Addressing COVID-19 challenges through institutionalisation and innovation within an evolving skills ecosystem: contexts of England and small islands in the British Isles

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The chapter aims to consider some implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for VET and workplace learning policies and practices in the contexts of England and small islands of the British Isles. One of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has created both challenges and opportunities of unprecedented intensity for lifelong learning within an evolving (skills) ecosystem. Shifts in organisational practices intensified by pandemic have become sustained and recognised both within individual organisations and more broadly, across industries. Workplaces and VET sectors had quickly to adapt their strategies and practices to new ways of working, learning and teaching, while coping with constant change. Some strategies and practices have been largely perceived as temporary and short-term solutions during the pandemic, as contingency arrangements to manage any further impact of COVID-19. However, some of them have been subsequently retained and institutionalised, particularly, those related to digitalisation, flexible learning and working modes, innovation, automation and sustainability. The chapter will aim to explore how this process of institutionalisation of innovation, challenges and opportunities is playing out in the contexts of ecosystems of England and some small islands of the British Isles.

Keywords: skills ecosystem; COVID-19; workplace learning; England and small islands of the British Isles

Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic has brought about a range of unprecedented challenges, affecting the development of VET and workplace learning. The distinctive nature of the pandemic and accompanying lockdown measures have triggered various shifts in VET and work-related policies and practices. Consequently, both workplaces and VET institutions had to swiftly adjust their strategies and practices to accommodate new ways

of working, learning, and teaching, while simultaneously coping with continuous change. These adjustments frequently entailed fostering institutional and individual resilience, creativity, and innovation. Their efficacy and sustainability have depended crucially on contexts and the functioning of local and national skills eco-systems, reflecting the interdependencies of business settings and associated business models; institutional/policy frameworks; modes of engaging labour; structure of jobs, and levels of skills and systems for their formation (Buchanan et al 2017).

In England, the impact of several lockdowns (2020-2021) has been evident, leading to severe consequences for vocational institutions (including Further Education (FE) colleges and private providers), workplaces, and businesses across various sectors. A significant number of employees were either furloughed or made redundant, particularly in the hardest-hit sectors, such as hospitality, tourism, retail, entertainment, and construction. Moreover, there was considerable disparity by demographics, with women, individuals with lower pay, and young people being the worst affected (Resolution Foundation 2020). Research undertaken by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020a; 2020b), observed that younger workers were nearly two-and-a-half times more likely to work in a sector that shut down due to the pandemic. These circumstances caused by the pandemic have severely affected young people's progression, life chances and career development (Edge Foundation 2020). A recent study (Ray-Chaudhuri and Xu 2023) also highlights that 'the loss in working experience and the reduced ability to progress in their careers during the pandemic, coupled with shocks to mental health, could leave long-lasting scars on recent graduates' (Ray-Chaudhuri and Xu 2023: 2). Similarly, Christie and Swingewood (2022: 5) observe that 'COVID-19 exacerbated existing concerns about young people's position in the labour market,' particularly as 'young people were more adversely affected than other generations by changes to employment and work caused by the pandemic.' . Additionally, the pandemic has intensified the trend towards increased polarisation in the youth labour market between high- and low-skill jobs, leading to fewer 'stepping stone' mid-skill jobs and more young people in insecure and part-time work (Williams et al 2021: 2). Research by Spours et al. (2022: 785) has identified five 'indirect harms' resulting from the effects of successive 'lockdowns' on local economies, workplaces, training opportunities as well as on learners' well-being and life chances.

- COVID Harms 1. Vocational disruption
- COVID Harms 2. Problematical transitions including access to higher education
- COVID Harms 3. Inequalities, disadvantaged young people and NEETs
- COVID Harms 4. The mental health and well-being of young people
- COVID Harms 5. A 'stressed' FE Sector

This indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about numerous unprecedented challenges. However, there is growing evidence that during the crisis, it has also provided an opportunity to reflect on and develop innovative policies and practices for learning and working. A study undertaken by the British Council points out that the challenges posed by COVID-19 present an enormous opportunity for the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector to innovate and increase its potential. The research has observed that these new approaches can include experiential virtual training, remote placements with employers, and other initiatives to enhance the inclusiveness of provision and work experience (British Council 2021). During the pandemic, these strategies and practices were initially perceived as temporary and short-term solutions, known as contingency arrangements to manage any further impact of COVID-19. However, some of these strategies have been subsequently retained and institutionalized, particularly, through the following key trends:

- Remote, hybrid, and/or flexible learning and working modes;
- Digitalisation, which involved experimenting and employing different modes of digital technology, including online blended learning;
- Focus on innovation, automation and sustainability;
- Focus on addressing skills shortages and labour market mobility - skills that support swift economic recovery, both in the pandemic and post-pandemic reconstruction;
- Resilience and skills to manage emergency within institutions and workplaces.

