STEPPING UP & STEPPING FORWARD

A series of 10 learning insights

eti

The Education and Training Inspectorate
Promoting Improvement

Providing inspection services for:

Department of Education
Department for the Economy
and other commissioning Departments

CUSTOMER SERVICE EXCELLENCE

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FOREWORD

'Stepping Up and Stepping Forward: 10 Learning Insights on how well Northern Ireland's education system is responding to COVID-19 and other challenges' is a commentary publication which draws on learning from the education and training system's response to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused extensive disruption to education and training across the world. According to the United Nations, 1.6 billion learners in 190 different countries were impacted adversely; Northern Ireland's (NI) learners were caught up in this global disorder.

Since the start of the pandemic, educators have stepped up and stepped forward to meet the challenges. Parents and carers, as first educators, were integral to that success.

The individual learning insights acknowledge the exemplary work of NI's leaders and practitioners and suggests how we can draw on their successes and work collaboratively to address the ongoing challenges.

'Stepping Up and Stepping Forward' is distilled from Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) first-hand observations and evidence from survey work, questionnaires, focus group discussions, visits to organisations, and interactions with leaders and practitioners across all education and training sectors, since March 2020

High quality education can transform lives and life-chances. ETI plays a unique role in education, in that its work covers the spectrum of the education, training and youth sectors. Inspectors believe that the work of ETI promotes improvement through professional and reliable external evaluation of provision in individual organisations, at
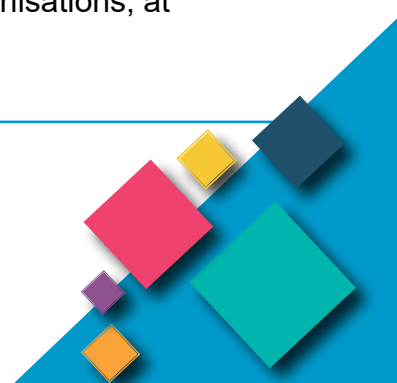
sector level and at system level. Equally, we view collaborative working, professional dialogue and building consensus as being key contributors to our own and our stakeholders' improvement agendas. That includes listening more attentively to learners to identify their individual needs, designing curricula to meet those needs and supporting and developing our most valuable learning resource, our teachers[1] and leaders.

Despite the best intentions, mistakes can be made, or important decisions not made quickly enough, by each one of us. However, with understanding and a resolve to work more collaboratively, we can accrue much practical learning from one another and through sharing our experiences.

All of our professional peers, stakeholders, families and communities play complementary roles in the education of our learners. By sharing our expertise, experiences and learning, we can work more coherently to realise our shared goal of giving every child and young person the life-chances they deserve.

We hope that the worst of the COVID-19 disruptions are behind us. We have all learned that by continuing to upskill ourselves, manage risks for learning and have high expectations around what we can achieve, we are stepping up from COVID-19 and stepping forward for learners.

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FAUSTINA GRAHAM

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1 In this document, the term 'teacher' includes teachers in schools and EOTAS settings, tutors/mentors in work-based learning, lecturers in Further Education colleges, staff in early years' settings and tutors in youth settings.

LEARNING INSIGHT 1

Covid–19 has created additional risks to our young people's emotional health and wellbeing; keeping them safe and well is our top priority.

What do we know?

Pre-schools, schools, colleges, youth and training organisations have always given a high priority to safeguarding and wellbeing, as is evident in their well-organised and responsive pastoral care systems. Increased online learning during the pandemic highlighted the need for organisations to ensure that digital learning platforms, ICT systems and codes of practice kept learners safe. We know that the loss of familiar structures, routines and friendships impacted negatively on learning and wellbeing. Keeping learners safe is the first priority for all organisations and the importance of emotional health and wellbeing, as a necessary foundation for learning, is well-documented.

What have we learned?

ETI acknowledges that while the Covid-19 pandemic brought additional challenges, many of our children, young people and adult learners demonstrated high levels of resilience and perseverance. Many learners developed confidence and independence through being more self-reliant. Nevertheless, the pandemic and the associated lockdowns created additional anxieties for other learners. Organisations reported to inspectors that some young people experienced challenges including issues within the home, disengagement and high levels of stress. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young people's (NICCY) report, A New and Better Normal, details the significant, negative impact of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of particular children.

One of the major challenges for learners during lockdown was a sense of isolation. There were instances where young people lost touch with their friends and/or school community, or felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the changes in their environment and circumstances. In June 2021, the ETI invited all pupils from year 6 to year 14

to comment on their remote learning experiences during the January - March 2021 lockdown. A total of 28,790 pupils responded to this questionnaire. Both primary and post-primary pupils indicated they missed the opportunities for socialisation, interaction with their friends and the regular face-to-face pastoral events such as assemblies.

Organisations welcomed the additional funding provided to help educational settings support the mental and emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people including, for example, the Department of Education's (DE) Engage Programme, which was designed to help young people re-engage in their learning and the DE Wellbeing fund which provided £5 million to schools and EOTAS Centres to support pupils. While extra funding has enabled schools to provide additional counselling, schools have reported that this does not meet sufficiently the needs of all the pupils being referred or self-referring. Additionally, the need to address the impact of the pandemic on children and young people has been highlighted by leading medical, social care and mental health experts.

What will help us move forward constructively?

Young people themselves have reported that much still needs to be done to improve mental health matters. They have recommended that teachers should be equipped better to support them; that access to high quality counselling services should be standard practice; and that addressing the negative impact of the pandemic on the emotional wellbeing of young people must be resourced adequately.

At organisational level, safeguarding, care and welfare policies and procedures should be monitored and updated to reflect current guidance and to implement and consolidate emerging effective practice. The joint DE and Department of Health publication, Children's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education framework, is a good example of collaborative working between government departments, statutory bodies and agencies, parents, carers, voluntary and community sector organisations and most importantly, the children and young people themselves. It provides a helpful starting point for identifying need and enacting interventions swiftly.

Learners value the help available through their own organisations and the care and attention given to their personal safety by staff. Nearly all of the pupils who responded to the ETI questionnaire indicated that they were taught how to keep themselves safe online. Given the ever-evolving risks to children and young people, particularly in the digital world, it is timely to have a conversation around how we can empower learners to understand, and manage effectively, their safety and wellbeing through an effective preventative curriculum. ETI is committed to working with all stakeholders to explore how the wider aspects of healthy lifestyles are integral to a well-rounded education and can be incorporated into programmes of learning.
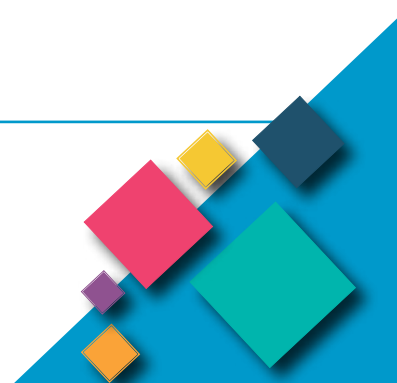
learning insight 1

LEARNING INSIGHT 2

We need to listen to, and understand better, the views of all learners; they have a right to a say in decisions that affect them.

What do we know?

The effective use of first-hand evidence, including the views of key stakeholders, particularly the learners, is crucial in underpinning effective practice, improving decision-making and contributing to wider professional discourse.

