivery of live sessions by a tutor, as well as the use of breakout groups to encourage discussions and groupwork among learners. Learners were also particularly satisfied with tutor engagement during their remote learning experiences. The ability to engage with tutors both in and out of the online sessions, despite distant learning, allows learners to ask questions in their own time, at their own pace, whilst still feeling connected and supported.

However, some learners were less satisfied with online learning approaches. Dissatisfaction arose when learners experienced certain challenges, including the ability to foster connections, and the quality of learning for practical courses, where learners tend to feel more can be gained in-person. These challenges are explored in more detail below.

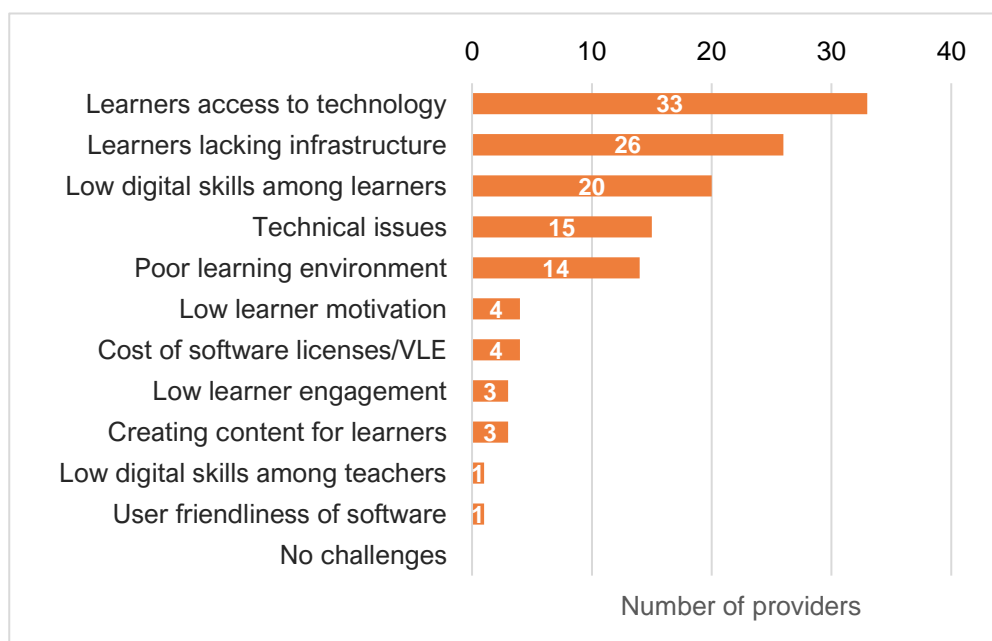
5. Challenges of remote learning

Key chapter findings:

- Learners faced barriers such as unstable internet and insufficient devices, often linked to low income. Providers try to assist, but technical issues continue to disrupt learning sessions, as providers' support structures face their own challenges. Remote learning also raised concerns about platform security.
- Remote learning exposed some learners' digital poverty, making providers suggest that basic digital skills were crucial for effective remote learning.
- Remote learning posed challenges in maintaining engagement and interaction. Technical platform limitations and distractions at home were significant hurdles. Some learners, however, found online platforms less intimidating and more inclusive.
- In-person learning was preferred by many for its social and mental health benefits, especially post-pandemic. Some courses, particularly practical ones, were considered better suited for face-to-face delivery.
- Course design has transformed with a shift to online-centric approaches. However, providers faced challenges in replicating the in-person experience online and navigating online pedagogy, with some suggesting external expertise may be needed.

The introduction of online learning alongside face-to-face has not been without challenges. Providers noted that the most prevalent problems in remote delivery were access to technology (33 providers), learners lacking technological infrastructure, such as internet access (26), and insufficient digital skills among learners (20) (see Figure 7). There was significant variance among providers in terms of which technological challenges were the most challenging. FE Colleges were the most likely to state that their students had limited access to technology, while Local Authority providers were the most likely to indicate that their students lacked the essential technological infrastructure.

Figure 7: Challenges of remote delivery



Source: L&W Provider Survey. Base: All respondents (42).

Technical issues and digital maintenance

Technical difficulties and digital infrastructure

From a learner's perspective, issues such as unstable internet connections and insufficient device capabilities were barriers. Learners noted that technical issues, and participants needing additional support with these, could sometimes interfere with the flow of sessions. Although common amongst remote learners, digital issues tended to be resolved quickly through the help of providers. One remote learner detailed the struggles of weak internet connections and the interventions that eventually improved the situation.

"They told me to go on this link and then it checks out your Wi-Fi speed and all that and then I got it checked by our provider and then, yes, we got that sorted out and I got a booster for my room, because obviously the Wi-Fi was on the other side of the property. When I got a booster everything was all sorted out." Remote Learner, ITP

Providers also noted that often learners struggled due to low digital skills, and lack of access to digital resources or infrastructure. This was seen as particularly notable for many of those taking part in community learning, ESOL courses, and adult skills provision at lower levels.

"The devices that they have may not be adequate to learn online. So, they might have a phone, but you can't really participate in online learning on a phone. You need a better device." Provider, Local Authority

This came up in discussions with learners, with one remote learner from an ITP sharing that they did not have a laptop, but the Jobcentre was able to offer them one. While provision of technology was sustained by some providers, this was more typical of Local Authority providers (see Figure 3 above).

Providing support and addressing technical glitches

Both providers and learners acknowledged the rapid support mechanisms put in place. For example, learners expressed gratitude for tutors who explained how to use the necessary online platforms at an early onboarding session and were always available to answer queries:

"She would take us through the session, in addition to giving us all the materials that we needed, all the links that we needed, she would also offer you her help at any time. You could email her, you could call her, so she was always available to answer questions that were needed." Remote Learner, ITP

In turn, providers reiterated their efforts to offer digital skills assessments and provide essential tools to learners, such as tablets and data. However, from a provider's standpoint, while the support structures were in place, they weren't without challenges. Technical hitches ranged from intricate log-in requirements and multi-factor authentication processes to software updates by external companies which they found time consuming and complicated.

"There's a number of technical issues that we're still struggling with. Really boring things like not being able to create a single logon that covers all of the different platforms and features of our offer is a real struggle." Provider, Local Authority

Likewise, the frequent changes in software parameters, especially by major companies like Google, posed unpredictability in course delivery.

"So [Google] suddenly might decide that they want to operate differently half way through one of our courses, which makes our delivery suddenly really difficult. So, that's totally out of our control [...] we usually find our way around the problem but it's a constant battle." Provider, Local Authority

A significant revelation, particularly among Local Authority sector providers, was the limitation in their IT infrastructure, which leads learners to direct most of the queries towards tutors.

Safety and security in the digital sphere

While the pivot to online learning brought several technical challenges, it also raised concerns about the security and safety of these platforms. Learners pointed out that unmonitored breakout rooms, inappropriate comments, and interruptions from third parties (commonly referred to as 'Zoombombing') occasionally disrupted the learning experience. In response to these safeguarding issues, particularly apparent during the Covid-19 lockdowns (both

relating to online conduct and more general learner welfare issues), some providers noted that they had introduced clear policies relating to remote learning which were shared with both staff and learners. However, remote learners we spoke to suggested that relevant effective policies and response plans ought to be consistently implemented and continuously improved by providers.

Digital literacy and skills challenges

Providers felt that often learners studying at low levels struggled due to low digital skills.

One of the recurring observations that providers made was that certain foundational skills, like keyboard usage or basic mouse skills, were prerequisites for effective online learning.

