

Quality Times

Issue Five
March 2021





Welcome to the fifth issue of our quality-focused newsletter

You won't be surprised to see that this issue is dominated by Covid-19-related challenges. Every college has had to find solutions to the same central issue: how to continue to offer quality provision while dealing with the constraints resulting from the pandemic. There is much that has been learned, however, that could have lasting benefits.

National Star explain how multi-disciplinary working has been key to their approach, Derwen College shares their learning about moving open days online, and we capture a range of creative solutions from different colleges as they adapt their preparation for employment courses. You can read about the development of Natspec's Home Learning webpages and how we took our first steps into delivering on-line courses through Natspec Transform. There is also advice from our TechAbility colleagues on how to review hastily implemented online solutions.

Away from Covid-19, our new policy officer opens a conversation about the importance of colleges taking a greater role in helping students achieve sustained post-college outcomes.

Thank you to all the contributors to this issue who made time to share their experiences with the rest of the membership, despite the pandemic-related pressures. And a big thank you to the students from Cambian Pengwern College who designed the gloriously optimistic front cover.

Ruth Perry – Senior Policy Manager at Natspec

Tracy Gillett – Director of Quality on the Natspec board

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Quality Times Cover

The cover for this edition of Quality Times was designed by students from Cambian Pengwern College. They were given a brief to create a cover suitable for a newsletter that focused on quality improvement. They have shared this account of their work.

The first question we had was what symbolises quality and the second was what is the Makaton symbol for 'quality'? When we researched this, we found that thumbs up was the Makaton symbol and that thumbs up also came up in the internet searches. So, we all agreed that we would use "thumbs up" and use photos of our hands.

We then looked at various magazines covers. We recognised that the main image needed to be in the centre of the front page, so that the writing could be placed around it, and the name of the magazine was at the top. These points needed to be kept in mind when arranging our hands and choosing our final design.

We produced rainbow designs for the background. This idea was chosen due to us currently being in lockdown and knowing that the quality of the education could be compromised. Then we considered various designs, using the different layouts of rainbows and each other's hands in several arrangements.

We chose the final design because it included both the staff members' and students' hands in a circle. We wanted to show that we are all involved in or benefit from the cycle of quality within our college. Our thumbs up are also symbolising we are all ok and coping with Covid.

We hope you like our front cover as much as we do.

Ben Meadows (Student), Jamie Vincent (Student), Debs Roberts (Support), Marie Nicastro (Photographer) and Jane Beard (Tutor)

If your students would like to design the front cover of a future edition of Quality Times, please contact Amanda Tribble at amanda.tribble@natspec.org.uk.

Preparing students for employment during a pandemic



Ruth Perry, senior policy manager at Natspec, investigates how member colleges are managing to offer high quality preparation for employment, despite the constraints of the pandemic.

COVID-19 has had an impact on all aspects of the curriculum as facilities have had to close, students have had to be taught in bubbles on site, or in some cases are learning from home. Preparation for employment courses, including supported internships, have perhaps been hardest hit of all. Students with learning disabilities, who often struggle to transfer skills, benefit hugely from the situated learning that work placement affords. The 'place and train' approach that is central to the supported employment model allows students to develop skills in context and to grow in confidence and independence as they do so. So, what happens when external work placements are extremely limited or disappear altogether?

Specialist colleges have shown remarkable resilience and creativity in completely re-designing their preparation for employment curriculum. While the starting point may have been, 'How do we cope?', they have swiftly moved on to considering how to maintain the quality of their provision – and how to use the situation as a prompt to develop and improve their approach. They are also reflecting on the fact that the employment landscape may have significantly changed by the time the pandemic is over and their students will need to be ready for this new world.

For Birtenshaw College, the constraints came as a bitter blow. In February 2020, they were awarded Fair Train's Work Experience Quality Standard at Gold Level. They were all set to build on this achievement when the pandemic struck. External work placements ceased, their onsite café closed and weekly cookery classes from a visiting professional chef stopped. The college now hosts regular online cookery masterclasses with guest chefs. Students are involved in menu development and practising new dishes ready for the re-opening of the café. This has given them the chance to explore another side of the catering profession while face-to-face service is not possible.