The chapter will discuss these key trends and some implications for policy and practice discourse in England, while also considering examples of institutionalisation from small island contexts closely connected in the social and governance ecologies of the British Isles. When considering the developments in the context of England and the British Isles, the chapter does not aim to undertake a systematic comparative analysis but rather aims to exemplify the emerging trends during COVID-19 that led to the institutionalisation of strategies associated with the initial emergency responses. Some similarities and differences will be discussed within the common discourse of the evolving ecosystem.
The next two sections will introduce the respective contexts of England and selected small islands of the British Isles, specifically discussing some key trends associated with Covid-related responses such as remote and flexible learning and working modes, digitalisation and the changing nature of learning and working spaces. The subsequent section will consider the impact of digitalisation, as one of the major trends, and its implications for institutionalisation and for future developments. The chapter will then focus on some implications for future developments, illustrating the ways in which the institutionalisation of changes, that were initially implemented as an emergency response

to lockdowns, has become an enduring development characterising both England and the small islands' approaches to learning and working within their respective ecosystems. The chapter will further reflect on the implications of these developments, which often require a high degree of resilience, as well as new skills and expertise that individuals need to develop to address various challenges in the constantly changing world of work. The concluding part will pull together issues considered within this chapter, discussing the ways the COVID-19 pandemic has created both challenges and opportunities for VET and workplace learning within an evolving skills ecosystem.

England: remote, hybrid, and flexible learning and working.

In England, the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 has triggered a rapid and significant shift towards remote learning and working. In March 2020, the Westminster Government implemented a series of lockdowns and requested people to work from home where possible. Subsequently, on March 23, 2020, the Government issued guidance requiring people to stay at home and away from others, thus introducing the notion of covid related social distancing (House of Parliament 2021: 12). Both VET institutions and workplaces had to adapt to the new reality, which involved a move to remote learning and working, where possible. Working remotely has become one of the most notable shifts in organisational practices, accelerated and intensified by the pandemic, which resulted in enormous uptake in hybrid and fully remote work. As noted by Hansen et al.'s research, over time, it has become clear that this shift will endure long after the initial forcing event (Hansen et al 2023: 1). Subsequently, a variety of workplace-related COVID-19 guidance was issued, which was continually modified and adjusted, to address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in England (UK Government 2021). Advice to businesses in other parts of the UK was set by the Northern Ireland Executive, the Scottish Government, and the Welsh Government.

In December 2021, members of the Flexible Working Taskforce published guidance on effective hybrid working. The key points of the guidance included recognising the importance of appropriate training for managers, specifically on how to manage and support hybrid teams effectively, including performance management, remote communication, collaboration and relationship building. In addition, the guidance notes that ongoing listening activity with employees, managers, and employee representatives should be undertaken to understand the early lessons of hybrid and whether hybrid is delivering anticipated benefits to individuals and the organisation (House of Parliament 2022a: 12). Some influential policy papers, aimed to offer more flexibility and to encourage skills development and lifelong learning. The Skills and Post-16 Education Bill (House of Parliament 2022b) introduced in the House of Lords on 18 May 2021:

- aimed to improve how the skills and post-16 education system functions in England.
- supported the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, announced by the Prime Minister in September 2020. (Prime Minister Office 2020)
- aimed to implement reforms set out in the Department for Education (DFE) White Paper, Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth (Department for Education 2021), giving employers a greater say in skills development and introducing a Lifelong Loan Entitlement.

It's worth noting that the key policy paper mentioned above, 'Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth' (Department for Education 2021), aimed not only to empower employers with a greater role in skills development but also included measures to address recommendations from the Independent Panel Report for the Review of Post-16 Education and Funding (the Augar report), which was published in May 2019. These measures particularly focused on expanding opportunities for flexible, lifelong learning (Department for Education 2019).