"It's possible to teach online successfully for higher levels but it's very difficult for lower levels. It would be the same for digital skills. Remarkably enough, digital skills for people who have very, very basic skills doesn't work online. They haven't got keyboard skills, they haven't got mouse skills. They don't know what to do. They can't get online, they don't have an email address. So they need to come in the centre to be able to be taught those skills before they can actually interact successfully remotely." Provider, Local Authority

Several providers emphasised the importance of conducting early assessments of individual digital skills to ascertain what mode(s) of delivery were most appropriate for them and what support and resources would be needed for them to participate online.

Use of introductory sessions and flexible offer for learners

One Independent Training Provider discussed having a flexible offer where learners on employability courses have options to access these either online or face-to-face, to ensure they are able to learn in a way which works for them, and does not exclude anyone.

Each learner has an initial assessment and induction period during which the provider will assess whether a learner will be able to effectively take part remotely (based on both skills and access to devices and digital infrastructure). If needed, the learner may be supported by borrowing one of the provider's laptops or support with data costs. Learners with limited digital skills will be encouraged to take part face-to-face.

"At that initial assessment and induction period, where a learner will probably request more that they'd rather do the course online, we assess their skills, so can they use a computer, have they got access to a computer and the data, if they don't have regular access we have provided support in the past where we can loan them a laptop and support with the data costs and things as well. But if they can't open a computer, or work Teams, or have an email, then we do say classroom for those individuals."

Interestingly, **despite the initial trepidation of navigating new online platforms, many learners found the experience less daunting than anticipated**, thanks to responsive tutors and intuitive digital tools.

"I thought it was going to be a bit scary and bad to be honest. I thought it was going to be very complicated and something I was going to need somebody to constantly help me with. I thought I was going to struggle but it exceeded my expectations by a good way. Like, it was so good, I personally think. I've already asked if I can do another course." Remote Learner, ITP

Learner engagement and interaction

Interaction challenges: face-to-face vs. online

The transition from face-to-face to remote learning posed significant challenges related to interaction. Many participants, both learners and providers, valued the spontaneous interactions that come with face-to-face learning. In-person sessions offer organic opportunities for socialisation and forming relationships, while online interactions often seem contrived—this is sometimes compounded by factors such as learners switching their cameras off during classes. As one remote learner from an Institute of Adult Learning noted, the spontaneity of just meeting someone and having a chat, or even just sharing a warm exchange, is more readily available in face-to-face settings.

"There is something different about meeting people in person. And I know there are all sorts of theories about it, about biology and mental health and all of that. But I also think there's a potential for networking as well. And although that's possible online, that kind of organic networking, just meeting someone, I have an interest, you have an interest, and we have a chat. And even if we don't connect in that way, just warm exchanges between people. There's something about just being in-person where there's that possibility of that happening. Online, that's possible too, but not always possible." Remote learner, Institute of Adult Education

Providers, particularly those offering ESOL and entry level courses, also recognised the importance of in-person interactions for effective learning. As one provider remarked,

"Most of our learners are at entry level, and I think in terms of learning, it's [better] being in the classroom. Learning remotely, you don't get the same sort of learning from your peers, the naturally occurring opportunities to discuss things with your classmates or with your teacher. It has to be planned for, so it's a bit more contrived." Provider, Local Authority

Relatedly, some providers noted that less confident learners often found it hard to navigate the self-access and self-study elements of online learning. They may not know who to ask for support or lack the motivation to do this.

"We could do recorded theory input sessions [for self-study], [but] I'd want to be confident that those delivering had the skills set to do that. ... Who do you go to ask for help? You have to have the confidence and the motivation to reach out, whereas if you're in a classroom situation, I think it's easier." Provider, Local Authority

Technical limitations of online platforms

Several technical issues hindered the quality of online interactions. Participants expressed frustrations with platforms like Zoom, where the interface displayed only one person at a time, resulting in a lack of continuity in viewing participants and missing out on reactions.⁶ Additionally, slight delays in reactions further detracted from the sense of a real-time interactive experience. In the words of a remote learner:

"If you've got a Zoom class of, I don't know, even just 5 or 6 people, you can only see one face at a time and it's generally the person who last moved. So, that person might have said absolutely nothing, maybe wishing to say absolutely nothing, someone else is talking but you've got a silent face in front of you or no face at all, they've just left their chat. It gets a bit frustrating and as well as that, you don't see the reaction." Remote learner, Institute of Adult Education

Because of these experiences, the learner would opt for face-to-face learning over online where possible.

Distractions and maintaining focus

Maintaining engagement in a remote learning environment also presented challenges. Face-to-face learners who reflected that having a change of scenery and attending a physical venue helped them to concentrate on their learning. This was echoed by providers who felt that distractions at home or in the workplace, such as family, friends, or employers, could sometimes interrupt remote learners.

"I think they like to have space to be able to mix with their peers, to discuss their peers' experiences. To come away from work without the pressure of being maybe called in to do something else, or the pressure of their employer, saying, 'Come on, this is long enough"

⁶ It is important to note that the issues mentioned above may vary according to the device used to access online platforms. For example, the difficulty in viewing multiple participants at once may be felt more on devices with smaller screens, such as smartphones or tablets, compared to laptops.

now and you've got to come back to work. What have you been doing today?" Provider, ITP

Providers also mentioned the difficulty of ensuring learners remained engaged and tutors being sufficiently aware of progress being made and any issues learners face, as it was seen as more challenging to monitor a learner's progress and levels of understanding in an online setting compared to when physically walking around a classroom.

" So, looking at how a learner is writing, how a learner is questioning and looking at, like from a maths-perspective, how they've calculated specific things. That's normally done as in walking around in a classroom, where it's hard or not comfortable for an individual to show their workings out on a Teams environment with their peers." Provider, ITP

Whilst some remote learners felt that engagement and interaction is more easily fostered within face-to-face settings, this was not a view shared by all. As mentioned in the previous chapter, other remote learners found online platforms less intimidating, offering a sense of anonymity that made them more comfortable participating in discussions:

"I feel like on an online platform, people are more open to sharing, in my experience, rather than having that one-to-one. Because online you're not seeing everyone's body language, there's very few barriers. So, you're more open to elaborate and, you know, share." Remote learner, ITP

This perspective suggests that there is a significant subjective element to this discussion and that remote learning can, in some instances, offer a more inclusive environment for certain learners.

The social and wellbeing benefits of face-to-face learning

Comparing remote learning with face-to-face delivery, some learners felt that in-person sessions facilitated the development of inter-personal and communication skills.

"It might benefit you more being in a classroom because of the social skills and, like I said, the communication, and things like that. Whereas at home, you don't get that. So, you might be secluded from everything." Remote learner, ITP

Most face-to-face learners engaged in this research felt that in-person sessions were more beneficial for their mental health and well-being. Interacting with others was seen as a crucial factor, especially post-pandemic. One learner shared their feelings of detachment after prolonged isolation and highlighted the mental health benefits of being around people:

"I found it's very good for my mental health to be around people, because I've spent a lot of time working from home and I felt very detached from, like, society. And, after Covid, I was

depressed and everything because I wasn't meeting anyone for a really long time, and I was just like so glad when I found out about this course, to be able to meet new people." Face-to-face learner, Adult Education Provider

The above comments speak to the importance of face-to-face learning in delivering not only educational outcomes but also social and well-being benefits. This aligns with the priorities of the Mayor of London and is monitored through the London Learner Survey.

Time and resource required to design and deliver high quality online provision

Several providers underscored the transformation in the design and delivery of online courses, and the time and resource, as well as staff training, needed to effectively deliver this. The shift from traditional classroom-based strategies to more online-centric approaches, called for a rethinking of course design (e.g., who the course is most appropriate for and how it should be designed and delivered).