Some colleges have managed to retain a few external work placements, including those that are mainly outdoors. In some cases, existing placements have been re-shaped, for example to remove a requirement for customer contact. Care has been taken to enable learners to adapt to

changes in the working environment resulting from COVID-19 safe measures. At Heart of Birmingham Vocational College, staff created videos of the changed workspaces and shared these with learners, talking them through the changes and the reasons behind these before students returned to their place of work. Some new opportunities have arisen, including in pubs that have shifted their business model to provide a takeaway or delivery service. Colleges have conducted detailed risk assessments to ensure that these placements remain safe for learners.

Heart of Birmingham Vocational College reluctantly abandoned external work placements in January. Instead, they focused on forging new partnerships with employers and other organisations to offer remote work experience opportunities. Current remote placements include a junior content editor supported internship. The intern works remotely three times a week between 9am and 2pm with structured breaks and changes of task. He has carried out a wide range of tasks from video editing to the creation of new promotional materials. The company has provided him with a brand-new company laptop and full uniform and this has helped him to feel a part of the team even in a remote setting. Working with a partner and John Lewis, the college is also providing students with the opportunity to explore various roles within the retail giant. Nine students, with the support of two job coaches, are collaborating with John Lewis employees on a variety of tasks and workshops over a seven-week period. Once restrictions are lifted, the students will be invited to attend face-to-face work experience within both John Lewis and Waitrose stores.



However, the majority of colleges have had to turn to **internal** placements as an alternative. This has presented not just a logistical challenge but a quality challenge too. The sector has quite rightly moved away from internal placements as the norm, particularly for final year students. Internal placements often do not stretch and challenge students in the same way as external placements which require interaction with unfamiliar people and externally set expectations, for example for behaviours, presentation, and time-keeping. Raph Taylor, Supported Employment Manager & Careers Lead, at Camphill Wakefield explains,

The biggest challenge has been to ensure that the onsite opportunities are genuine and recognised jobs: it is all too easy to create roles in order to satisfy the need for work experience. We were determined to identify genuine jobs that needed doing and would therefore answer a genuine business need.

At Camphill Wakefield, they have combined internal work placements with enterprise projects as a context for skill development. In each case, the enterprise is meeting a genuine need for their services, including a catering service for staff (which took £350 in its first term). Similarly, at LifeBridge, students have set up and are running a tuckshop. Three students at Trinity Specialist College have created their own gardening and maintenance company. They pitched the idea to the principal and now have a one-day-a-week contract to provide services to the college, for which they invoice and are paid. These students are developing skills for future self-employment which might not otherwise have been included in their programme.

Re-deployment of staff and the need for new products or services, as a result of COVID-19, have opened up opportunities for students. At SENSE College Loughborough, students were tasked with creating a virtual college tour to support the college as it redeveloped its approach to transition for new or potential students. They are also working on a newsletter for employers, as part of a range of activities identified by the work placement coordinator as needed to 'keep employers warm' while external work placements are on-hold. This is a common concern for work placement coordinators who have worked hard to build relationships with local employers. Having secured the commitment of a major employer in Bolton to offer placements, *Joanne Read, Employer Engagement Officer* at Lifebridge ASEND, has kept her contact close by involving them in co-delivering online a BTEC unit in preparing for work placement.

Abi Baker, Work Experience Coordinator at Derwen College, describes how they have adapted their placement opportunities to 'run in parallel to the outside world'. Students are now managing their own eBay shop to sell products created as part of their vocational learning, while those who were working in the college café are providing takeaway services. Catering students at Trinity Specialist College have learned how to food-shop online rather than go out and buy ingredients in the local supermarket. By introducing these new skills and contexts,

colleges are working to ensure that learners' skills and experiences match the kind of opportunities that will be there for them when we finally emerge from the pandemic.