Learner participation contributes to greater engagement and motivation in the learning process and contributes richly to organisational improvement. Participation is a fundamental right that all young people should enjoy. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) and Article 12 in particular, grants every child and young person under the age of 18 the right to express their views on all matters affecting them and have those views listened to

and given due weight. Schools and other organisations have a duty to pro-actively seek out the views of their learners, facilitate their expression, and provide feedback on how the learners' views have been acted upon. Many schools and organisations already solicit the views of their learners and use them successfully to inform aspects of learning and teaching and broader decision-making.

A key mechanism for engaging with children and young people is the school council. While many schools have these structures in place, pupils feel that the quality of these forums could be improved and made more meaningful. A recent report by the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland highlighted the need for more effective

learning insight 2

councils and greater participation by children and young people.

What have we learned?

Inspectors reported that as the pandemic progressed, schools became more confident in using both well-established and innovative ways of seeking out the views of learners and their parents and carers. Leaders and teachers understood more clearly what their learners were experiencing and were able to plan to meet their needs more effectively. Engaging in ongoing, meaningful conversations with young people and their parents helped organisations understand their views on: accessing and participating in online learning; how well they were coping with the range of challenges; and, how the organisation might support them further.

The ETI pupil remote learning survey (2021) asked pupils about their experiences during the January - March 2021 lockdown to understand better what worked well for these learners. The majority of the 28,790 pupils who responded said that they appreciated the opportunity to engage in live lessons, access recorded lessons and receive good quality teacher feedback. They valued the opportunities they were given to meet and interact with their friends online and renew friendships.

What will help us move forward constructively?

Competing priorities and limited resources will mean that organisations will have to make difficult choices; these decisions must be informed by the views of the learners, their parents and carers, and the community the organisation serves. Effective organisations have always consulted widely with their stakeholders. Robust self-evaluation and the use of reliable first-hand evidence, taking on board the views of the learners, is key to ensuring that the right choices are made.

At this stage in the pandemic, none of us know fully the extent of the harm that Covid-19 has caused to learning and progression, therefore it is important for organisations to
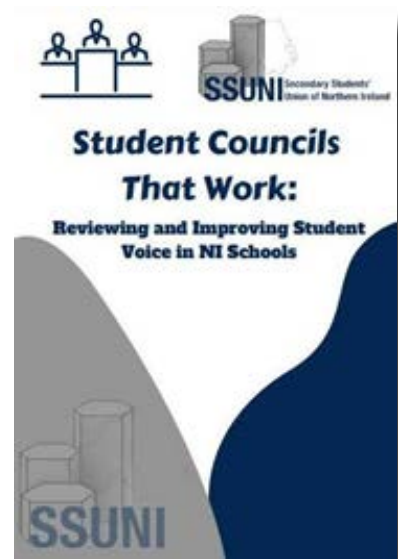
continue to engage with all learners and all other stakeholders in order to monitor the evolving impact of the pandemic on learning and wellbeing. This will help organisations to meet better the needs of their learners.

ETI promotes the importance of seeking the views of learners. ETI is committed to listening to the voices of children and young people through the continuing development of our learner questionnaires and focus group discussions. We will also continue to work to identify and disseminate effective and innovative practice in accessing the views of learners and their parents or carers.
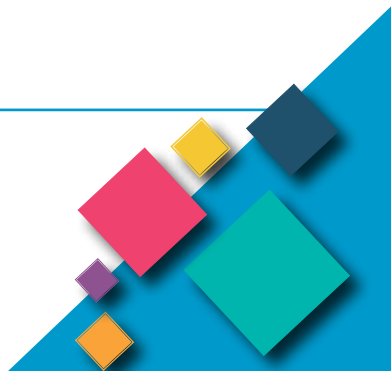
LEARNING INSIGHT 3

Covid-19 had a greater impact on learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds than their peers; coherent multi-agency work can continue to meet their diverse range of needs.

What do we know?

Prior to Covid-19, organisations worked tirelessly to support learners affected by socio-economic disadvantage. In the decade up to 2020, evidence indicated that NI was being successful in closing the attainment gap. In the foreword of the DE commissioned report, A Fair Start (2021), the authors state rightly that, 'Despite the significant financial challenges faced by schools over the past ten years or more, the panel is acutely aware of the year-on-year improvements there have been in educational outcomes at level 2 (GCSE or equivalent) and level 3 (A level or equivalent) and the particular success of non-grammar schools in closing the gap between FSME and non-FSME pupils'.

EXPERT PANEL ON EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

a fair start.

FINAL REPORT & ACTION PLAN MAY 2021

In March 2020, the additional disruptions brought by Covid-19 impacted profoundly on the most disadvantaged learners. The pandemic exacerbated poverty levels, bringing about furlough and unemployment, and impacting adversely on people's emotional health and wellbeing. In education and training, those impacted most by the Covid-19 disruptions include: asylum-seekers; those not in employment, education, or training; prisoners serving time in jails; and children affected adversely by economic poverty and homelessness. The Department for Communities' latest statistics on homelessness reveal that by the end of August 2021, 3,596 children were living in temporary accommodation, up 48% from January 2019 when the figure was 2,433. In this

challenging context, schools remained open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers and special schools stayed open for all of their pupils.

What have we learned?

Schools and organisations responded creatively to support the most disadvantaged individuals, their families and the wider communities they serve. For example, across education and training, many organisations went the extra mile to meet the needs of learners and their families by visiting homes, offering support and delivering food parcels. Covid-19 brought about particular challenges for the children and young people who attend special schools. In many instances, special schools collaborated effectively with parents and optimised their resources to meet holistically the needs of these vulnerable learners.

Lockdown necessitated online and blended learning which brought significant operational challenges for teachers, tutors and leaders. They responded with great professionalism to the digital challenges at pace pivoting to a new method of delivery almost overnight. Nevertheless the challenges of unfamiliar teaching approaches and, for example, the cessation of practical elements of the curriculum resulted in variable and inconsistent quality and pace of delivery.

Schools and organisations provide learners with opportunities to build friendships, to socialise and to benefit from routines. While all learners were unable to access fully these formative opportunities during lockdown, those experiencing high levels of educational disadvantage felt the impact more keenly. Furthermore, many children and young people did not have the pre-requisite skills to access fully and effectively the remote learning provided. This group includes: newcomer children with language challenges, pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties who require face-to-face teaching and learners in a prison environment whose entry level literacy skills did not prepare them adequately for the demands of remote learning. The provision of digital devices on its own was insufficient to overcome all of the challenges, resulting in significant loss of, or disengagement from, learning. In addition, some parents were unable to support well their child's learning due to reasons which included work demands and their own confidence levels.

learning insight 3

Providers had to adapt their provision at pace. For example, there was a prompt response from childcare partnership managers, Health and Social Care Trusts and Sure Start providers to adapt their normal support services and provide practical, online and face-to-face support, tailored to meet the needs of families. Despite the best endeavours of organisations and their success in overcoming many problems, learning experiences for particular children and young people remained tough.

The youth sector was very quick to respond to the need for young people to stay connected, to facilitate the expression of their views and in providing community services, such as, the delivery of essential food items. The youth sector played a key role in helping many young people to stay positive and demonstrate strong community values, minimising the risk to those who may be susceptible to anti-social influences.

What will help us move forward constructively?