Both the policy discourse and challenges caused by the pandemic have resulted in the growing role of remote and flexible working and learning modes. Hansen et al.'s research, which examines the full text of over 250 million job postings across five English-speaking countries, provides compelling evidence of the significant surge in remote working during the pandemic. Figure 1 (source: Hansen et al 2023: 55) illustrates a substantial increase in the demand for hybrid and fully remote work across the five countries. The figure indicates that the unweighted share of new job ads offering hybrid or fully remote work is highest in the UK.
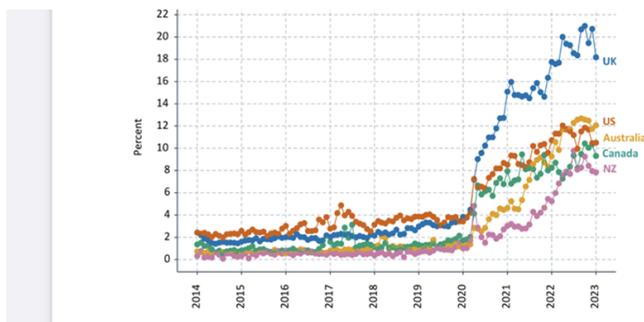

Figure 1 (source: Hansen et al 2023: 55)

Working remotely is a term that encompasses various configurations of work conducted outside conventional physical workplace settings. It may pertain to a range of contexts and spaces, such as libraries and trains. The concept of workplace space has been recently reconceptualized in response to evolving societal perceptions and demands regarding learning and work (Malloch et al 2021; Kersh 2015; Kersh and Evans 2017). Even before the pandemics, workplace spaces have been increasingly characterized by their multidimensional nature, blurring the boundaries between different work-related contexts and settings (Kersh and Evans, 2017). The emergence of new learning and working spaces has emphasised the growing flexibility of learning opportunities and the evolving demands of contemporary workplace. The pandemic has exacerbated the blurred boundaries between work, learning, and other environments, highlighting the flexibility of both workplace location and working hours. On the location spectrum, some tasks may necessitate specific places, while others can be accomplished anywhere. Similarly, on the time scale, certain tasks may require adherence to specific schedules whereas others can be executed at any time (CIPD 2021). Furthermore, as emphasized by Derrick et al (2021), the pandemic has brought into sharp view that working productively goes beyond just the tasks that are required to be done. Research indicates that remote work often demands more than the execution of specific tasks; it calls for creativity, resilience, and multitasking. In addition, resilience has become a critical dimension, particularly concerning managing the stress and anxiety associated with national lockdowns and the complexities of transitioning to full or hybrid remote work. This transition frequently demands the development of new skills, such as ICT proficiency (e.g., information and communication technology) as well as building resilience through personal commitment, problem-solving, and multitasking.

Small islands in the British Isles: unique ecosystems and Covid responses

Small islands that form part of the British Isles represent distinct contexts and unique ecosystems that relate to the UK in different ways. The research by Dabbous et al (2022) investigated selected small islands around the UK with relationships to UK governance, whether governed by UK parliament and devolved parliaments, such as the islands of Scotland, or with other established governance relationships to the UK such as Crown Dependency. Islands known as 'crown dependencies' (Isle of Man[1], Bailiwicks of Jersey, Guernsey[2]) are self-governing on all domestic matters and they are not represented in the UK parliament. In the Channel Islands, large enough islands operate their own

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[1] The Isle of Man is located in the Irish Sea between Great Britain and Ireland.

[2] located in the English Channel and together known as Channel Islands

parliaments (Dabbous et al 2022: 7-8). The governance relationships have implications for education systems, and also for the ways in which COVID-19 restrictions have been managed in each location. For example, the crown dependency islands' education policy developments link to a certain extent to education policies within the UK but such linkages are not legally required and policy developments are introduced in the islands according to their specific needs and contexts.   All participating islands selected for the research had more than one secondary school but were big enough to have their own further education college and an established post-16 provision. These colleges also provided on-island higher education courses.

The islands have experienced the outbreak of the pandemic similarly to the UK mainland and went into lockdown in the last two weeks of March 2020. However, lockdown timescales and recovery plans for re-opening colleges and essential services varied. Focusing on schools and colleges lockdowns, Jersey, for example, only had one lockdown, Guernsey had two lockdowns and the Isle of Man three lockdowns. The durations of school and college closures were generally shorter in the self-governing islands than those that applied in the directly governed counties and islands of England and Scotland.