While increased time for learners on-site has been forced upon them, some colleges have been reflecting on how that has helped them improve their offer. While all plan to return to using external work placements as soon as possible, some may do things a little differently. For example, staff at SENSE College Loughborough have found that spending more time with students onsite has allowed them to get to know them better, and more fully understand their abilities and job aspirations. They are considering how to strengthen their vocational profiling for the future to help them fine-tune the matching of student to placement. SENSE College students on supported internships would normally have a single extended placement but staff are now considering whether some would benefit from several shorter placements. Rotating round different job roles in college has broadened students' skill sets and allowed them to explore which roles best suit them. Staff have also found that having students embedded in different areas of the college has increased the understanding of the whole college of the work that they do. They are hopeful that this will lead to a more holistic approach in the future, with a wider range of staff more fully engaged in supporting the students on their path to employment.

It is still early days in terms of evaluating the impact of these enforced changes on students' development of employability skills and their readiness to progress from college into work. At Camphill Wakefield, they have carried out a student feedback survey. They discovered that although many students described the loss of their work placement as causing them to feel sad, angry, worried, upset, stressed or less confident about the future, the students also saw their current curriculum as, 'giving me some skills for the future', 'helping rebuild my confidence' and 'making me more independent.' At Derwen College, they are using students' EHC Plan outcomes to guide them in terms of the suitability of any alternative approach, asking themselves: will students still be able to make good progress towards their employability goals if we make this change? The real test will come at the end of the summer term as students leave college. We will have to see what the destination data tells us. But it is already clear that any drop in employment rates cannot be attributed to a lack of effort on the part of the colleges who have contributed to this research. They have shown remarkable creativity, resourcefulness and positivity in the face of enormous challenge.

Thanks to Birtenshaw College, Camphill Wakefield, Derwen College, Heart of Birmingham Vocational College, Lifebridge ASEND, SENSE College – Loughborough, Trinity Specialist College.

A changing curriculum and delivery model – underpinned by a well-established approach



National Star

Realising the aspirations
of people with disabilities

National Star's Simon Welch, Director of Learning and Support, and Megan Rogers, Director of Services for the South, explain how flexibility and multi-disciplinary-working have enabled them to continue to meet students' needs over the past twelve months.

From the start of the pandemic, National Star has striven to maintain its provision so that we can continue to meet the needs of the young people we support and their families. To achieve this, we have had to be flexible in our service offer and adapt to rapidly changing situations. We have needed systems in place to enable us to make critical decisions quickly. In mid-February 2020, we set up a Covid-19 crisis management group comprising a small group of key senior managers, with responsibilities for different aspects of our provision. We are still meeting daily online with much of our time devoted to risk management issues. There is no doubt that this has enabled the organisation to adapt more quickly and deal with problems before they became a crisis. We also run a fortnightly infection, prevention and control task and finish group which drives operational changes and ensures we have the appropriate systems and processes in place. Having established working practices and protocols enables us to adapt quickly. As the pandemic has evolved and as guidance has been updated, this has been an important means of staying on top of the situation.

Risk assessments govern all aspects of our provision. Sophisticated and detailed personalised risk assessments, that include a risk benefit analysis, have been created for every student and long-term resident. This dynamic process continues to change to reflect the national situation and the wishes of students and their families. For example, the analysis measures the risk of providing a specific therapy against the value of receiving the therapy. If the value of therapy outweighs the level of risk, then staff explore ways to mitigate the risk and provide the therapy. Every student and family is involved in the process.

Keeping students safe is, of course, our top priority, but we have also worked hard to maintain the quality of provision, so that our students have the best experience of college as possible. We have had to be flexible in the way that we reorganise provision and have found ourselves relying more than ever on multi-disciplinary team (MDT) working. The MDT approach was already well-established at National Star. Staff across care, education and therapies are used to working together in the best interests of the individual, ensuring that what is learnt in the classroom or the therapy suite is integrated into daily life. This model became critical in the

pandemic as residences moved in – and out – of self-isolation and as student cluster groups were created. Therapists, care and education staff were assigned to specific cluster groups or residences. Working together with new people has led to a greater appreciation of roles and resulted in even more effective cross-team working. Both learning and therapies have been delivered through a blended approach, with staff delivering a mix of face-to-face and remote provision. Staff also found creative approaches to enable shielding students to maintain contact with their peers as they continued with their learning at home.