Most educators adapted and responded positively, and often collaboratively, to meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged children and young people. Working collaboratively and pooling resources and expertise can support the increasingly complex and diverse needs of those learners who have been hit hardest by Covid-19.

All children and young people deserve access to a high quality education. Prior to the pandemic, good progress was being made in tackling underachievement and closing the attainment gap between the most and least advantaged learners. In working towards a fairer and more equitable society, the successful implementation of: DE's response to A Fair Start; the Department for the Economy's draft skills strategy, Skills for a 10X Economy; and the 14-19 Transition into Careers Project, will be key in reducing inequality and improving opportunities for all learners.

learning insight 3

We all share the aim of building a just, inclusive and shared society. We know that we need to find solutions to the disadvantages that affect many of our learners. By remaining committed to tackling disadvantage, we can work towards a more equitable society, even when unforeseen challenges threaten to undermine our aspirations. The benefits of coherent multi-agency support are well-documented including in our own Evaluation of Full Service Extended Schools and Full Service Community Network report (2013). Providing the wraparound support these learners need is key to addressing the challenges outlined above. We know that practitioners are the main contributors to improving learners' lives and life-chances. They deserve coherent support from all of us, government, multi-disciplinary professional peers, parents, local communities and all other stakeholders contributing our expertise to complement their work. ETI will continue to support learners through working with teachers, tutors and lecturers to disseminate best practice in tackling educational disadvantage and to identify the innovative ways in which all organisations are working to help close the attainment gap.

LEARNING INSIGHT 4

Teachers' commitment and innovation enabled learning to continue through the lockdowns; we need to invest further in their professional learning.

What do we know?

Teachers are our most important and valuable educational resource; the experiences and outcomes for learners are dependent on the quality of the classroom and remote learning practice. Teachers have always responded well to ongoing challenge, change and policy direction. In addressing the disruptions created by the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders, teachers, support staff, parents and carers did a remarkable job in helping learners. We know our teachers have always had to adapt effectively to change and we know that they care for and work tirelessly for children and young people.

The vision of DE's Learning Leaders strategy (2016, p.4) is that 'every teacher is a learning leader, accomplished in working collaboratively with all partners in the interests of children and young people'. We know that our teachers are well-qualified, experienced in working collaboratively and can adapt extremely well in addressing the many challenges that society leaves at their classroom door. They deserve high quality professional learning opportunities to sustain their motivation, talent and commitment to the learners in their care.
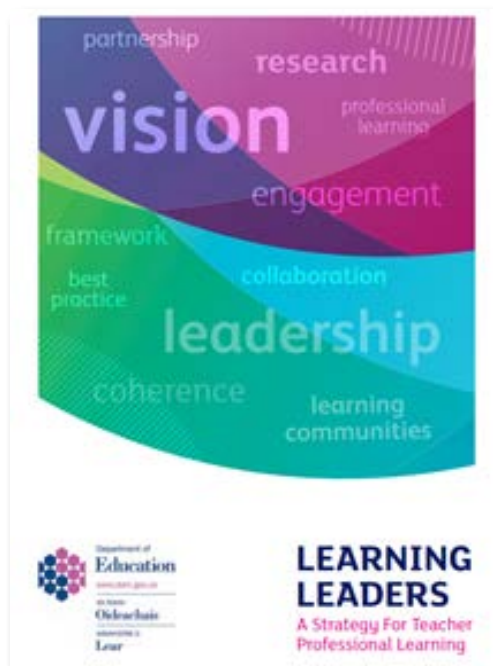
What have we learned?

The disruption of Covid-19 has let the public see much more explicitly the levels of commitment and dedication of the teaching profession and has allowed society to appreciate openly all that teachers do for children and young people.

learning insight 4

During the first lockdown, in spring 2020, many teachers adapted their lessons to provide remote learning through gradually introducing some elements of synchronous and asynchronous[2] approaches. Despite their best endeavours to provide engaging and enjoyable remote learning, schools noted variable levels of learner engagement and reported that remote learning is not as effective as face to face lessons. The challenges that some teachers faced included: not initially possessing the e pedagogical skills to provide digital lessons; providing effective feedback remotely; and ensuring that learning was well-paced and effective. There was an acceptance that remote learning was exceptionally challenging and does not suit all learners.

On returning to school in August 2020, teachers reported that they were better placed to provide a more balanced approach to learning through both remote and face-to-face learning.

The teachers had identified and addressed their own learning needs, which were met by individual learning, in-house professional development and through teachers sharing practice locally and regionally.

In discussions with inspectors, early years providers and schools reported significant levels of collaboration including peer support and inter-organisational sharing. New networks such as 'BlendEd NI' responded quickly, while existing Area Learning Communities developed further approaches to professional learning such as webinars for teachers. High levels of trust and mutual support amongst practitioners transformed individual professional growth to systemic growth that has benefitted many thousands of learners and ensured our system was resilient and robust throughout the school closures. Arrangements such as the cross-organisational link officer provision, and the support of our local initial teacher training institutes in providing professional learning opportunities and advice, also helped with the provision of effective collective support for schools during these challenging times.

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2 *In the context of remote learning, synchronous learning requires learners to attend live lessons at a designated time. Asynchronous learning allows learners to access pre-recorded and uploaded materials at any time.*
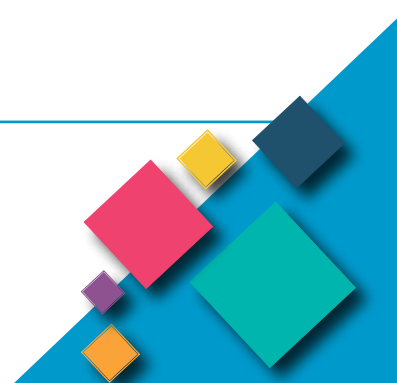
What will help us move forward constructively?

Teachers are our most valuable asset in improving the quality of learning our young people experience and consequently, their life-chances. Teachers' readiness to upskill themselves allowed for the continuity of learning during the pandemic through establishing new and innovative ways of teaching. Some of the methods used in the remote learning environment have the potential to enhance learning in face-to-face classrooms. For example, asynchronous activities support children in consolidating their learning at their own pace at home and enable parents to engage more closely with the learning process.

We need to show how much we value teachers by investing further in their personal and professional learning through greater access to high quality and relevant learning opportunities. We are now in the sixth year of a ten year strategy for supporting teachers' professional learning (TPL) through DE's Learning Leaders strategy. The ETI is particularly interested in identifying how the system can best integrate the self-generated professional learning developed by teachers, for teachers, into the wider DE Learning Leaders strategy, without stifling the innovation, independence or risk-taking that was evident during the periods of lockdown. Going forward, it will be important that teachers can avail of a good range of high quality, sustained professional development and have opportunities to share effective practice.

The ETI will support TPL and building capacity at middle management level in schools through its Empowering Improvement - Stepping Forward Together project.