The frequency and the length of lockdown, and the preparedness of FE colleges for going into lockdown clearly had an impact on their responses. Further specificities of the small islands, such as geographical size and the relatively small population, offered unique possibilities to overcome the challenges FE colleges faced due to Covid. FE interviewees often referred to the small community spirit and 'everybody knows each other' when asked about how their employer engagement changed and, specifically, what possibilities they had to support their disadvantaged young people.

Given the differences of lockdown frequency and length, the small islands' abilities to have a clearer sense of how their policy makers planned to respond to Covid, offered other solutions for FE colleges. These FE colleges often rearranged the curriculum, which meant that they focused on the delivery of theory during lockdown and picked up the practical elements of the curriculum once the colleges were open. This was possible when FE colleges had a sense of the extent of lockdown. Employer engagement is fundamental to VET. While this partially stopped and changed during COVID-19, there were ways this could be sustained and resumed in some cases very quickly given the close communities on small islands.

The role of digitisation and use of ICT

In England and in small islands of the British Isles alike, at the time of the pandemic, digitalisation has emerged as an important trend underpinning remote and hybrid modes of learning and working, and ICT has been commonly perceived as a 'key enabler of

remote and hybrid working' (House of Parliament 2022). Digital tools like websites, social media platforms, smartphones, content-sharing systems, other platforms and gadgets have played a crucial role in enabling businesses to maintain their day-to-day workplace activities, and participate in innovation, research and development. A Cedefop study observes that the coronavirus pandemic and its wide-ranging implications have accelerated digital skills demand in many occupations, especially non-ICT ones (Cedefop 2021). Businesses in England have swiftly embraced remote work arrangements to maintain their operations. Employers have been increasingly using video conferencing tools, collaboration platforms, and project management software to facilitate communication and workflow.

Equally, in VET, virtual classrooms became the new norm, allowing students to continue their studies and interact with teachers remotely. This shift brought about both challenges and opportunities, as educators had to cope with ensuring equal access to technology and internet connectivity for all students and exploring innovative ways to deliver engaging and effective virtual lessons. Comparisons can be made between system-wide findings in England and the other jurisdictions of the UK (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland), with the specific situation in 'island colleges' in small islands highlighting the ways in which the vocational challenges could be creatively addressed in some 'close-knit' communities that, at the same time, have multiple interconnections and interdependencies in neighbouring eco-systems (Dabbous et al 2022).

In the context of small islands of the British Isles, FE colleges clearly experienced 'Vocational disruption' (Covid Harm 1) due to the lockdown and developed their own response to teaching and learning of vocational courses. Online teaching and learning is not new. What was new at the beginning of the pandemic was the speed, intensity and extent to which course delivery shifted online. Island colleges have already used different learning platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Blackboard, Zoom and Canvas and had online teaching built into their practice well before Covid. This was also due to their geographical sizes and locations. Nevertheless, having the tools to access education has been key and many FE colleges on the islands were able to lend their learners laptops in order for them to remain engaged with education and training. They were often able to do so from day one. Similarly, developing further digital tools and in particular digital skills of teaching staff and learners have been key to successful online and blended teaching and learning. Further, most FE colleges on the islands developed their IT support further. These tendencies are not unique and fit in well with what happened across the UK.

Online and blended teaching models have been promoted through various national initiatives in the countries of the UK. In England, the Department for Education (responsible for education including higher and further education policy, apprenticeships,

and wider skills in England) launched the 'Skills Toolkit' – a new online learning platform providing free access to digital, numeracy and employability courses to help people build skills, progress in work and, during lockdown, to maintain skills development during furlough (Department for Education 2020). As highlighted by Cedefop (2021), the effective utilisation of digital skills has emerged as a driver of resilience, assisting both workers and entire organisations in adjusting to the new realities forged by the pandemic. This has further facilitated the uninterrupted delivery of public and private services. Notably, numerous employees who did not previously incorporate digital skills into their immediate work responsibilities were able to seamlessly transition to remote virtual work in response to the pandemic.

However, the development of digital skills, especially during the time of COVID-19, posed challenges for many employees. They were required to quickly master new digitally related skills within a relatively short period. Additionally, the accelerated pace of digitisation has contributed to a digital divide, resulting in inequalities in access to skills and training. This has particularly led to the following issues:

- Workers who earn more tend to work in jobs with more scope for home working: Employees who earn higher hourly wages are more likely to be able to work from home.
- The impact of digitisation will differ across sectors, jobs and geographical areas.
- Women, BME workers, young workers and migrants are overrepresented in jobs that are very liable to digitisation.
- The evidence suggests a digital skills gap, particularly amongst workers in precarious types of employment. The lack of on-the job training opportunities puts these workers at high risk of unemployment in the future. (TUC 2022)
- Those lacking digital literacy are considerably disadvantaged.