"For us as a service [remote learning has] shaped what we do and it's shaped our offer and it's very much a conversation now of, 'Okay well we've got a new course, where's it going to be? How's it going to run? Who's going to deliver it? And what digital skills do they need? What pre-planning do we need do? What level of skills do the learners need to be able to be online or in the centre?'" Provider, Local Authority

Moreover, providers noted that the last few years have seen a considerable need for upskilling of staff in designing and delivering online material, which was challenging for some depending on their views on online learning and existing digital skills (explored further in the following section).

"Staff have now had those two-and-a-half years since Covid [and] they've got a lot more skills than they ever had before. They've got, on the whole, the ability to be able to see what will work and what won't work. And they are now much more open to reflecting on developing that model, coming up with new ideas, trying things out for themselves, without us telling them they have to do it." Provider, Local Authority

For some providers, this involved a considerable investment of time and resources, although most were pleased that this increased the overall quality of their offer.

"What we did find from a trainer perspective, is making sure we gave them the CPD that was needed on how to use the systems, and if they're comfortable, because it is a slightly different teaching style from being online to being in a classroom. So support of the trainers with developing their CPD to be able to deliver online also." Provider, ITP

Some providers also raised concerns about the future lifespan of their digital resources, noting that while new hardware had been purchased during the pandemic, it would require regular updating and maintenance or replacement.

Complexities in remote learning delivery

Appropriateness of content delivery

Both learners and providers touched upon the appropriateness of course content for remote delivery. Some courses, particularly those with a practical element, were perceived by learners as better suited to in-person delivery. For instance, learners undertaking singing lessons noted the absence of a live piano accompanist, compelling them to use a backing track. Another learner, completing a Level 2 Digital Contact Centre course, felt it would have been easier to digest some material face-to-face.

"I felt that in a classroom, it would have been better. Because you have diagrams and so on [...]. But that side of things, I think we were developing software, a one-to-one would have been better, in the classroom." Remote learner, ITP

Similarly, practical subjects were identified by both remote and face-to-face learners as more effectively taught face-to-face due to the hands-on nature of the material.

"with what I'm doing [...] it involves needing machinery that I don't have or seeing work and a lot of the work is textile, so you need to see it better. It's not that it can't be done online, it's just you gain more I think from being in person." Remote learner, Institute of Adult Education

This sentiment was echoed by providers offering more practical and work-related subjects.

"With the practical side - because we're involved in quite a varied range of skills and areas in the industrial sectors, the more practical kind of apprenticeships do like the practical training they get at the college. You won't get that on remote learning." Provider, ITP

Navigating online pedagogy

While some providers have embraced the online shift, others expressed reservations, feeling that achieving high-quality online learning experiences may necessitate external expertise.

"If you buy a package from [company name], experts in online, you know the content been tried and tested then, yes....I just think the model we were trying, a home-grown model that [wasn't] really working that well." Provider, Local Authority

For some providers, despite ongoing CPD for their staff in online delivery and digital skills, tutor willingness to engage with remote learning still varies, typically according to the individual, and their attitudes towards learning, with some still favouring face-to-face overall.

"What we've found is, it's not due to age and it's not due to subject. I think it centres around beliefs around teaching and learning, beliefs and openness to give online learning a real go." Provider, Local Authority

"We've got staff who are very comfortable working from home, and they have developed some really good skills, and also good teaching and learning methodologies online. And then we've also got staff where they just didn't embrace it at all, and actually are a lot better in a classroom environment." Provider, ITP

Challenges in replicating the in-person experience

For providers, replicating the in-person learning experience online, particularly for entry-level courses, remained challenging.

"How do you create a highly collaborative learning environment online, you know, you want high levels of collaboration, high levels of direct interaction, so that you learn it, you do it, and you practice it. All of those things have to be able to be duplicated in their online space, with the high level of interaction. So anything that does that, I think, will give you the depth of learning, but if it doesn't, it might be superficial." Provider, FE College

A few providers also found hybrid approaches particularly challenging, putting strain on instructors juggling in-person and online learners simultaneously.

Furthermore, some providers felt it was harder to provide individual support online, feeling there are more options to manage this in a classroom setting e.g., by requesting additional support from colleagues present in the building or by encouraging the class to progress or discuss topics among themselves while a learner is being supported.

"We sometimes have some issues with the English second language low level, entry one people because that's like a double, isn't it? It's like the language skills are really low and then to explain something using a digital session it take a long time. What we do find is if the classes, you know, if you've got a class of 15 that others in the classroom get quite frustrated if a person is keeping the whole class back online. Whereas, if you're in a classroom, if that's happening sometimes you can find somebody else who's able then to support that person." Provider, ITP

6. Suggestions for improving remote delivery

Key chapter findings

- Post-pandemic adult education requires flexible and hybrid delivery models to cater to individual learner preferences, making a one-size-fits-all approach impractical.
- Despite the convenience of remote learning, it faces limitations in providing practical experiences. Partnering for volunteering or work placement opportunities could bridge this experiential gap. Moreover, providers should consider ways to facilitate more active engagement in remote settings.
- Individual preferences, language barriers, or technology issues can impede active participation in online discussions and activities. Learners suggested the provision of language support and offering alternative face-to-face options where needed.
- Providers and learners concur that tackling digital poverty (e.g., through structured digital skills assessments and training) and ensuring accessibility to up-to-date technology is essential. Concurrently, straightforward, and reliable online systems that facilitate interpersonal connections are in demand.
- Providers feel that ongoing staff training focusing on the pedagogy of digital learning, policy focus on digital pedagogy, and reconsideration of funding models are crucial to maintaining the quality of remote learning provision and ensuring it remains competitive.

Ensuring flexible/hybrid models

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the importance of flexibility and adaptability in adult education provision. One suggestion from remote learners studying through the Institute of Adult Learning was the implementation of a hybrid classroom. This method of delivery would grant learners the autonomy to choose between online or face-to-face engagement, thus catering to individual preferences and circumstances. While learners' desire for complete flexibility can be challenging for staff to deliver in practice, the need for a nuanced strategy that offers a range of tailored and accessible options was recognised by providers.

"You need a mixed economy to meet the needs of the different learners with different attitudes, different digital competence and access and different responsibilities." Provider, VCSE provider

Maintaining learner engagement

In response to the concerns raised by providers and learners alike about maintaining learner engagement, participants to this study suggested potential strategies to address it. Remote learners, who had completed a Level 1 Employability course through an ITP, discussed the limitations of remote learning in providing practical, hands-on experience. To try and overcome this, **it was suggested that providers could identify where more practical experiences can be embedded within a course.** Collaborating with external partners to facilitate volunteering or work placement opportunities for remote learners might serve to bridge this experiential gap.

It was noted that within online learning settings, it is not always possible to encourage all participants to contribute to discussions and learning activities or turn on their cameras. Remote learners, studying through an ITP, acknowledged that this may be related to individual learner preference, or language barriers, for example. Given this, **it was suggested that providers could do more to support learners to participate, through providing language support or offering face-to-face options for those who find them more conducive.**

Face-to-face learners, reflecting on previous experiences with remote learning, shared how they had found it more difficult to motivate themselves to engage with pre-recorded content. Others drew parallels between live remote classes and passive video content, indicating a discernible lack of active engagement. This observation aligns with providers' apprehensions. They felt that the increased use of online learning methods needs to be carefully managed to ensure that learner engagement remains high. Specifically, this would mean:

- Ensuring careful consideration as to how interactions between learners and tutors are designed, so they are meaningful and add significant value to the learning.
- Continuing to support staff CPD to enable them to effectively maintain engagement when delivering online learning.
- Ensuring employers are still giving their staff dedicated time for engaging with learning opportunities.
- Working with learners to effectively assess and support the development of their independent learning skills.

Accessibility

To unlock the full potential of remote learning, providers and learners suggested that the accessibility of this model requires nuanced improvement. **Providers felt that ongoing investment was needed in maintaining and updating available technology, so they have the resources to continue to tackle digital poverty** by sharing laptops, tablets, and data. This issue was seen as rapidly developing, given much of the technology purchased during the Covid-19 pandemic is now approximately three years old.

