

DIGITAL DELIVERY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING LOOKS SET TO STAY, IN SOME FORM: WHAT WILL THIS MEAN FOR PEOPLE AND PLACES?

Over the course of early 2021 Cambridge Ahead conducted interviews with secondary schools, further education colleges, universities, and employers. This sought to understand what lessons had been learned from a year of enforced digital delivery, what degree of remote provision educators want to retain in the “new normal”, and what the implications of all of this might add up to in a setting like Greater Cambridge.

It is apparent from this research that all educators want to incorporate the best bits of digital delivery in their business models going forward. Headline benefits are seen to be the ability to record learning material that can then be stored and shared, greater timetable flexibility, and breaking down geographical barriers.

It was also reported that digital assessments have brought benefits for providers and learners alike. For example, a survey of 550 disabled students undertaken by the University of Cambridge showed that a significant majority indicated that the switch to online assessment was a positive experience compared to in-person exams sat in 2019. Both the University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin University are reviewing their assessment regimes.

Some providers have used the lockdown as an opportunity to push novel learning methods. For example, the Marshall Centre has developed a Virtual Reality learning tool allowing access to a wide range of interactive educational and developmental content as part of a fully immersive VR experience.

Digital delivery can clearly add value to the learner and educator alike. Many providers have already invested in equipment and technology to support this transition, but similarly many have not been able to. Cambridge Ahead believes that **Local Authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough should establish a *Digital Learning Transition* capital fund to facilitate and accelerate the adoption of new techniques for learning**. This fund should be weighted towards institutions that serve learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, helping those less able to invest in new technology to keep pace with the vanguard.

There are also fundamental concerns about the implications of digital delivery trends for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The digital divide has been highlighted and widened by the pandemic across many aspects of life, with education and training being no different. These interviews highlight significant concerns and actions taken to try and improve connectivity and kit for those who were lacking it at the outset of the pandemic. Many institutions have invested directly in devices and internet connections for learners.

However, the more fundamental concerns were not around connectivity or kit but rather the home setting. For those where a home setting that is not conducive to learning, the ability to learn “on site” becomes far more significant and could very well become the difference between continuing with learning or not (similar issues play out in the world of work and the impact on productivity). Disadvantaged and vulnerable learners are most exposed to this issue. Schools, colleges, universities and employers will want to maintain in person provision but in many cases will adopt a more flexible and fluid model. However, this could very well undermine financial viability in core areas of the business, such as transport and catering.

Taking further education college transport as an example, a move in student travel away from peak times may undermine the viability of dedicated bus services that are currently provided through a combination of state and sector funding. Cambridge Regional College currently contributes around half a million pounds in funding towards specific bus services. These services are at risk of becoming even less viable now and finding alternative options for the students they serve will be challenging.

Urgent action will be needed to ensure that new transport support models can align with timetables to ensure learners from disadvantaged backgrounds can still get to and from their place of learning at the times that they need to. **Government should see this issue as integral to the levelling up agenda nationally, and locally Councils should work with schools, colleges, and universities to find urgent solutions for transport, catering, and other facilities where financial viability now places provision at risk.**

Lastly, this research found that employers have also innovated ways in which work experience can be provided virtually and, in many cases, have found benefits to this. For example, Morgan Sindall Construction has developed a Virtual Work Experience programme that reached 101 students in the East of England in 2020 and has found that this has widened the demographic of those participating, with young people often feeling more comfortable and confident in a digital setting. Later this year Women into Construction will deliver a work experience programme for Hill. Employers that have trialled VWE believe that it should be incorporated into their model going forward, but currently it is not recognised by Government as work experience. **Where there is evidence that Virtual Work Experience matches Gatsby benchmark quality, Government should recognise it is a part of a blended work experience package.**

CONCLUSIONS FOR LOCAL AND NATIONAL POLICYMAKERS

Cambridge Ahead believes that:

1. Local Authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough should establish a *Digital Learning Transition* capital fund to facilitate and accelerate the adoption of new techniques for learning
2. Government should see transport, catering, and other services that support on-site learning as integral to the levelling up agenda nationally, and locally Councils should work with schools, colleges, and universities to find urgent solutions where financial viability now places provision at risk
3. Where there is evidence that Virtual Work Experience matches Gatsby benchmark quality, Government should recognise it is a part of a blended work experience package.