



Developing online learning in vocational education in small island context of the British Isles

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Employer engagement in the contexts of the White Paper and the pandemic

1. Impact of meaningful, high quality, sustained employer engagement
2. In all educational institutions, all age groups - schools, colleges, 5 year olds +
3. Long history of Employer Engagement (Huddleston 2012, 2020)
4. Employer engagement encouraged over 30 years
5. Multi-faceted engagement
6. Diploma development presents a substantial extension of previous practice
Employers designed and developed qualifications for the compulsory school sector
7. Requested/Offered level of engagement

White Paper (2021)

Putting employers at the heart of post-16 skills (p. 18)

‘Despite all their [employers] good will, the question is raised about sustainability of existing employer engagement [in the current economic climate], let alone the intensification of it’ (Huddleston & Laczik 2012)

Small island context

Why start with small islands?

- Small island contexts share and exaggerate key concerns facing educational institutions before, during and post-pandemic.
- Institutions in these contexts are also used to working responsively and flexibly within their local communities to solve problems and address emerging challenges.

Small island context

Key concerns:

- Concerns of youth out-migration due to employment and education opportunities elsewhere (Royle, 2010)
- Small and specific labour markets (Alexander, 2015), particularly reliant on tourism (Graci and Maher, 2018)
- Questions of curriculum breadth and long-term viability of course provision (Hovgaard, 2016; Misselke, 2021)
- Inconsistent internet coverage and digital poverty (Lagi, 2020)
- Varying policy relationships to the devolved UK nations (Henderson and Bathmaker, 2020)

Key advantages:

- Close, often informal relationships with key island-based employers (Karides *et al.*, 2020)
- Histories of networked educational provision, particularly in HE sector (Clark, 2015)
- Economies of scale that allow close tracking of NEET young people, educational progression and entry to employment
- Pre-pandemic experiences of negotiating issues of isolation and connectivity (Parker, 2021)
- Varying policy relationships to the devolved UK nations (Henderson and Bathmaker, 2020)

Research aims

The aims of the project are to find out:

- how the pandemic impacted employer engagement in colleges
- how college provision of VET courses has been adapted online during Covid-19
- what have been the benefits and drawbacks of moving to online delivery for VET courses
- whether future VET/employer engagement provision will be changed as a consequence of the adaptations made to VET during the Covid-19 crisis

Methods

- 4 FE colleges on islands around the British isles
- Semi-structured interviews with SLT, teaching staff, students, support staff and digital co-ordinators (n= 31)
- Interviews conducted March - June 2021
- Research on course provision for 16-18 age group at Levels 2 and 3 in VET
- Thematic analysis - *early stages*

Findings - employer engagement

- Disconnect with industry and courses - exacerbated by the pandemic
 - *Pre-existing problems matching employers needs' and VET provision*
 - *Loss of (student PT jobs) and sector shutdown*
 - *Lack of industry experience*
 - *Students lack of confidence in finding employment after studies*

'[employers] don't tend to do manpower planning in advance, they just phone up on me and say, "I'm short-staffed. Have you got anybody that could be a chef?" So it's quite hard in college to really get the employers to engage and see, you know we've got potential people here that we can grow. Not an easy one. I mean, some of them are good, but they don't see the benefit of training.' (Hospitality curriculum lead)

Findings - employer engagement

- Small island context can enable close ties with industry
 - *Often staff level/personal links*
 - *Enabled through student working alongside studies*

- Pandemic has attracted more students to VET
 - *Lack of employment opportunities*
 - *Learning remotely has allowed those in work to take up additional qualifications flexibly*
 - *Increased interest in some professions (e.g. nursing)*

‘So during the lockdown the staff would be in contact with local employers, so like maybe in hair and beauty, or something else, so they would they know each other they’re very you know, it’s quite a small community so everyone knows each other.’
(SLT)

‘We have a huge number of students in the inclusive practice department at the moment that we never had before... You know they’re leaving school or whatever and there is no employment’ (Student support tutor)

Findings - employer engagement

- Supporting sectors suffering from pandemic
 - Reskilling staff
 - Diversifying offerings/innovating in the sector e.g. tourism

‘the other industry that’s been hit really big is...hospitality, the hotels, tourism, so we’re looking at doing courses that...not necessarily about changing their career, but... putting courses that help them develop their skills for their current career so we’ve got a new course in walk leadership.’ (SLT)

Other key findings

- Difficulties to engage online - esp L2&3 students - lower confidence, independence, motivation
- Digital issues - Connection issues; digital poverty; and digital skills
- Personal circumstances highlighted for staff and students - e.g. family situation/home schooling, workspace, availability of 'props' /resources at home
- Workload for staff incl. new roles as pastoral support
- Creativity in delivering practical tasks - teacher/course dependent

Conclusion

- The govt White Paper wants employers at the heart of the VET/skills system
- Island VET provision can be precarious - small, specific markets/sectors; low numbers but also flexibility
- Covid-19 presented problems for continuing employer engagement in VET - lack of industry experience, loss of jobs
- But also presented opportunities for innovation and diversification - new courses, flexible learning opportunities
- College staff/students can take advantage of closer ties on island to develop and maintain relationships
- New possibilities for online employer engagement - beyond island borders?

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Thank you for listening

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