Remote learners emphasise the value of straightforward and reliable online systems. Their preference leans towards technology that bolsters interpersonal connections between learners. One remote learner, studying with an Institute of Adult Learning, referred to the use of virtual reality (VR) technology:

“I just want to be able to see that tutor, see those people, and I might connect with them in another way, in another course or in another capacity again. VR wouldn't appeal to me. I'd rather learn about it but only be in that environment if it's part of me learning about it.”

Remote Learner, Institute of Adult Learning

Furthermore, providers identified the need for a structured approach to support learners with digital proficiency. They proposed the inclusion of an initial digital skills assessment, followed by targeted training wherever necessary. This support would ensure all learners are improving their digital skills, even if they are learning mainly face-to-face.

“As people become more digitally savvy, I can see more of an opportunity to offer online or blended or hybrid learning, but I think I'm going to have to be really careful about who I let on those courses because we need to make sure that they've got the digital skills already to interact. It would be good to have some kind of standardised initial assessment to assess [whether] you have the skills to learn online?” Provider, Local Authority

Finally, there's a recognised need among learners for clarity and transparency in course advertisements. While face-to-face learners acknowledge the accessibility benefits of remote learning, especially for groups with health conditions or disabilities, they also stress the imperative of clear course promotion. A remote learner explained that what seemed like a job advert turned out to be an online course, leading to avoidable confusion.

Quality

Quality was a key area where providers wanted to improve, both where they felt they could do better, and where they wanted to continue improving in the future. Generally, they felt quality could be supported with ongoing commitment to CPD for staff, focusing on both the design and delivery of online learning – with an emphasis on pedagogy.

One provider also noted they would like to see more policy focus on digital pedagogy to improve provision and the CPD support available for tutors.

“An effective policy focus on digital pedagogy would be really, really welcomed. There isn't any investment in it. When we did the digital conversion overnight in Covid, we found ourselves accessing a lot of American training because that's [all there was]. Some were really good. I did a four or five module RTOL [Rapid Transition to Online Learning] programme which an American University made free overnight. There's very little of that

around. There's some digital support offered by places like Education and Training Foundation, but not enough." Provider, Local Authority

A few providers also identified the importance of continuing to monitor new and emerging developments such as in Artificial Intelligence (AI), to identify how this may be effectively utilised to support delivery and assessment.

A few providers believed that the increased availability of online courses, and the potential variability of course quality, meant that it may be harder for people to choose the right course for them. **It was felt that more support should be given to employers and learners to help them discern between different course types based on content and quality.**

To ensure quality is maintained, some providers observed that funding models do not always reward high quality online provision. They felt funding models were based on the (inaccurate) assumption that remote is cheaper to deliver, therefore providers receive no London uplift, which in turn dis-incentivises providers from investing in quality remote provision.

"If the uplift was maintained, in recognition of the fact that those accessing online learning face barriers, and potentially more barriers than those who can access face-to-face learning, I think that would be really helpful." Provider, Local Authority

" [for] every pound we get through funding, we get an extra 20 pence, like a 20% uplift, in recognition of the running costs of central London. However, when something is recorded as delivered online, there is no multiplier on that base rate, but, of course, there's a huge infrastructure, management and support overhead that goes along with doing it well. That's not been recognised as yet through the formula." Provider, FE College

A few providers also felt that the quantification of provision through guided learning hours associated with a course may not fit the structure of remote provision, and may also impact negatively on how funding is calculated and how performance is assessed. To address this concern, it is important to consider a consistent funding model for online courses that takes into account not only guided learning hours but also factors such as self-directed study and other forms of independent learning.

Similarly, to ensure the quality of teaching is consistent, a small number of providers noted that online and remote delivery has implications for planning teachers' work. Current approaches to planning and managing staff contact hours are mostly based on the single model of face-to-face classroom learning. Greater use of remote and online delivery raises issues about how online teaching activities, particularly those that are asynchronous, are accounted for.

Collaboration

Providers hoped to see more information and discussion available on effective practice in remote delivery. **Several providers felt it was hard to judge their own provision's quality without understanding more about what 'best practice' looks like and how this is assessed.**

"I'd love to find out how they do it and what approaches they take. Because otherwise everyone's reinventing the wheel all the time in their little silos. If you pool ideas, it really helps, doesn't it?" Provider, Local Authority

"I think would be really helpful because I think a lot of our online deliveries operate in quite an isolated fashion and we throw stuff at them and say, 'Well, why don't you do this? Why don't you do that?' We just don't want to see PowerPoint presentations but what I don't see is a CPD menu which is really specifically for people who do remote delivery and that would be really great to see that emerge." Provider, FE College

Finally, several providers noted the need for Awarding Bodies to work with them to ensure they accommodate changes as a result of increased remote delivery in their assessment processes, with some still focused on assessments being face-to-face and based on guided learning hours which may not be relevant to the online learning context.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to considerable change in providers' practice in the provision of remote and online learning opportunities. Although the number of online enrolments has fallen back since its peak in 20/21, remote and online delivery is now an established feature of providers' AEB offers.

As a result of the rapid shift to online delivery during the pandemic, providers have learned much about the benefits of online learning provision. These benefits include increased flexibility and inclusion, with online learning providing opportunities for learners who may otherwise have been excluded, for example those with work or family commitments, or people unable to travel to on-site provision. In many cases, providers have developed a good understanding of the types of provision and subject areas which are well-suited to online delivery, and adapted their curriculum offer accordingly. Providers were also able to support practitioners to upskill in relation to online delivery. Learners able to access online learning also cited benefits, including development of digital skills (alongside the main course content) and confidence, which were considered valuable in life and for work.

At the same time, the experience of increasing the use of remote and online learning has highlighted that several challenges remain. Providers report that, for many learners, digital poverty, including access to suitable devices and the internet, and low digital skills, are a barrier to participation in online learning. This was reported to be a particular issue in relation to the delivery of provision at lower levels, including adult essential skills and ESOL provision. There is also concern that the wider benefits of participation in learning, including the social, health and wellbeing outcomes recognised as social impact areas of the AEB, may be more challenging to achieve in online provision, as it appears they are closely linked with the in-person experience.

Providers also report some challenges in relation to online pedagogy, with some aspects of effective practice in classroom delivery considered more challenging to replicate online. These include creating an online environment which supports the engagement and active participation of all learners, and providing opportunities for teachers to monitor and assess all learners' progress effectively, and provide tailored individual feedback and support, during the delivery of online sessions.

This research suggests areas for the improvement of remote and online learning in future. For learners, it will be key to provide ongoing support to address barriers to learning, including cost barriers and low digital skills. Learners would also benefit from improvements in online delivery to enhance the learning experience and ensure it is as engaging as possible. Providers also recognise a need for a continued focus on developing digital pedagogy and supporting practitioners' professional development. Some providers also highlighted that, as online delivery becomes a more established part of the AEB offer, underpinning funding mechanisms and curriculum management processes – often based on classroom-based guided learning hours - may need

adapting to ensure they remain fit for purpose in the context of newer, more flexible delivery models which include a blend of face-to-face learning and online, asynchronous elements.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, this report makes a number of recommendations for the future development of policy and practice in relation to remote and online learning in AEB provision.

Recommendation 1: Providers should ensure they have a clear rationale and strategy in place for their remote learning curriculum, including the initial assessment of learners' digital skills prior to enrolment in remote learning.