Empowering improvement - Stepping forward together
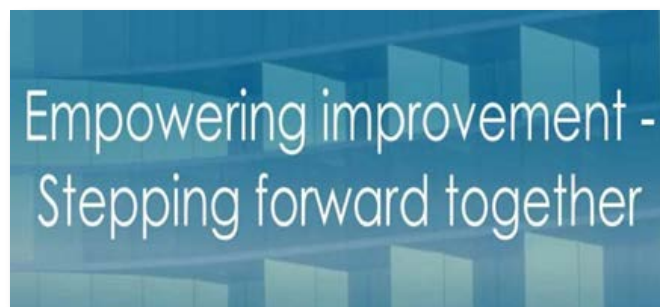
This initiative will focus on the project will focus on self-evaluation leading to whole organisation improvement for middle leaders. It will also look at self-evaluation of learning and teaching, encompassing digital learning, in order to help schools deliver the best possible provision and outcomes for all learners.

learning insight 4

LEARNING INSIGHT 5

The system is working more collaboratively; creating innovative and purposeful networks supports learners.

What do we know?

The aim of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 is to promote co-operation between certain public authorities and others as they deliver services aimed at improving the wellbeing of children and young people. During the pandemic many organisations set aside individual and sectoral interests in order to work collectively for the common good. Multi-agency approaches demonstrated that we can deliver curriculum and support programmes of wraparound individual and social care in a more holistic and effective way. For example, evidence from some of the European Social Fund projects indicates that providers work closely with employers to create opportunities for learners with complex and multiple additional needs to enter the workplace. Many learners benefit from accessing mentoring services and support such as coaching for interviews. These collaborative and connected ways of working meet the individual needs of these young people effectively and support them more holistically.

What have we learned?

Educators worked vigorously to provide continuity of learning remotely, while supporting learners and their families emotionally, pastorally and practically. In discussions with inspectors, schools reported significant levels of collaboration including peer support and with other schools. For example, communities of learning emerged within and between schools, colleges and other organisations: benefitting learners, parents and the local community being served.

Many of these networks and support partnerships helped learners with all of the pertinent issues affecting their ability to learn. In January to March 2021, for example, over 10% of young people aged 16-24 were not in education, employment or training (NEET). To support these young people, existing multi-agency work was intensified to

help meet their needs. This support included: assistance with accommodation needs, universal credit applications, preventing substance addiction, counselling, and family support.

DE's Continuity of Learning programme enabled support services, employing authorities and the ETI to work together effectively in the interests of learners. The Education Authority, Comhairle Na Gaelscolaiochta, the Controlled Schools' Support Council, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education, along with ETI, showed willingness and enthusiasm in taking on additional roles, such as the cross-organisational link officer role, which was valued highly by schools. Consultation with schools enabled ETI and others to learn more about the challenges organisations faced which, in turn, helped inform policy and enabled the dissemination of effective practice.

Many useful resources, training opportunities and tailored advice were offered to help schools, FE colleges and work-based learning providers overcome the extraordinary challenges facing education and training at that time. Learners benefitted from the collaboration of their teachers and tutors which resulted in the increased use of remote learning platforms. Consequently, the use of shared teaching approaches and resources supported learners both pastorally and academically, particularly during the periods of lockdown.

The Continuity of Learning programme, together with the significant amount of collaboration within and between schools and other learning organisations indicated that working well together brings significant benefits for learners and educators alike.

Featured resources

Content audit
Audit this published content
We publish regularly a range of resources, including evaluative reports identifying good and innovative practice, to help support organisations in addressing successfully the challenges within education.

- Further Education, Work-based Learning, European Social Fund - A guide for effective action planning
- ETI consultation on the delivery of remote learning
- Considerations for planning and self-evaluation in the academic year 2020-21
- Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches
- Education and Training Inspectorate Webinars - Video-on-Demand for teacher professional learning
- The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF)
- ETI Remote Learning Advice (Pre-school and Primary)
- Continuity of Learning: Guidance for Primary School Leaders and Practitioners Moving to Blended Learning in the Primary School
- Safeguarding - Remote and blended learning: challenges and approaches
- Safeguarding

learning insight 5

What will help us move forward constructively?

A key challenge for government departments, education and training organisations and others is how to collectively strengthen the processes for working well together. Nurturing trust, being willing to cooperate and realising the benefits created for learners are necessary principles for effective collaboration.

Learners have benefitted from collaborative approaches and it is important that this continues and grows. Many gains emerged from the organic collaborations between organisations that were necessitated by the challenges of Covid-19. Leaders and teachers managed to find many solutions locally to address particular needs and they shared these with one another, building good levels of trust and co-operation. It is important that we continue to work collaboratively in the best interests of all learners, retaining and building upon the many new and revised practices that have emerged since the onset of the pandemic.

Going forward, the ETI will continue to act as an impartial voice in education and training, speaking for learners through our evaluation of provision, stimulating educational debate and building capacity through inspection activity, including district engagement and undertaking thematic evaluations, and regional initiatives, such as, the 'Empowering Improvement – Stepping Forward Together' Project.
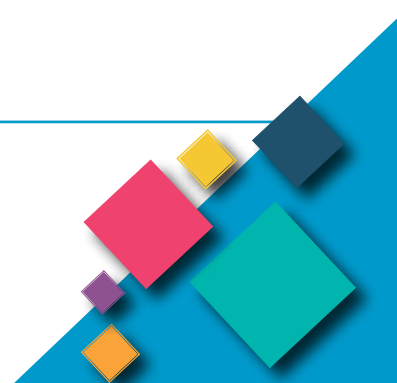
LEARNING INSIGHT 6

Leaders responded admirably to Covid-19 by providing continuity of learning; they still face many challenges and require further support to continue to manage these effectively.

What do we know?

Northern Ireland is fortunate to have so many excellent leaders at all levels in education and training. Their relentless dedication to, and work for, their learners has contributed significantly to the many improvements in education and training over many years. Leadership involves inspiring and guiding others, having credibility and providing vision, particularly at times when it is difficult to see what lies ahead. Management involves problem solving, providing order and organising resources to meet all needs, particularly unprecedented ones.

Northern Ireland's education and training system is privileged to have such talented and committed people at the forefront of the response to Covid-19. It is important to acknowledge that these leaders have addressed successfully an ever-growing range of increasingly complex issues over a considerable period of time. The significant range of challenges affecting education and training that existed before Covid-19 remain. These include: addressing educational underachievement, supporting effectively learners who have additional needs, promoting the emotional health and wellbeing of learners and staff, and managing limited resources and tight budgets. Self-evaluation as a process, validated externally by inspection activity, is crucial in bringing about positive change and improving the lives and life-chances of learners. Society expects assurances that schools are well-managed, learners are cared for and that they achieve well.

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Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework

a shared framework that supports inspection and self-evaluation across all phases

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What have we learned?

During Covid-19, Northern Ireland's school and college leaders met innovatively the challenges that arose. Given the extraordinary nature of the disruptions caused by the pandemic and the need to follow Public Health Agency (PHA) advice, leaders put in place remote learning arrangements and worked at pace to upskill their staff to ensure that there was continuity of learning. Leaders, at all levels, and their staff are still addressing many significant and complex issues; we need to continue to value, listen, support, encourage and work alongside them.

Covid-19 has intensified the problems and workloads that already existed. On top of the core business of organisational improvement, school and college leaders continue to deal with a range of additional Covid-related pressures on a daily basis. These include: the health and welfare of their staff, upskilling their workforce quickly and meeting the pastoral and academic needs of learners and, in many cases, their families as well.

They had to respond to guidance and direction, while as the pandemic progressed, work out how they could make their organisations safe to re-open. Monitoring the welfare and progression of learners was challenging, however many leaders were better prepared for the second lockdown in early 2021 due to the effectiveness of capacity building within their organisations. Many leaders were involved in the alternative awarding arrangements for public examinations. There were unfamiliar and new demands placed on organisations to ensure pupil assessment was rigorous and controlled to a high level; these high-stake processes were stressful for leaders, staff and learners alike.