While this period of change was associated with significant challenges, it also revealed the potential for a more flexible and adaptable approach to education and employment in the future. As restrictions eased, a hybrid model of learning and working has been gradually adopted and institutionalised, combining the best of both physical and virtual dimensions of learning and working spaces.

Implications for future developments

This section will examine key implications arising from the changes and challenges faced by VET and workplace learning during the pandemic. Shifts in organizational practices, such as flexible and hybrid working and learning, have become enduring and widely recognized and adopted, within individual institutions and across the business world. The

gradual institutionalisation of these emergent measures has become a pivotal development, shaping fresh approaches to learning and working post-pandemic both in England and in small islands of the British Isles. Simultaneously, these developments underscore the need for new skill sets and new occupations to address both existing and emerging challenges intensified by COVID-19. The complex interplay between these challenges and opportunities brought about by the pandemic will be explored.

Institutionalisation

Some strategies, particularly those related to digitalisation, flexible and remote working and learning, have been formalized and have contributed to the emergence of innovative approaches in the context of vocational education and training (VET) and workplace learning. A study undertaken by British Council, points out, 'that change that was initially implemented as an emergency response to lockdowns and campus closures has generated efficient and sustainable practices that suggest a complete return to pre-pandemic TVET policy and practice is unlikely'. The current social and economic challenges, caused by the COVID-19 crisis and the subsequent need for many workplaces across the world to move to remote working and learning, represent a powerful example of the changing nature of the learning space at work. (British Council, 2021)

In both England and the small islands contexts, similar tendencies have led to the gradual institutionalization of COVID-19-related responses, which were initially employed as short-term and temporary measures. In small island contexts of the British Isles, it has been noted (Dabbous et al., 2022) that lessons learned during college closures have resulted in long-lasting impacts on the way teaching and learning take place. In VET and work-related learning, these developments have been characterized by a consensus that the traditional pre-COVID-19 ways of teaching, learning and working do not need to fully return as the default. The key features of these new approaches have included increased flexibility for staff and students to engage in some form of remote working and learning, as well as rethinking physical spaces at colleges and workplaces to accommodate blended learning and working approaches.

Institutionalisation of post-pandemic VET changes in England is rooted in the dominant models for VET development and the way in which these are developing in the UK. The direction of travel is towards the systemic upgrading and enhancement of TVET as an alternative but equivalent (in status) pathway parallel to the 'academic route'. This process has encountered some significant set-backs as a consequence of Covid, which has impacted negatively on the take up of TVET relative to academic education. The policy of strengthening TVET quality and participation is now connected with a 'levelling-up discourse' and related set of policies (necessitated by Brexit and then pandemic effects).

The policies are building on long-standing parity of esteem arguments that have held that inequalities can be reduced by generating 'higher normative expectations' for vocational learning, through the provision of flexible progression routes and equivalence frameworks. Historically, VET in England has performed relatively poorly in outcomes and quality of vocational provision. While many of the limiting factors identified by Green et al (2021) endure (e.g. over-reliance on 'initiatives' and long – term underfunding) progress over recent decades have been made in institutionalising common standards frameworks extending from basic to higher professional levels and flexible progression routes have been recognised and become established. These have been stress-tested during the pandemic with some of the consequent changes to institutional/pedagogic practices outlined above contributing incrementally to development and sustainability. Post pandemic, the reliance on 'initiatives' remains, with active support for dissemination of best practice still a primary means of institutionalisation in England. Sustainability questions remain urgent for insecure, often lower-level work-based routes with few guarantees for young people and adults on programmes that end when companies cease operating. Action is urgently needed on 'safety nets' and recovery plans, for young people and adults who are placed in vulnerable situations by events beyond their control, without the means to cope unaided. The Trades Union Congress has recommended, for example, a revamp of the disappointing Kickstart scheme, investment in job creation, and a strong safety net for those who do lose jobs – learning from some short-term coordinating and support arrangements that were successfully deployed during the pandemic in specific localities or sectors3. Calls for more multi-agency coordination of this kind in communities and sub-regions have intensified, in the face of the challenges of pandemic recovery, feeding into policy planning processes from local to national levels and influencing what Spours et al. term the development of nascent 'covid recovery ecosystems'.