Remote and online learning opportunities provide access to learning for people who may otherwise miss out, and increased flexibility for providers to deliver provision which meets the diverse needs and circumstances of Londoners. However, this should be balanced to ensure that learners for whom online learning is less well suited are not disadvantaged. Classroom-based delivery will continue to have benefits over online delivery in many cases, particularly in practical subjects and in learning provision where social outcomes are a particular consideration. To support this:

- Providers should ensure a clear rationale and strategy for their remote and online learning offer is in place, tailored to their strategic priorities, the specifics of each curriculum area and the needs of the learner cohort.
- Providers should ensure that the digital skills needed by learners to participate in remote and online learning, along with their access to devices and a reliable internet connection, are assessed prior to enrolment, to ensure that learners have the skills they need to learn online. Learners needing further digital skills support can then be identified and signposted to essential digital skills provision, and/or classroom-based learning as appropriate.
- To support providers, the GLA could consider convening a time-limited provider working group or forum to support the development of remote learning strategies and/or approaches to initial assessment of digital skills. With a defined work plan (for example, 3 – 4 meetings over 12 months), the group could act as a forum for providers to share their approaches and any challenges they are experiencing. The GLA could facilitate external inputs from external stakeholders and experts in response to specific issues. Learnings from the group and examples of remote learning strategies and/or initial assessment tools could be shared across AEB providers.

Recommendation 2: Providers should continue to support London's adult education workforce with appropriate professional development opportunities in relation to delivering remote and online learning.

- Providers should ensure that practitioners have regular access to professional learning and development opportunities in relation to online and remote delivery. This could include in areas

identified as challenges in this research, such as supporting learners' digital skills, e-safety and safeguarding, and strategies for engaging learners online, as well as responding to new and emerging technologies. This includes internal learning and development activity, and access to the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) professional learning and development offer, or other external training.

- The GLA could support this by working with providers to identify priorities for current and future workforce development needed to support high-quality remote and online learning in London. This would help determine if there is a case for developing an enhanced or more targeted offer for practitioners in London's AEB providers, in addition to what providers already offer.

Recommendation 3: The GLA should ensure that adequate support is available to providers and adult learners with the costs of online and remote learning.

The GLA should regularly engage with providers to monitor the extent to which AEB funding, including the funding formula and the discretionary Learner Support Fund (LSF), is working effectively to support remote and online learning. This could include ensuring that:

- Provider delivery costs in relation to online learning, including curriculum development, software licences and other online resources are appropriately recognised.
- There are opportunities for providers to make capital investments in the infrastructure and facilities needed to deliver high quality online and remote learning, particularly for providers with limited access to FE or other external capital funding.
- Where appropriate, providers are able to support learners to overcome barriers to accessing online learning, including costs such as data and access to suitable devices for online learning, through the discretionary LSF.
- Raising AEB providers' awareness of wider GLA programmes to address digital exclusion, and encouraging links and use of these to be made where appropriate, such as Get Online London⁷.

⁷ Get Online London is a city-wide project that seeks to address the digital exclusion experienced by many Londoners by providing access to devices, free mobile connectivity, and crucial digital skills support. Led by Good Things Foundation and backed by the Mayor of London and the London Office of Technology & Innovation (LOTI), the programme is part of ongoing efforts to ensure digital accessibility in the capital. <https://loti.london/get-online-london/>

Annex 1. Rapid evidence review

The following document presents the findings from a Rapid Evidence Review which explores available research and evidence on the transition to increased use of remote learning in adult education in recent years.

The review mostly focuses on evidence of effective practice available from March 2020 onwards (although some reports from early 2020/late 2019 have been considered where appropriate). It includes key literature including relevant academic and policy research, as well as grey literature.

The review focuses on adult learning provision, with a particular emphasis on remote learning for essential skills and ESOL. When exploring the findings, the review considers how applicable they are to London-based provision, and the needs of learners in London.

This document explores the approaches taken to remote delivery, the impact of provision on learners and providers, and what constitutes as effective practice in remote learning. It also considers recommendations to inform a working definition of effective practice in remote delivery to ensure that any examples of effective practice highlighted by providers as part of this research are supported by wider evidence.

Approaches taken to remote delivery

What do we mean by remote learning and delivery?

There is no universally agreed upon definition of remote learning, with both the terminology used, and the different approaches and technology included varying considerably (Stevens & Davies, 2021; Wietrak et al, 2021).

“The terms online learning and online education are not clearly defined. In both the popular and scientific literatures, the terms virtual-, online-, digital-, remote-, distance-, and e-learning are used interchangeably.” (Wietrak et al, 2021)

For this research we would define remote delivery and remote learning in a broad sense to reflect the range of provision in adult education, including:

- **Synchronous and asynchronous learning.** Referring to how and when knowledge is transferred to the learner e.g. whether the teacher/lecturer is present or if learner is working in their own time (UK Parliament, 2021).
- **Blended or supported learning.** Courses which combine elements of in-person and online delivery (UK Parliament, 2021).
- **Fully remote learning.** Courses and qualifications that can be completed without any tutor delivered instruction, and courses that contain no in-person delivery (Stevens & Davies, 2021).

The evidence review did not explicitly consider **informal digital learning** (where technology provides opportunities to support informal learning, typically linked to knowledge-sharing), as this would not necessarily be part of a specific offer from a provider and may be more likely linked to workplace learning (CIPD, 2021).

What was the impact of COVID-19 on remote delivery?

In 2019 the Government published its strategy for EdTech (DfE, 2019). The strategy aimed to support and enable the education sector in England to help develop and embed technology in a way that cuts workload, fosters efficiencies, removes barriers to education and drives improvements in educational outcomes.

The strategy noted that: *“Whilst it would be wrong to assume that technology will always deliver improvements, when used and integrated well, technology has potential to help create world-class education, training and care for everyone, whatever their background.”*

The strategy, like other literature at the time recognised the opportunity for significant growth in the use of EdTech in learning, including for administration, assessment, teaching practices, CPD, and supporting decisions for future learning; whilst acknowledging significant barriers to its implementation, such as challenges and gaps in infrastructure and digital procurement, the need for greater digital capability and skills among learners, lecturers, and senior leadership, and concerns about privacy, safety, and data security (Sero Consulting, 2018; Bucky, 2019; Islam et al, 2015; Klenk & Sadro 2021a; Zaidi et al, 2018; Islam et al, 2015; Hutton & Robson, 2019).

The Covid-19 lockdowns created a rapid step-change in the use of remote learning, and provided an unprecedented opportunity to trial online delivery methods of all kinds, and troubleshoot emerging issues (Stevens & Davies, 2021; CIPD, 2021). Research from the AoC found that by Summer 2020 90% of colleges had continued using remote learning into the Summer term, with 74% stating that all or most timetabled lessons or tutor-led activity was being undertaken remotely (AoC, 2020).

Following the opportunity to return to face-to-face learning, many providers have maintained elements of online and blended learning, and further expanded their remote offers, including.

- Improving pre-existing blended learning models.
- Continuing to offer hybrid approaches for those who may not be able or comfortable to return to face-to-face learning.
- Introducing new fully online and blended learning opportunities.

By offering these approaches providers have been able to meet institutional, employer and learner needs, and observe some of the benefits of online learning, such as efficiency in delivery and flexibility for learners (Stevens & Davies, 2021).

What is the scale and nature of remote delivery post-Covid?

While exact figures are not available on the number of courses being offered with remote learning elements following the return of face-to-face learning, many observers note the potential for the ongoing acceleration of progress in digital education following the pandemic: *“moving from a crisis response to a ‘reimagining’ of the educational landscape”* (DfE, 2021b; OECD, 2020). This growth can help to further enhance some of the benefits offered by remote learning, such as learner and tutor agency and flexibility (DfE, 2021b).

