

Executive Summary

More students, more engagement, less impact

Background

Anecdotal evidence suggested that, following the experience of delivering remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic, widening participation (WP) providers intended to permanently retain an element of online provision in future. This study, commissioned by Future U, the Lancashire Uni Connect, had two aims: to discover the true extent of this shift, and to determine what the impacts might be of a permanent move online on providers' abilities to meet their core aims.

Methods

To investigate the above questions, we conducted a series of surveys, interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders: school staff, pupils, and widening participation practitioners themselves. We were also able to access some relevant activity evaluations from one WP provider. This data was then analysed and synthesised to reveal the impacts of moves to online provision on the three groups, with particular emphasis on the needs of pupils, who form the target of most interventions.

• We asked teachers and practitioners to rate the impact of different types of provision on a number of scales including engagement, inspiration and learning.

Findings Overview

- In-person, face-to-face provision was most highly rated by both groups on all scales;
- Pre-recorded videos were consistently deemed least effective, with live online sessions in the middle;
- Comments from both school staff and WP practitioners suggested that schools had a strong preference for in-person delivery methods and may disengage with providers who focus on remote sessions.
- However, the vast majority of WP practitioners, around 80%, stated that their organisation intended to retain an element of online provision. This was due to practical benefits, eg:
 - Cost and time savings;
 - Convenience and flexibility;
 - Reaching more students, in terms of number of schools and geographical spread.

Impacts on pupils

- A number of potentially negative impacts on pupils of online provision were identified:
 - Engagement with online sessions tend to be lower than for face-to-face provision;
 - Lack of personal contact with the person delivering led to less excitement and fewer opportunities for informal conversation;
 - Emphasis may shift from deeper, more intensive engagements to greater quantities of less in-depth provision, risking "degradation of the experience";
 - These negative impacts are likely to be exacerbated for the most in need groups, who are more challenging to engage and benefit more from face-to-face contact.
- There were, however, a number of mitigating factors to the above findings:
 - The pupils who participated in our study were more accepting of remote provision than teachers or most practitioners. Although most had a mild preference for in-person sessions, some actively preferred online;
 - Students with certain personality traits, such as lack of confidence or anxiety, may benefit from remote provision;

- The ability to ask questions was cited by many as an important aspect of WP provision, and certain sub-groups of pupils find this easier online;
- Some WP groups, such as young carers or those from military families, may find it easier to access remote provision;
- Evaluation findings suggest that where students are motivated, there is no evidence that learning is inferior from online provision.
- Where young learners could choose whether or not to engage with a session, for example via out-of-school offerings, engagement and response was often better. However there were drawbacks:
 - Such sessions are more likely to attract pupils who are already keen and interested;
 - The ease of signing up to online sessions can mean greater drop-out rates.
- Some session types need to stay in-person, while others can work well online:
 - In-person campus visits are highly valued by teachers and many practitioners;
 - Short sessions intended purely to relay information can work better online, as they can reach more students at a time;
 - Some practitioners felt that mentoring was actively better done remotely, noting benefits to behaviour, concentration and honesty.

Impacts on schools

- Although schools expressed a strong preference for in-person activity, they also experience benefits from online provision, such as ease of timetabling and reaching more pupils at once. However, teachers recognise a trade-off between convenience and effectiveness.
- Some schools, eg those in remote areas, are clear beneficiaries of moves to online provision.
- However there were also reports of schools being overwhelmed by approaches from WP organisations who are no longer restricted to operating in their local area.

Impacts on practitioners and provider organisations

- Although a few practitioners were champions of online delivery, most felt that their job satisfaction depended on face-to-face interactions with pupils.
- Some practitioners were concerned that moves to remote provision could lead to job losses, and in one case this had already happened.
- Providers may find it easier to recruit by offering remote working. They may also begin to look for a different skills mix, preferring staff with greater technical know-how.
- It is significantly harder to effectively evaluate remote sessions, meaning that organisations will have a less clear idea of whether interventions are working.

Best practice for WP delivery

- Interventions designed for traditional delivery cannot simply be switched wholesale to remote provision – to be effective, online sessions need to be purposefully designed.
- Sessions should be organised to be quick to grab the attention of the audience and contain interactive or activity-based elements. Giving schools physical materials in advance of sessions can be helpful here.
- Maximal use should be made of the possibilities afforded by the use of technology, such as use of visuals and a variety of media.
- Delivering an online session well can require more skill than presenting in person, and may require careful thought and practice. Pupil participants particularly valued humour in remote provision.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, we make the following recommendations.

1. It is tempting for organisations to embrace online delivery because they can reach more pupils in a wider geographical area. However, it is important to acknowledge that these activities have the potential to be less impactful than face-to-face delivery. Providers should ask themselves whether the total effectiveness of their provision is being negatively impacted by this shift of focus.
2. Students who are already interested are always likely to benefit more from any session, and moves online can exacerbate this, for example by making it easier for some individuals to disengage, or by removing informal opportunities for conversation. There was broad agreement that the hardest to reach are more in need of in-person interventions; providers should consider whether remote provision is damaging to their potential impacts on these groups.
3. However, some groups of pupils may prefer online provision, either because of their personality traits (eg lacking in confidence) or personal circumstances (eg young carers). Hybrid provision, carefully designed, could enable both these young learners and those preferring in-person interventions to be reached.
4. Although teachers voiced (strongly) negative views towards online provision, schools can in fact find this beneficial, enabling more pupils to be reached with less organisational difficulty. However, forcing schools to accept such sessions can damage relationships and ultimately make them look elsewhere for WP content. Allowing for school preferences, particularly among trusted partners, is likely to lead to greater acceptance.
5. Pupils, by contrast, expressed only a mild preference for in-person sessions, with some preferring online. Where providers have strong partnerships with schools, it may be possible to take the learners' views into account when deciding on provision type.
6. The ability to ask questions was repeatedly cited as an important aspect of WP interventions, however the evidence is mixed as to whether this is helped or hindered by moves to online delivery. As a result, we advise that providers monitor and consider questioning behaviour in all sessions and take steps to facilitate this if necessary.
7. Organisations running sessions that individuals can sign up to may find that there is no adverse effect on learning from being online. However, as noted in point 2, the tendency for the already-keen to sign up to such sessions may be exacerbated, meaning that overall WP goals can be missed.
8. It is clear from our findings that the ability to evaluate provision can be severely adversely impacted by moves online. If organisations do not carefully consider how to measure the effectiveness of their remote delivery, they risk being unable to determine whether or not their activities are impactful.
9. Successful online interventions often fall into one of three types, and practitioners might wish to consider focusing their remote provision in these areas:
 - a. Short, snappy sessions intended purely to relay information;
 - b. Interventions that are specifically designed for delivery online, including interactive elements, innovative use of technology and, potentially, physical materials;
 - c. 1:1 mentoring sessions – although some disagreed.
10. Effective remote delivery can require different, or greater, presenting skills than those needed in-person. Organisations that intend to retain an element of online provision should consider providing specific training for staff in this area.