Regarding the development of the 'lifetime learning guarantee', its reliance on take-up of loans for learning is also raising fundamental questions about its scope, viability and efficacy, and its possible effects in further entrenching inequalities that were laid bare in the pandemic.

Innovation, automation and green skills

Another significant implication is linked to rethinking the skills required by contemporary society, particularly those tied to innovation, automation, and sustainability. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a range of challenges and changes for Vocational Education and Training (VET) and workplace learning. At the same time, across the UK, the pandemic crisis has provided an opportunity to reconsider the significance and types

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3 Please see for further details https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/publications/impact-of-covid-19-on-the-uk-labour-market-the-case-for-a-place-based-recovery

of skills and expertise that individuals need to develop to address various challenges in the constantly changing world of work. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and sharpened the focus on skills shortages and labor market mobility that already existed prior to the pandemic.

As observed by Suciu et al (2023), the COVID-19 pandemic has not only produced devastating effects globally, particularly in terms of health, economic activity, and social life, but has also highlighted the gaps and vulnerabilities of Industry 4.0 (Suciu et al 2023: 2). Their research indicates that automation creates significant shifts between sectors and job profiles, driven by technologies, which can impact both low-skilled workers and high-skilled professionals. The authors conclude that empirical evidence, along with medium- and long-term forecasts, suggests that the process of substantial digitalization of business models is expected to accelerate, thereby increasing pressure on the labor market (Suciu et al. 2023). This acceleration requires the development of new job roles and skills. For instance, specialists in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and machine learning, Information Technology (IT) services, and process automation are expected to be in demand, necessitating specific training and skill development (Schlegel and Kraus 2023). The newly created jobs are linked to several skill requirements, including: (1) skills needed to use specific new hardware and software; (2) data science skills and (3) the need to apply or adapt skills to future-related goals, for example combating climate change. A new green learning agenda has emerged as a prominent post-COVID development. It has been argued (e.g. Kwauk and Casey 2022) that there is a strong necessity to formulate frameworks for the skills required to tackle one of the most far-reaching challenges: climate change. This involves considering the three types of green skills that form the foundation of a new green learning agenda for climate action:

- Green life skills
- Skills for green job
- Skills for green transformation

Williams et al (2021: 2-3) note that concerns about climate change have been linked to the shift towards green jobs, offering an opportunity "to create 'future-proof' jobs for young people, including those from disadvantaged groups." Their research found that this is particularly relevant for jobs in social care, low-carbon housing, sustainable transport, and healthcare, resulting in significant job opportunities across the skills spectrum – including mid-skill jobs. It's worth noting that opportunities for young people to transition from existing roles to 'green' roles may span across a variety of sectors. For instance, in the construction sector, trades might involve home retrofitting and low-carbon heat, while receptionists and retail sales workers could shift into customer service representative roles within green sectors to meet the growing demand (Williams et al 2021: 3).

COVID-19 has been recognized as both a disrupter and a catalyst for addressing the green skills agenda (Strachan et al 2022). Specifically, this could be seen as an opportunity to expedite social change and the reskilling and upskilling of the workforce needed to facilitate any transition toward a cleaner, fairer economy and society. Addressing the climate change agenda within the workplace demands innovation, resilience, and creativity within an evolving post-COVID ecosystem that brings together all key stakeholders. This requires increased collaboration between VET providers and organizations, aiming to foresee and provide the necessary support that employers need to enhance skills development for their workforce.

Conclusions

One of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has created both challenges and opportunities of unprecedented intensity for lifelong learning within an evolving skills ecosystem. As Child (2020) puts it, the coronavirus crisis has created an opportunity to reflect on how a more effective system of social collaboration and learning could contribute to more effectively addressing other enduring challenges. This includes considering collaborative solutions to many of the contemporary problems that will persist beyond the COVID-19 period (Child, 2020: 2-3). Shifts in organizational practices, intensified by the pandemic, are being sustained and acknowledged both within individual organizations and more broadly across industries. Across the UK, similar strategies to address the challenges of the pandemic stemmed from the common legal frameworks that link the countries' actions. Differences reflected greater influences from the local government when colleges could re-open for face-to-face teaching. This indicated the extent to which overall strategies were flexed to fit localised contexts. Dabbous et al.'s research (2022) has found that institutions in small British island contexts developed specific approaches to working responsively and flexibly within their local communities to resolve issues and tackle emerging challenges. During the pandemic, many communities experienced shorter periods of school and college closure, and a greater influence from the local government (Dabbous et al, 2021), while, as observed by Mouthaan et al (2021) England appeared to exhibit a more "top down" or centralised approach than the other parts of the UK.