It is worth noting that it is recognised that remote learning is not a 'panacea' for resolving challenges in education and teaching (DfE, 2021b). For many the barriers to remote teaching and learning have stayed the same, and become more nuanced as gaps have widened for some learner groups. Ufi summarises these as:

- **Access to technology:** highlighting a significant equality gap for those most at risk of being excluded from training.
- **Learner confidence:** for some learners confidence to engage has decreased, compounded by a lack of motivation.
- **Digital skills:** there is generally a lower level of digital competence in learner groups most likely to be negatively impacted by the pandemic.
- **Social and practical learning:** emphasis on the personalised learning remote learning offers limits opportunities for a learner community and culture or social learning factors.
- **Limitations in the education technology market (particularly for vocational education):** funding models are based on time and attendance rather than skill acquisition, limiting innovation. (Ufi, 2021a).

Further to this, longstanding barriers to online learning continue to exist (Kenyon et al, 2022), including situational (e.g. due to an individual's personal and family situation), institutional (e.g. due to unresponsiveness or lack of flexibility from educational institutions in their provision and scheduling), and dispositional (e.g. due to an individual's attitudes, perceptions and expectations towards learning).

Impacts of remote provision on learners and providers

What difference does remote learning make to learner experience?

Much has been written on the benefits of remote learning for the learner experience. These benefits typically include:

- **Offering increased flexibility and convenience for learners:** Learners can take part in learning activities at a time and location convenient for them, helping to remove barriers such as transportation and caring responsibilities. (Stevens & Davies, 2021; Barber, 2021; Reeves et al, 2017; Glover et al, 2020).
- **Increased accessibility:** EdTech can remove some of the barriers to learning faced by learners with physical or learning disabilities. (Stevens & Davies, 2021; Barber, 2021; Glover et al, 2020).
- **Personalised learning:** Digital learning can offer a more personalised learning journey through more diverse options for course design, use of personalised assessment tasks, use of varying modes of engagement, and use of breakout groups for discussion and problem solving. (Stevens & Davies, 2021; Barber, 2021; Reeves et al, 2017; Cheung and Cable, 2017).

In ESOL courses, research by L&W also identifies a range of wider benefits for ESOL learners, including development of digital skills; facilitating independent study; and making learning more stimulating and engaging (Crane et al, 2020).

What difference does remote learning make to learner outcomes?

In terms of learner outcomes, in their evidence review of virtual classrooms (which included meta-analyses and randomised controlled studies), CIPD found that there is little difference in the effects of virtual and in-person teaching on learning effectiveness.

They found that online learning shows similar and sometimes greater learning gains than traditional in-person learning, regardless of its configuration, mode of delivery, target group, or type of learning outcome (Asadi et al 2019; Borokhovski et al 2012; Du et al 2013; George et al 2019; Howard 2020; Jurewitsch 2012; McCutcheon et al 2015; Woldeab et al 2020).

Outside of learning outcomes, some research finds that remote learning may help to improve career prospects either through development of digital skills (which are expected to be highly valued by employers in London in the next 2-5 years), or supporting learners to access wider information and data about future careers (GLA Economics, 2023; Klenk & Sadro, 2021).

Similarly, in ESOL courses, L&W's research reveals a lack of practitioner consensus on whether EdTech facilitates faster progress in language learning, compared to other methods and resources. They found that practitioners identify the benefits to learners as being more related to accessibility and flexibility, and the development of digital skills. However, the research found little appetite for entirely online ESOL delivery, with learners valuing the support that teachers provide in face-to-face delivery (Crane et al, 2020).

What difference does remote learning make to provider planning and resource?

The main benefit of remote learning identified in the evidence review for providers was around increased efficiency. Specifically, reduced travel times to multiple sites, and use of online assessment tools can help create efficiencies for teaching staff; however, it was felt this needed to be treated with caution, as the efficiencies were sometimes balanced out by the additional work needed in the design and effective management of remote courses (Stevens & Davies, 2021; Glover et al, 2020).

In ESOL courses, providers were positive about the additional pedagogical opportunities created by the use of EdTech. For example, improved ability to locate, access and share teaching and learning resources, improved communications with learners e.g. through smartphone apps, and teaching and learning activities using EdTech (Crane et al, 2020).

What constitutes effective practice in remote learning

What does this typically include?

There is a range of literature exploring what constitutes effective practice in remote teaching and learning, although it is notable that the literature is not always supported by robust measures and evaluation frameworks, and is often more qualitative or anecdotal in nature.

In the available literature and studies, effective practice examples typically cluster around 5 key themes for ensuring quality programme of delivery (CIPD, 2021; Egglestone et al, 2021b; ICF, 2021; Ofsted, 2021; Palmer et al, 2017; Stevens & Davies, 2021; UK Parliament, 2021; Welsh Government, 2020).

- 1. Design of learning programmes:** How a remote learning programme is designed and how this aligns with the curriculum and effective practice in face-to-face delivery is seen as crucial.
 - The mode of delivery should be seen as a means to deliver a high-quality curriculum.
 - Resources should be clear and simple. Resources should not be over-complicated.
 - Programme design should move at an appropriate pace, which checks in places to ensure key concepts are communicated and understood before progressing.
 - Programme design should ensure it includes appropriate and balanced delivery techniques e.g. balance between live-lessons vs pre-recorded content.
- 2. Access and inclusion:** Learning providers need to ensure they are using an appropriate and accessible medium and learners have access to appropriate devices.
- 3. Feedback and assessment:** Learner progress and understanding needs to be closely monitored using feedback, retrieval practice and assessment techniques e.g. through online discussions with teachers or peers, through built in assessments on online platforms, or other assignments.
- 4. Learner engagement and wraparound support:** While remote learning is seen as having many benefits for learner flexibility and access, it can reduce levels of engagement both with the course content, other learners, and the provider institution as a whole. Providers need to ensure ways to maintain engagement, and provide opportunities for interaction among learners. This may also include through institution-wide approaches to learner engagement.
- 5. Teaching and quality assurance:** Providers need to ensure effective teaching practices and quality assurance through regular staff CPD, ensuring access to shared resources and materials, and peer discussions. Providers can also support overall quality by co-designing content and collaborating with digital experts.

In many instances providers felt a key element to the overarching design and delivery of effective remote learning was a strong vision and strategic support from their senior management team.

How does this differ for different types of provision/learners and why?

The evidence review did not identify many examples of effective practice in remote learning which focused on the needs of specific learner groups; however, the evidence suggests that effective practice would require a diverse range of approaches and strategies to meet the needs of different learner groups, particularly in cohorts which may be diverse in nature e.g. ESOL learners, Basic

Skills Learners, and some learners from ethnic minority groups (Crane et al, 2020; Hutchings & Sheppard, 2021).

In terms of provision, research by L&W (Crane et al, 2020) found that:

- **There is some use of remote learning is common and established practice in Adult Education Budget ESOL provision.** Typically, this uses a model where EdTech facilitates a combination of tutor-led activities, support and guidance, peer-to-peer and collaborative learning opportunities, and independent self-study.
- **The use of EdTech is changing aspects of ESOL delivery.** This includes: improved ability to locate, access and share teaching and learning resources; improved communications with learners e.g. through smartphone apps; and teaching and learning activities using EdTech now used more frequently.

Similarly, the evaluation of the Skills for Londoners Innovation Fund found that ESOL learners particularly valued built in time for post-lesson reflection and consolidation of learning outcome, as it gave them an opportunity to practice spoken English with course-mates (ICF, 2021).

In terms of essential digital skills provision (EDS), research by L&W found that there is an EDS skills gap in the workplace, including: i) general essential digital skills and aptitudes ii) knowledge and skills to use specific software and applications, and iii) underpinning digital confidence (Stevens et al, 2022). To help support learners and the workforce to develop these skills the research found:

- Stakeholders (including employers, workers, and EDS providers) favoured a blended approach to upskilling individuals in EDS.
- Employers and workers valued a flexible approach to delivery of EDS-related learning, to help prevent time/capacity issues in the workplace, and to allow individuals to learn at their own pace.
- Overall stakeholders showed a preference for 'bitesize' learning (of 15-30 minutes).
- Tutor support both online and face-to-face would be valuable to support workers, who may have low levels of confidence and motivation.
- An online learning platform would be valuable as a repository for resources and materials, preferably in a range of formats e.g. videos, images, and written content.