ETI inspectors listened to hundreds of testimonies from principals from all over Northern Ireland through district engagement visits, survey work and through telephone and online meetings; what came across consistently was that our school and college leaders, while being human and vulnerable like everyone else, responded with commendable levels of courage, determination and resilience. Many felt overwhelmed by the additional administrative demands, which included contact tracing, interpreting and administering PHA guidance, facilitating alternative assessment arrangements

and maintaining staffing levels when so many learners and staff were getting sick or had to self-isolate.
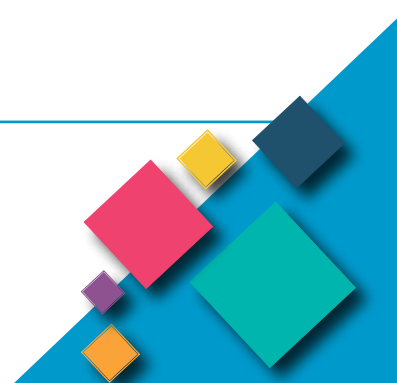
Many principals reported that these challenges brought extra pressures to what already is an extremely demanding role. Furthermore, for schools involved in area-based planning processes, additional anxieties were placed upon their leaders due to the ongoing uncertainties.

What will help us move forward constructively?

Going forward, challenges remain for leaders, including many unresolved pre-pandemic issues and newer Covid-related ones. It is important that collectively, we recognise the work of our leaders at all levels, acknowledge the severity of some of the challenges that may lie ahead and identify actions to alleviate any pressure points. In addition, it is important that the health and wellbeing of our leaders is prioritised and that inspection activity does not contribute to any undue stress. To this end, ETI is committed to working collaboratively with leaders in order to communicate expectations with clarity so that any anxieties around inspection are reduced and the process is transparent and constructive for all.

ETI recognises the pressures leaders face in managing their schools on a day-to-day basis. For example, many school leaders report that considerable time is spent on administration work such as finding substitute teachers, accessing the support of some external agencies and the bureaucracy necessitated by Covid-19. We should work to ensure that administration does not distract leaders from their essential work of improving the curriculum and learning. There is an important balance between ensuring there is sufficient accountability and assurance for the system, without diverting leaders and teachers too far from their core business.

ETI's core business is to provide impartial external evaluation through support and appropriate challenge. School and organisational leaders are accountable to their communities for the quality of the provision. Where leaders work alongside their district inspectors, the process of self-evaluation, validated through inspection activity, can be

learning insight 6

a productive and collaborative one which ultimately benefits the learners and provides the assurances a community needs.

ETI can support our leaders through focused district inspection activity which supports schools by offering external evaluation, advice and validation of the school's improvement journey. Furthermore, ETI will help schools build middle leadership capacity and improve learning and teaching through its Empowering Improvement: Stepping Forward Together initiative and will consult widely in developing a new inspection strategy.

Empowering Improvement – Stepping Forward Together

Date published: 15 October 2021

ETI is committed to wide-scale, meaningful consultation and engagement with all stakeholders in order to support schools and organisations as they move forward during this challenging time.

ETI aims to work alongside schools and organisations with a particular focus on sustainable capacity-building of leaders and teachers in the key area of self-evaluation, in order to improve the educational provision and attainment of all pupils/learners.

Empowering improvement -
Stepping forward together

LEARNING INSIGHT 7

All learners require a curriculum that enables them to succeed; the capacity and flexibility of the Northern Ireland Curriculum is there to meet the needs of all learners.

What do we know?

Curricula should reflect the values, culture and priorities of society. Learners are entitled to an enabling curriculum that meets their needs, is relevant to their lives and provides pathways through appropriate learning experiences. A relevant and empowering curriculum should develop knowledge, understanding and skills as well as nurturing attitudes that can be progressed through lifelong learning.

The NI curriculum (NIC) was designed to provide for diverse individual learning, taking account of local contexts so that lessons are relevant, enjoyable and matched closely to need. Non-statutory, pre-school, post-16 and youth curricula have all been designed in ways that complement similar skills development, but often the links and opportunites are not made explicit to learners of all ages, particularly at key transition points. It is important that the *outworkings* of the statutory curriculum enables learners to develop as individuals, participate in the communities in which they live and secure strong foundations for lifelong learning and work.

What have we learned?

The flexibility that is embedded in the NIC is there to meet the needs and aspirations of the learners. In planning a coherent curriculum, schools and organisations have had to contend with many additional issues including alternative examination arrangements, and public health regulations and constraints on the delivery of practical subjects. Across the FE colleges, opportunities for project-based learning – which can be used effectively to provide rich experiences for the students and enable them to develop a broad range of transferable skills that are highly valued by employers - were restricted due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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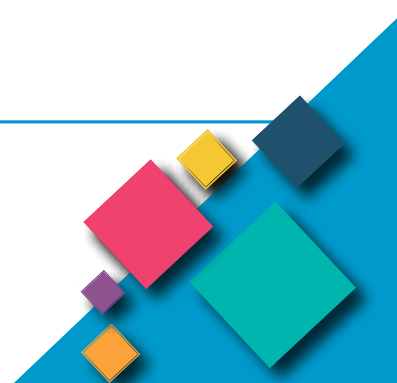
Classroom and workshop learning should be enriched through high quality additional experiences such as: outdoor learning; educational visits; workplace experiences; and, access to mentoring and coaching from local and international leaders and experts. While many of these opportunities were available to learners pre-Covid 19 and despite the best efforts of schools and organisations to make the curriculum relevant and enjoyable, it has to be acknowldeged that the public health restrictions disrupted these important learning experiences.

Consequently, this has resulted in a much narrower curriculum experience and has impacted on experiences and outcomes for many learners. For example, pupils could not enjoy educational visits, access careers conventions or attend the open days at universities and colleges. Learners undertaking professional and technical courses in FE colleges and work-based learning were unable to complete the practical elements of courses and consequently their accreditation had to be delayed.

The ETI's thematic reports on remote learning, including the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), featured examples of schools and organisations adapting creatively their curricula and associated pedagogy to meet their learners' needs. In addition, the pre-pre-school, primary and special phase thematic reports include case studies, outlining innovative solutions that schools and settings have employed to improve provision within localised and challenging contexts.

Phase-specific thematic reports on Remote Learning

Schools and other organisations are at a crossroads now regarding curriculum and future provision for their learners. We know also that the flexibility and opportunities within the NI curriculum have not been realised to their optimum.

What will help us move forward constructively?

We believe that the starting point post-pandemic should be that schools and organisations who know their learners best should adapt curricula to reflect the needs, interests and career aspirations of their learners.

Current and future employment requires learners who have the skills to collaborate with others, work in unfamiliar and changing contexts and think critically. Employers value skills and dispositions such as problem-solving, team-working and resilience. The core aim of the NIC aspires to develop learners as informed and responsible decision-makers. Schools should encourage learners to engage critically with information and recognise decision-making as a range of alternatives that can be subjected to testing for truth, accuracy and reliability.