The curriculum itself has had to shift to match what students needed to learn. For example, we began to teach students about the pandemic and social distancing. Teachers had to teach in different ways to meet the needs of the individuals in their cluster – from creating social stories to creating a new shop onsite so that students had meaningful work experience even when they could not access the community. It was an opportunity for staff to learn new things, too, and take them out of their comfort zones.

The vaccination of students illustrates particularly well how need has driven learning and how our MDT approach has facilitated that. We received just a week's notice that the college GP would lead a vaccination day with almost 200 students and long-term residents to be vaccinated. The therapies team created social stories about what was going to happen on vaccination day. Tutors and other learning programmes staff integrated material about the vaccinations into lessons and one-to-ones to reassure students and give them an opportunity to discuss their concerns. Working alongside them were staff trained in Team Teach to support any student who may become heightened and anxious, although on the day, they were only required in three cases as students had been so well prepared.



As our curriculum and delivery model (for both therapies and education) has had to change, it has been important to communicate these changes clearly to everyone involved and to monitor how well we are doing. Involving stakeholders in quality assurance has been crucial. We have

set up new ways of communicating to ensure we are receiving feedback. A regular virtual parents' forum, hosted on Zoom, has been established with parents deciding the themes. Parents and staff received regular targeted communications – often weekly – to keep them up-to-date with what has been happening. Residential staff also adapted their regular communication and increased contact with those students who were shielding at home. Learning staff use these communications to create regular updates for students in a format they can understand.

There have also been some unanticipated gains from our pandemic experience. It has enabled us to build stronger relationships with key partners, and as within the multi-disciplinary teams, to develop an understanding of the different pressures we are all facing. We attend weekly meetings with PHE / Health Protection team to share our practice but also ask questions and learn from others. The need to find more venues in which to base clusters of students has strengthened our relationship with the community and the local authority.

The pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated change at National Star. It has taught us all to work smarter, to adapt and be more flexible, to work more collaboratively and not be afraid of going beyond our comfort zones. The learning we take away from the past 12 months will enable us to improve our provision and to focus on our core activities.

Natspec's 2020 Home Learning Project



Dr Dawn Green, Natspec Director for Technology, looks back on her experience of leading Natspec's first ever 'Home Learning' project

At the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, colleges across the nation suddenly found themselves supporting large numbers of young people to continue with their learning from home. During the first lockdown, the numbers of young people learning from home were at their largest. As the pandemic has progressed we have seen a move towards a blended approach, with colleges developing their delivery methods to support mixed cohorts of learners on campus and accessing their learning remotely.

The challenges during this time have been unprecedented and complex. Practitioners have tried to ensure a meaningful learning experience for learners who ordinarily depend on sensory and experiential teaching and learning approaches, with input from a multi-disciplinary team of specialists, practitioners. On top of that they have had to factor in variable levels of support and engagement from parents / carers and an inconsistency in the availability of resources, technology, and connectivity at home.

At Natspec we were hearing similar concerns voiced by practitioners across different member colleges. We also knew there was lots of effective practice emerging in different places. We decided the most helpful thing we could do as a membership organisation was to harness expertise from across the sector to help us develop a resource that we could share widely. There was already a lot of guidance circulating about different online platforms and the 'kit' you might need. We wanted to focus our attention on **quality**, regardless of the methods colleges were using to reach learners at home. We wanted to help colleges, as they rushed to provide something meaningful for their learners, to keep a firm eye on the quality of what they were offering. We decide to concentrate on meeting three broad aims:

- to provide a framework for supporting providers to focus on the quality of the home learning provision and support they were offering
- to produce thematic guidance and supporting exemplar material relating to home-based provision
- to share the resource with FE providers working across the sector with learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

A group of facilitators was hastily convened and a brief for the project was sent out to Natspec colleges requesting expressions of interests from colleagues who would be prepared to participate in one (or more) of six working groups, each working on a different theme. We decided the most pressing need was for material relating to

- providing learning material
- monitoring progress
- working with families
- student wellbeing
- offering therapy
- managing transitions in and out of college.