Early results from Jisc's ongoing FE Learner Digital Experience Insights Survey 2021 found notable differences in digital access among learners from ethnic minorities.

- A higher proportion of learners from ethnic minorities compared with white learners have had problems accessing suitable devices, online platforms or services, software, Wi-Fi, mobile data costs and private and safe study space. Black African and Black Caribbean learners appear to be the most affected group.
- Digital access is a particular issue for refugees and asylum seekers on entry level ESOL courses (both for financial reasons and limited digital skills in some cases).

- Those with additional barriers such as low-level literacy and numeracy are at greater risk of not engaging effectively with their learning without the right level of support.

The study notes that providers need to have good awareness of the different needs of individual learners from these high-risk groups, and mechanisms to support them to ensure that no learner is left behind (Hutchings & Sheppard, 2021).

Recommendations to inform a working definition of effective practice in remote delivery

Based on the evidence review, the following key principles could be considered when assessing the quality of different remote learning offers and approaches.

Effective practice should:

- Begin with course design, and ensure digital learning is tailor-made for purpose and used to enhance the benefits and outcomes of the existing curriculum (with input from both technological and subject-experts).
- Ensure awareness of likely digital barriers and how to overcome these at both a tutor and institutional level, with in-built flexibility to be able to respond to the needs of different learners.
- Ensure ongoing feedback and assessment at all levels (learner, tutor, institutional) to ensure a positive learner experience and outcomes.
- Seek to engage the learner with the course, their peers, and the wider institution so they may benefit from all aspects of the learner journey.
- Be underpinned by strong CPD, the sharing of resources and effective practice, and senior-level support for digital strategy design, delivery, and quality assurance.

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Annex 2. Methodology

The research took a mixed methods approach. The scoping phase involved five interviews with provider and employer-related stakeholders as well as an online survey for training providers. The main methodological approach involved depth interviews with training providers and employers and focus groups with learners.

Scoping phase research

The research began with a scoping phase involving a rapid review to explore recent approaches to the transition to remote learning in London and the rest of the UK. It focuses on evidence of effective practice available from March 2020 onwards and includes key literature including relevant academic and policy research, as well as grey literature. The review focuses on adult learning provision, with a particular emphasis on remote learning for essential skills and ESOL. When exploring the findings, the review considers how applicable they are to London-based provision, and the needs of learners in London.

In addition, five scoping interviews were conducted with key provider and employer-related stakeholders, including professional bodies of education and business support organisations and networks; three interviews with AEB provider representatives to generate an understanding of how remote learning is being delivered across the adult education sector in London, and two interviews with employer representatives to gain insight into the use of remote learning to support workforce training and development.

Reporting of ILR data from 2019/20 to 2022/23 (mid-year) mapped differences in online and in-person enrolments, according to funding model, qualification level and subject sector type.

Online survey

The research team developed a short, online survey to capture London AEB provider perspectives about delivering remote learning over recent years. The intention of the survey was to capture a snapshot of provider perspectives as opposed to an extensive understanding, to support the scoping phase, recruitment of depth interviews, and qualitative interview findings. Invitation to complete the survey was shared amongst AEB provider networks in London and included space for providers to volunteer participation in the qualitative research. The survey was live for two months and a total of 42 respondents completed the survey. Here is a breakdown of the respondents by provider type:

Type of Learning Provider	Number of Respondents
Local Authority	11

Further Education College	10
Independent training provider	16
Institute for adult learning	2
Sixth form college	1
Other	1
Total	42

Depth interviews

Semi-structured, depth interviews were conducted with 22 training providers to gather evidence on changes to remote delivery since the beginning of the pandemic and its impacts on providers and learners. This included seven FE Colleges, eight Local Authority providers, two Institutes of Adult Learning, and five other provider types, (including Independent Training Providers (ITPs) and Voluntary and Community Sector). The sampling was purposive, aiming to provide rich insights rather than exhaustive representation. The volume of remote delivery varied across providers, spanning from low to high. Two additional depth interviews were conducted with employers to gain insight into implementation of remote training and development for employees. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams or telephone.

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted with learners participating in AEB provision in London to gain an understanding of their learning experiences. London AEB providers supported the organisation of the focus groups by sharing relevant research information with their learners. During the recruitment process, we aimed to include a wide range of participant characteristics and circumstances, including subject area, age, ethnicity, and gender. Learners' tutors were not present during the focus groups which helped to create a space for honest and open responses, helping to mitigate potential response bias.

Four online focus groups were conducted with learners who are participate in remote learning, via Microsoft Teams or Zoom, with an average of 3-4 learners per group. Two focus groups involved learners at Independent Training providers, one involved learners with a provider in the community sector, and one involved learners at an Institute of Adult Learning. These focus groups aimed to generate evidence of learners' experiences with online delivery.

Two in-person focus groups were conducted with learners who are participating in face-to-face learning from Entry-Level to Level 2. These were conducted at the learners' place of study. The first focus group included nine learners at an Institute of Adult Learning and the second focus group involved 11 learners involved in Local Authority provision. These focus groups aimed to gather evidence around face-to-face learning experiences and how they might compare to online learning experiences.

The qualitative discussions were guided by key areas of interest, including reasons for learner engagement and decisions around online/ face-to-face learning; experiences of learning online/ face-to-face; the impact of the learning delivery; and benefits and challenges of the delivery.

Data analysis and synthesis

Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. This qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis, to draw out and interpret key emerging themes about online delivery amongst AEB providers in London.

Descriptive statistical analysis was implemented on the quantitative survey data, to draw out supportive findings of the qualitative write up. Considering the base size of respondents (N= 42), findings were reported as general summaries and frequencies, supported with descriptive graphs, as opposed to percentages.

Annex 3. Activate Learning: An example of successful remote delivery

Case study into successful remote delivery: [Activate Learning](#), a further education provider describes how they used remote learning to raise achievement rates for adult GCSE English and Maths.

The move to remote learning and delivery

The move online, prompted by the pandemic, led one provider to make a serious investment in remote learning. That investment has led to a substantial and fast-growing provision. At the outbreak of the pandemic, this provider, a Further Education college group, had just 30 remote learners. Today, it has some 2000 remote learners, across a range of curriculum areas, including 200 London-based adult learners on remote GCSE English, GCSE Maths, and Access to HE courses.

The provider has two main objectives with online learning. One is to make learning accessible to people who wouldn't otherwise engage in learning. The second is to enable learners to achieve better results online than they might face-to-face. The provider's approach is based on carefully sequenced, high-quality, asynchronous instruction, freeing up tutors for 1:1 and small group support.

"Human beings are good at motivating other human beings. And that's where we need the human being. We need them less to explain algebra, more to help keep the person engaged in learning. The objective is to have a more personalised, more human connection between teachers and learners by reordering what our tutors do, so they have more one-to-one time, more small group work, not less."

Learner challenges and barriers at GCSE level

Nationally, less than half of adult learners achieve the GCSE grade they need in English and maths.

"I would describe adult GCSE provision as, fundamentally, a failed concept. What adult learners need from GCSEs is a grade 4. Usually, that's the only reason they're participating...But nationally, only around half of people achieve grade 4. So, we did very consciously think, 'How can we use what we've learnt through delivering other programmes online to transform that achievement rate? What would have to happen?'"

The provider identified one key barrier for adult GCSE learners: life circumstances.