The ETI is interested in how we can work with others to ensure that organisations are supported in tailoring their curriculum offer to meet the diverse needs of learners. This includes ETI assuring communities that the curriculum offer at all levels is coherent and manageable in developing confident, independent and reflective learners. Within curriculum design, schools must give serious consideration to ensuring that their post-16 provision is sustainable, provides very good pathways for learners and takes cognisance of how appropriate any transition offer may be. It is important that where vocational qualifications are offered, schools have the necessary resources to deliver enriched and engaging courses and that the staff are appropriately qualified and experienced in the area.

The ETI is keen to prioritise conversation about how organisations can best develop their learners as individuals who can participate effectively in society and have the skills to contribute well to the economy and environment.
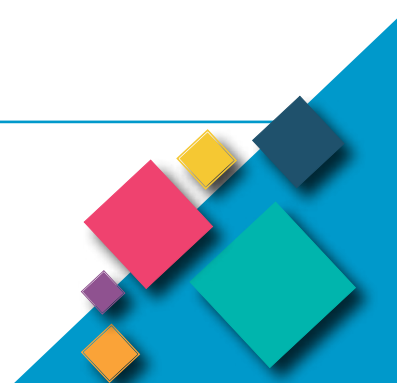
LEARNING INSIGHT 8

The world of work is changing dramatically; learners require high quality Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG), underpinned by an innovative cross-sectoral approach.

What do we know?

The world of work is constantly evolving and the pace of change has been accelerated by the pandemic. In this context, learners need ready access to up-to-date CEIAG, relevant workplace experiences and open pathways to a range of education, training and employment options. The range of courses offered and the subject choices learners make can be influenced by a school's values and traditions and by parental advice, some of which can be misinformed. In the context of the changing demands of the economy, societal attitudes to certain qualification and career pathways, curricula and CEIAG need to continue to adapt at pace in order to support learners' life-chances.

Some young people are more interested in, or have more aptitude for, the traditional academic subjects while others prefer more practical subjects, either due to the nature of the content of the courses or due to how they are assessed. The courses offered through the Department of Education's (DE) Entitlement Framework should be economically relevant and individually engaging with clear progression pathways. To improve the career prospects of all learners, all teachers need to be supported to keep up-to-date with labour market intelligence and relevant information about the world of work. For example, apprenticeships offer a direct route into employment and higher level apprenticeships provide a valuable alternative to university.

What have we learned?

During Covid-19, learners were unable to access readily, work and volunteering experiences, educational visits, youth provision and careers conventions. Learners were somewhat disadvantaged by being unable to meet and engage face-to-face with external advisers, such as employers, college and university staff and others who normally support their career planning. Some learners were able to access online

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provision provided by the Careers Advisory Service which they report did help them with their career planning.

The impact of Covid-19 has been widely felt across the local and global labour markets. The pandemic has accelerated changes that were already underway, and new opportunities are opening up for employment in areas such as: digitisation, cybersecurity, robotics, artificial intelligence and virtual reality. To enable learners to benefit from these new opportunities, schools and colleges are beginning to reflect upon the implications this will have on their provision.   Promoting work experience and volunteering in some of the new technologies can extend learners understanding of the opportunities available.

The Department for the Economy's (DfE) economic vision document, A 10X Economy identifies the new industries likely to drive Northern Ireland's economy in the next decade (fig1).

A 10X economy draws attention to the need for DE and DfE to work collaboratively to support optimum delivery of effective careers education through a coherent cross-departmental strategy for CEIAG.

Figure 1: 'New and Emerging Technologies', A 10X Economy, Department for the Economy, May 2021
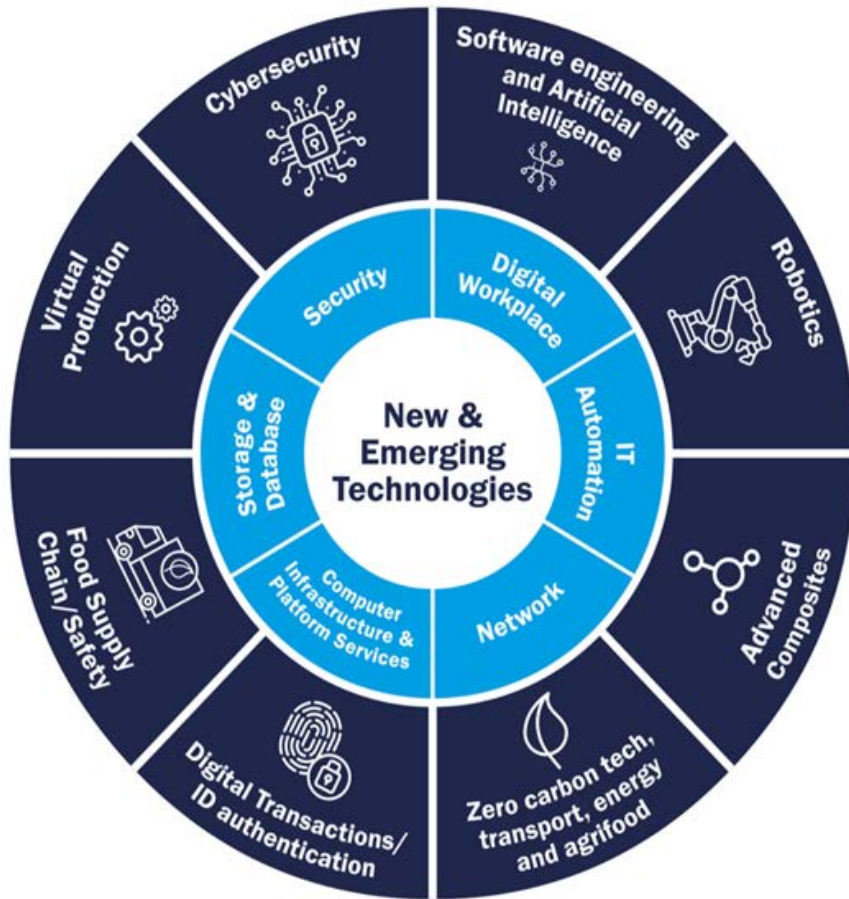
What will help us move forward constructively?

Careers in the new industries will provide excellent opportunities for learners. All learners will be better served by an organisation that offers an enabling curriculum and can provide expert teaching and tuition. In addition, learners who choose a more vocational career pathway will benefit from access to industry-standard equipment as well as local, national and international links with employers.

In continuing to work in the best interests of their learners, organisations should consider carefully their ability to offer specialist instruction, provide access to relevant courses and

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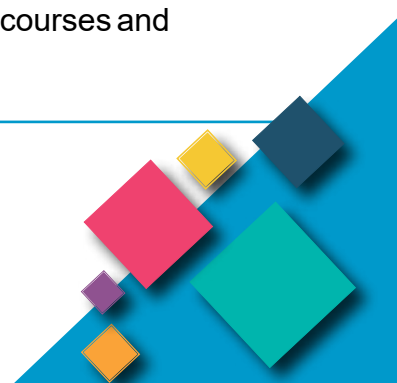
enable learners to use industry-standard equipment and resources. Taking a learner centred approach will help identify when further education and training can provide a more appropriate curriculum and viable pathway than a school setting at post-16. In addition, according to UCAS, 'misplaced snobbery' around apprenticeships may restrict learner opportunities; it is timely to value the many benefits of apprenticeships, including those at a higher level.