The phenomenon of institutionalization has become increasingly widespread, particularly in relation to maintaining and implementing hybrid and online modes of learning and working. The advantages of hybrid modes of learning and working have been appreciated by various stakeholders, including employers, teaching staff, and learners. These trends are often associated with innovations aimed at sustaining and improving the best innovative practices developed in response to COVID-19. Local capacity, creativity and

communication matter in speed, targeting and quality of efforts on the ground. We have drawn on lessons from both England and some small island contexts that illustrate not only the diversity and interconnectedness of ecosystems but also the commonalities and shared experiences across contexts.

Despite these advancements, there are many challenges and gaps that need to be addressed post-COVID. One important challenge relates to finding a balance between digital engagement and direct face-to-face engagement to ensure that the needs of both learners and other key stakeholders have been considered, and that any implementation of online modes of learning is meaningful. According to a McKinsey report, organizations increasingly promoting their existing portfolios of digital-learning options need to go beyond merely applying existing technology solutions to offer virtual classrooms. Instead, they should represent a more fundamental rethinking of the learning experience to enable collaborative, interactive social-learning experiences for groups of learners (Kshirsagar et al., 2020, p. 5).

Collaboration has been highlighted as one of the key dimensions of the skills ecosystem. There is a clear need for schools and colleges to collaborate with employers, career advisors, local authorities, and other education and training providers. This collaboration is essential to nurture the evolving ecosystem and support students/learners in preparing for the workplace and making informed choices about their next steps in education or training.

Ecosystems perspectives show how challenges in maintaining learning and skills development under conditions of external shock such as pandemics are reinforced at the institutional level as learning and skills providers experience multiple, sometimes conflicting pressures as the communities in which they are situated (and the families that comprise them) are differentially affected by disruptions. At the macro-level the qualification system effects are pervasive. Interdependencies of these levels and scales of activity evolve over time. Focusing on the ecosystem interdependencies that affect the broad structures of vocational education and training structures highlights the necessity for longer-term strategic planning to mitigate system-wide disruption. This more strategic approach requires more than the building of capacity at local and regional levels to remediate shorter term vocational learning losses and longer-term harms (institutionalising a pandemic-recovery approach). It also requires active planning for (re)entry-to-employment, generation of new job opportunities and systemic support for social collaboration and lifelong learning, as key elements of a pandemic/'external shock' resilience eco-system.

COVID-19 pandemic effects on vocational education and training hit workplace learning hardest. Recovery required flexibility and catching up, but resilience will require greater attention to the interdependencies of labour markets, business systems and

industry processes. Covid emergencies have already intensified calls for the stronger institutionalisation of industrial strategies for generating and securing future jobs, particularly in greening the economy, and have also contributed to the acceleration of plans for lifetime learning guarantees linked to reskilling, underpinned by new legislation.

Institutionalising the upgrading of VET requires more than ongoing changes to the qualification system that are already in hand in England. It also requires adequate resourcing for public sector colleges and incentives as well as obligations for employers. Mounting evidence from key Sector actors has already strengthened calls for broadening of learning and skills entitlements in England, building on policies already implemented in Scotland and Wales. Systematic reviews of evidence have confirmed the strategic importance of collaborative multi-agency interventions that aim to co-ordinate job placements; careers education and guidance; and support for vulnerable learners (Spours et al. 2022). The strengthening of the meso-level of the broad structures of VET requires resources for the further institutionalisation of local and subregional networks of schools and colleges, HE institutions, employers, training agencies and providers of work-based learning, working with trade unions and other 'third sector' organisations. Strengthening of these meso-level, intermediary relationships potentially creates a more secure basis for national governments in UK to devolve progressively more responsibilities to the lower levels. Devolution can harness local knowledge, relationships and support networks for future resilience, beyond mere recovery, The challenges of how far and how best such devolutions can be realised are already featuring in the formation of plans and missions of political parties, towards the 2024 UK general election. The exploration of these challenges and the proposed solutions requires the further development of ecosystems perspectives and research methodologies that can capture the complexities and interdependencies at a deeper level.

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