"Adult learners drop out, or they don't work hard enough, because they've got complicated lives...We needed to make learning easy and convenient, and we needed to help individuals to maintain their motivation."

Approaches to remote delivery for adults with complicated lives

In partnership with an EdTech provider, the provider developed an online programme structured to ensure the learning effort was both manageable and impactful for learners. One 90-minute, taught session per week is reinforced by a daily set of five bitesize activities. A weekly synoptic assessment serves to flag any issues to the learner's tutor, who – within 48 hours – reviews the assessment, identifies any issues the learner might have, and arranges a time with the learner to work through those issues together. Sessions are highly structured, with signing available for deaf learners, as well as transcripts. An AI algorithm adjusts the five daily bitesize tasks according to the learner's performance.

In addition to CENTURY Tech for GCSE English and maths content on their AI-powered teaching and learning platform, and a range of other digital tools, the provider uses the VLE, Canvas, and the videoconferencing app, BigBlueButton, and YouTube. Tutors use visualisers, so that they can show live examples and script. Learners use a range of devices, including phones, laptops, PCs, and Smart TVs. If necessary, learners can borrow a laptop from the provider.

Outcomes

The provider's published results for August 2022 show grade 4 or above was achieved by 79% of its online GCSE English learners (compared to 46% nationally), and 64% of its online GCSE Maths learners (compared to 38% nationally). Both sets of learners achieved a 100% pass rate. Cost savings are another benefit to learners:

"We did a very rough calculation. If you took our 2,000 online learners and said that they had to spend £15 a week to travel in and out of college, the total cost would be about £950,000-£960,000 annually. We've removed that as a barrier for those learners. They don't have to get the train in, they don't need to find childcare."

Why it works

In addition to the flexibility and efficiencies of remote learning, this approach – combining carefully sequenced, instruction reinforced by personalised practice and spaced repetition, with supportive, developmental coaching – directly addresses the issues that typically undermine face-to-face learners.

"We have learnt that doing those five tasks every day, over 200 days, really is highly impactful. Learners on campus generally spend as much time learning, but they do it in blocks...Online you can resurface and revisit content, get instant feedback, learn from your mistakes iteratively and at pace. When you add the human element, the coaching and motivational interventions – we think that's what makes the difference to our online provision."

Remote learning has also greatly widened the pool of potential tutors available to the provider. Online tutors can be based anywhere in the country, and the role itself is attractive to a group of potential tutors who, for a range of reasons, wouldn't apply for a campus-based role.

“It’s hugely increased the pool of people that we can recruit from. We typically attract about nine times more applicants for online roles than equivalent campus-based roles.”

Remote tutors are recruited for their ability to coach empathically in their subject area. They are assigned learner caseloads of their own choosing and paid on the progress of their learners. It demands a different skillset to classroom teaching.

“When we recruit tutors, we are really clear about our expectations, our courses, who they’re for and what we’re trying to do – help people transform their lives and progress. If a single parent who can’t get childcare while she’s on a lesson with you is going to be a problem for you, you’re probably not the person to come and work with us.”

Unmet demand

The provider reports unmet demand in London for its online GCSE and Access to HE courses.

“Since September [2022], we have had to turn away just under 500 learners [due to funding limitations]. Some will have gone to a local college, no doubt. But it’s reasonable to assume a fair number of those learners won’t have engaged with learning as a result.”

Conclusions

This provider views remote learning as option that can offer learners better results than face-to-face provision – but only if it’s done right.

“We’re obviously hugely positive about it. We’ve seen learner growth from nought to 2000, and we’ve seen better results. If you were to talk to a provider who’s dabbled a little bit online, and it hasn’t gone terribly well, what they may say is, ‘Online learning’s not very good. It hasn’t worked. It doesn’t work for our students.’ And of course, in some respects they’re right. They will have some students for whom only on-campus works. But they’re also wrong. The reason is, they haven’t done it right. They haven’t understood what online learning is. Online is a positive when done well, it’s a negative when done badly.

So do procure online provision, but procure it from people who are invested in that model. And I don’t just mean us. There are providers who do this nationally who have got specialist expertise in online learning. Whereas a campus-based provider is invested in a different model.”

The provider suggests that policy makers and funding agencies might be receiving applications of online delivery with “scepticism, rather than enthusiasm” could be more open-minded and objective about online delivery:

“Arguably what they should actually be asking is, ‘Show us the quality of your data analytics that’s going to indicate how well you will meet precisely the groups that we want to.’”

Annex 4. Learner participation data

AEB enrolments by sector subject area and delivery type

Sector Subject Area	2019/2020		2020/2021		2021/2022		2022/2023 (Half)	
	In-person	Online	In-person	Online	In-person	Online	In-person	Online
Health, Public Services and Care	20,460 (67%)	10,030 (33%)	18,030 (55%)	14,540 (45%)	24,120 (58%)	17,430 (42%)	13,180 (57%)	9,860 (43%)
Science and Mathematics	6,830 (99%)	100 (1%)	5,620 (87%)	840 (13%)	5,530 (95%)	310 (5%)	4,730 (95%)	260 (52%)
Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care	2,620 (91%)	250 (9%)	2,470 (88%)	340 (12%)	3,010 (96%)	130 (4%)	1,530 (94%)	90 (6%)
Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies	2,640 (91%)	270 (9%)	2,960 (74%)	1,020 (26%)	4,220 (90%)	440 (9%)	2,850 (87%)	430 (13%)
Construction, Planning and the Built Environment	4,580 (89%)	570 (11%)	6,120 (75%)	2,100 (25%)	10,450 (94%)	650 (6%)	6,270 (91%)	650 (9%)
Information and Communication Technology	17,050 (88%)	2,410 (12%)	17,450 (68%)	8,170 (32%)	23,960 (83%)	4,980 (17%)	12,400 (77%)	3,680 (23%)
Retail and Commercial Enterprise	10,360 (86%)	1,620 (14%)	7,500 (65%)	4,040 (35%)	10,730 (76%)	3,430 (24%)	5,810 (81%)	1,400 (19%)
Leisure, Travel and Tourism	12,620 (92%)	1,130 (8%)	6,370 (75%)	2,110 (25%)	10,270 (86%)	1,660 (14%)	5,370 (85%)	920 (15%)
Arts, Media and Publishing	52,500 (92%)	4,790 (8%)	27,030 (65%)	14,690 (35%)	49,790 (88%)	6,970 (12%)	29,550 (92%)	2,500 (8%)
History, Philosophy and Theology	4,150 (81%)	980 (19%)	610 (9%)	6,340 (91%)	1,850 (42%)	2,520 (58%)	1,400 (64%)	780 (36%)
Social Sciences	540 (79%)	140 (21%)	200 (21%)	770 (79%)	250 (32%)	530 (68%)	270 (63%)	160 (37%)

Languages, Literature and Culture	28,930 (85%)	4,920 (5%)	10,270 (34%)	19,570 (66%)	12,230 (49%)	12,590 (51%)	10,730 (67%)	5,280 (33%)
Education and Training	4,580 (89%)	570 (11%)	3,460 (63%)	2,020 (37%)	4,840 (81%)	1,130 (19%)	3,100 (84%)	610 (16%)
Preparation for Life and Work	202,410 (96%)	7,470 (4%)	164,720 (83%)	32,790 (17%)	208,390 (91%)	21,090 (9%)	136,250 (93%)	10,730 (7%)
Business, Administration, Finance and Law	12,770 (78%)	7,470 (22%)	10,270 (53%)	8,950 (47%)	11,130 (55%)	9,070 (45%)	6,230 (58%)	4,570 (42%)
Total	386,330 (91%)	38,420 (9%)	283,100 (71%)	118,280 (30%)	380,750 (82%)	82,910 (18%)	239,660 (85%)	41,910 (15%)