At transitional points, where learners choose their next pathway, the schools, colleges and other organisations must function in the learners' best interests and the learners should have access to information on pathways from a wide range of providers at the right time. Schools can support their young people to make the right choice about where their career needs and aspirations can be best met; this is particularly important for learners with particular needs, including those in special schools, where advice needs to be highly individualised.

Careers teachers deserve more support in being upskilled further, so that they are equipped and confident in their roles. It is worth considering how Teacher Professional Learning could support this process through an ambitious programme of professional learning as part of an innovative and cross-sectoral strategy for CEIAG. Teacher Professional Learning and first-hand access, experience and fixed-term placements in industry and business for teachers could enhance their capacity to enable learners to make informed decisions around the best career pathway for them, including lifelong learning. Both DE and DfE have central roles in guiding and supporting this important work.

LEARNING INSIGHT 9

In a year when public examinations were cancelled, some pupils reported experiences of 'testing overload'; the constant collection and collation of data can distract from learning.

What do we know?

The ETI acknowledges the importance of assessment and testing as part of an effective assessment for learning pedagogy. High quality, qualitative feedback can make a big difference in improving learners' knowledge, understanding and skills; key factors of which are teacher professional judgement and knowledge of the learner. Effective assessment informs conversations around learning between the teacher and the learner to discuss strengths and aspects of their work which may be improved. It is important that learners understand the organisation's assessment practices, the purpose of each assessment and the feedback a teacher provides, and that they are given opportunities to act upon teacher feedback and apply it to their work in order to make improvements.

Organisations routinely track the standard of learners' work in order to demonstrate progression but excessive internal testing can consume valuable learning time. Assessment is integral to learning and teaching and assessment for learning has a positive impact on learners' progress. All organisations should assure themselves that their data and tracking systems support learners to make progress, inform learning and interventions and are not overly burdensome for learners and staff.

What have we learned?

Ensuring that arrangements for assessment are robust while providing pupils with high quality learning experiences can be a difficult balance to achieve.

In a year when public examinations were cancelled, many learners were engaged in numerous internal assessments. Teachers, in both primary and post-primary schools, reported that correcting and providing feedback for online testing was excessively time

consuming. On returning to face-to-face lessons, the loss of teaching time during the lockdowns was compounded by a focus on assessment rather than learning in some organisations. On return to school in the spring of 2021, teachers and learners reported that extensive assessments and tests were set, in order to ascertain gaps in learning.

The cancellation of formal examinations in the summers of 2020 and 2021 added additional pressures and brought in new demands for assessment data, in order to confirm centre determined grades. Teachers reported to inspectors that this testing and its associated administration was challenging for staff and pupils. Teachers and leaders faced the extremely challenging task of having to put in place alternative awarding arrangements to provide centre determined grades.

What will help us move forward constructively?

It will be important that a holistic and appropriately balanced teaching, learning and assessment process is re-established. While it is essential for schools and organisations to monitor the progress of their learners, the collection and collation of data can at times become overly burdensome for learners and teachers alike; too much testing can distract from learning and the evidence shows a demotivating impact on learners' engagement in, and enjoyment of, their lessons and education more generally.

ETI promotes the effective use of data but we, along with organisations, know that data is only part of the picture in assessing learning and progression. High quality assessments can generate rich data and can provide valuable information about learner progress but assessment practices must put learners, and learning, first. The professional holistic judgement of educators who know their learners best is crucial first-hand evidence in how learners are performing and should contribute to planning next steps and interventions in learning.

Covid-19 is still presenting significant challenges. Schools, parents and young people are still concerned that alternative assessment arrangements for public examinations may have to be introduced again in 2022; this is causing uncertainty and some anxiety. Any decision to change the current understanding of how the 2021/22 series of examinations will be conducted, needs to be communicated in a timely manner to allow

learners and staff to be well-prepared. In 2021, the quality of the arrangements was improved by leaders, practitioners, parents and young people being actively involved in the decision-making processes around alternative assessment arrangements; this needs to continue. ETI is committed to monitoring the outworking of any alternative arrangements and commenting without fear or favour on how modifications can best meet the needs of all learners.
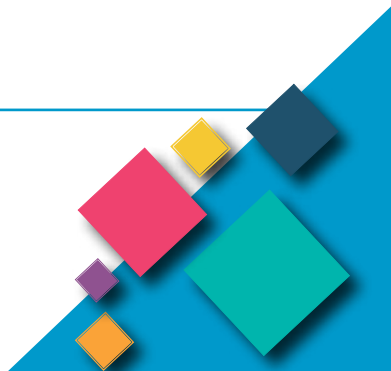
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LEARNING INSIGHT 10

There are many digital issues to be resolved; we need a regional strategy to unlock the benefits of technology-enabled learning.

What do we know?

The impact of Covid-19 has been widely felt across education and the local and global labour markets. The pandemic has accelerated changes that were already underway, and new opportunities are opening up for learning and employment in areas such as: digitisation, robotics, artificial intelligence and virtual reality.

Government departments have invested significantly in providing digital equipment, learning platforms, digital resources and high-speed broadband to schools, further education colleges and other organisations. These resources are essential for learning, but not all learners can access them. Many learners with special educational needs, including the growing number of such learners in mainstream schools, are benefitting from appropriate adjustments including the use of suitable software and assistive technologies.

We know that when staff collaborate and share expertise, learners benefit. More opportunities are now being provided for staff to learn from one another; particularly in less formal situations and quite often through social media. Learners would undoubtedly benefit if we could work in a more joined-up way to share digital expertise across the sectors. Currently, we do not have a regional cross-sectoral digital strategy to meet the professional needs of staff and support the development of learners' digital literacy.

What have we learned?

Schools and other organisations have discussed with inspectors the various digital applications they are using, including the advantages and risks of applications used, such as security and safeguarding issues. They also reported the extensive work undertaken to upskill staff. It is widely recognised that during the Covid-19 lockdowns, practitioners developed both their ICT technical competences and their e-pedagogical

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skills in order to deliver effective remote learning. While it is accepted that remote learning was largely an emergency measure, practitioners continue to develop and embed more effective e-pedagogy to support home and remote learning, and as a contingency plan in order to address any future Covid-related disruption.

ICT should permeate learning, teaching and assessment. It is embedded as a core cross-curricular skill in the Northern Ireland Curriculum and is crucial for learners' future employment opportunities, including accessing key every-day services. Despite this, the overall number of pupils taking appropriate software qualifications is low, particularly in non-selective post-primary schools.

It is disappointing that not enough females are choosing qualifications or careers in ICT. A low number of females are taking ICT/software qualifications across all sectors. In post-primary schools, from 2015-16 to 2019-20, there has been a reduction of approximately 64% of females taking the CCEA GCSE Digital Technology (from September 2016) in comparison to the previously offered ICT qualification. In further education colleges, over the same period, the number of females studying qualifications in ICT decreased by around 40%.

What will help us move forward constructively?

It will be important that young people view ICT both as a crucial life skill and also as a discrete subject leading to very good employment and career prospects. More positive perceptions around ICT begin in the primary schools with a focus on digital audio, managing data, coding, communication and presentational skills. At post-primary level, consideration should be given to how schools support progression to higher level learning in ICT, including ways to encourage more females to study for software qualifications.

More opportunities need to be developed to allow more collaborative learning between ICT/software practitioners in early years, schools, further education, work-based learning and the community and voluntary sector, including professional learning to support skills development.

Given the increasing importance of learning through technology, the greater use of remote learning and employment opportunities in digital industries, learners require ready access to highly effective ICT provision. To support this, a cross-departmental and sector-wide digital strategy should be developed to inform digital skills, educational technology and applications provision across the early years, schools, further education, work-based learning and community and voluntary sectors, and the professional learning needs of our education workforce.

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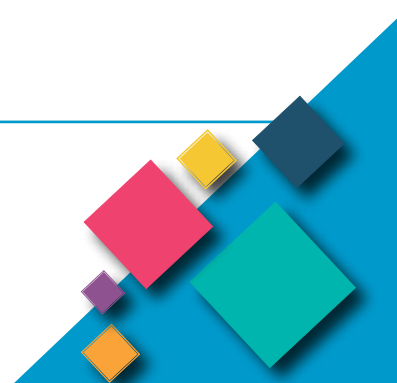
CLOSING COMMENTS

We continue to learn lessons from our response to Covid–19; building on them will support us to continue to step up and step forward for learners.

The premise of these learning insights was to reflect upon how Northern Ireland's education and training system is responding to Covid-19 and other challenges and offer constructive ways to step up and move forward. Through the engagement of a dedicated workforce in education, the profile of the work of a wide range of support services for children and young people has been raised. It is our hope that, in the throes of this health pandemic and its many challenges, children and young people can take some comfort in the knowledge that so many educational professionals are working tirelessly to provide wraparound support for them and their families.

Many learners benefitted from the adaptability and resilience of education and training staff, leaders and parents/carers in enabling the continuity of learning. The difficulty of keeping schools, colleges and other organisations operational required colossal efforts amid persistent and ongoing Covid-related disruptions. Teachers and tutors worked with dedication and flexibility in order to provide care for their learners and enable learning to continue; this was exhausting and challenging work. This huge commitment to learners is commendable and has allowed many of them to progress successfully to the next stage of their learning with increased independence and resilience. Educators have worked hard too to address the needs of those children, young people and parents who have been over-whelmed or have become more vulnerable through circumstances beyond their control. The challenge now is to our ability to draw on the wide range of skills across providers, to customise support for each learner, while recognising the pathways to dependence and independence, intervening at the right time to support their growth as individuals, lifelong learners and active citizens in creating the future.
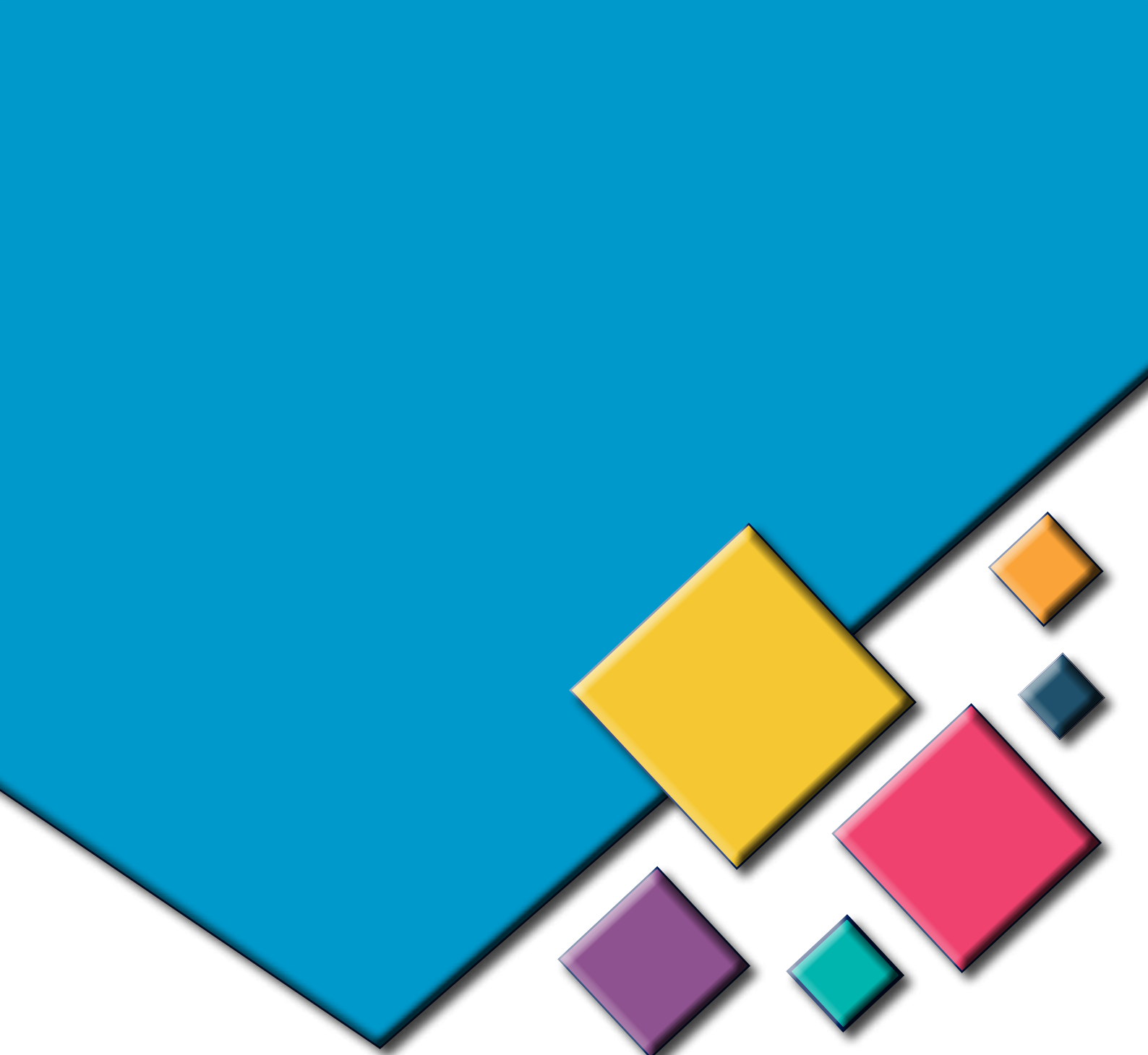
As we progress through the 2021-22 academic year, it is clear that we are a long way from a complete return to pre-Covid-19 education and training experiences. Everyone has had to adapt in order to surmount the many Covid-19 challenges and we know much more about what does and does not work. Best practice has emerged where

closing comments

there has been informed decision-making, based on first-hand evidence and local research, coupled increasingly with forward planning which has begun to recognise and anticipate risk as we understand more about the impact of Covid-19. The ETI is willing to initiate conversations around how we, as an education and training system, can support our teachers, trainers, parents and learners more fully and engage with them more collaboratively to find the right solutions. We want to contribute to ensuring our education and training providers are supported fully, resources are targeted at the front-line of provision and they are encouraged, empowered and appreciated for their commitment.

While inspection is currently paused, ETI will continue to engage, evaluate and report on the pertinent issues in education and training, sharing the findings widely, with a view to initiating solutions-based processes from which all learners can benefit. The responses to this series of learning insights have demonstrated a commitment to ongoing collaborative working in stepping up and stepping forward to support our learners. They deserve no less.

STEPPING UP & STEPPING FORWARD

A series of 10 learning insights