The response was truly overwhelming as offers to contribute came pouring in from a total of 80 practitioners from 25 different colleges. Each was then allocated to a different working group based on their skills and expertise. Despite the significant operational challenges faced by colleges at this time and our own inexperience of working virtually, the groups gelled immediately. The generosity, creativity and energy for the project was truly inspirational. The urgent need for the material that we had committed to produce created an added pressure; we knew that we had to get things out there fast but were determined to still ensure that what we came up with was of good quality.

Over a four-week period colleagues worked tirelessly to create for each of our six themes some effective practice principles, checklists and guidance. This was then supplemented by materials that our contributors had already created and were using in their own settings. We created [a website to house all the materials](#) and ran a series of webinars to introduce the resource and talk through how it could be used. The webinar recordings are still available on our [YouTube channel](#).

The project certainly resulted in some very useful outputs in the shape of the materials on the website, however there were also some unanticipated outcomes. Many colleagues who participated spoke about the professional development opportunities brought about from networking and working with people in other colleges. The benefits of sharing practice, ideas, and approaches to policy development in the early days of lockdown were evident, whilst for some, just the opportunity to check in with others was welcomed.

We are enormously grateful to all the contributors from Natspec member colleges who gave their time and shared their ideas and resources so generously. They have helped us create a resource that shows how, despite the situation in which we find ourselves, we can still connect with others, work together and provide high quality learning and support for our students.



While the material was developed in response to an urgent need created by the current pandemic, we believe much of it will remain useful in the future. For example, it will help colleges to

- support learners who cannot attend college during periods of ill-health
- offer more blended learning
- set learning tasks on snow days
- help learners who want to maintain skills during holidays
- involve parents and carers more fully in their young person's learning
- encourage more independent learning for those students who are capable of it.

Those of us who participated in this project in the heightened atmosphere of Spring 2020, met as strangers but we left as a group with common interests and keen to work together in the future. Many of us are looking forward to being able to meet in person when the restrictions ease!

Natspec is currently considering how to keep the Home Learning website up-to-date as new practice and resources emerge. If you have material that you would like us to consider adding, please get in touch with Ruth Perry at ruth.perry@natspec.org.uk. We would ask you to first check that it is consistent with the effective practice principles set out on our Home Learning website.

Open days with a difference



As Derwen College prepares for a third virtual open day, Head of Curriculum, Zoe Wood, and Head of Quality, Dawn Roberts, reflect on what the college has learnt about providing an informative, quality experience

for potential students and their families.

Open days are an important first step for families looking for the right provision for a young person. They provide an opportunity for potential students and their families to understand more about the curriculum, learning, facilities, teaching, and other students as well as getting a general feel for an establishment. They are key to helping both college and families determine if the 'fit' is right. They are also a valuable opportunity for a college to showcase itself and make that vital first impression.

The pandemic has meant that welcoming visitors on site has simply not been possible. However, it is still just as important that families can look ahead to their young person's future and plan the next step in their learning journey. Similarly, the college cannot put the admissions process on hold, and needs to look forward to the next intake of young people to replace graduates moving on to future training, employment and / or supported living. At Derwen, as with many other colleges, we have had to think how we can offer young people and their families the open day experience through virtual means. The challenge has been to adapt the means, whilst maintaining the quality of the event so that we are able to provide the information and guidance that families expect and need.

In the past, young people and their families would tour our college sites, taking a look at the work areas, the residences and the leisure activities on offer. They would see existing students at work, and chat to students and teachers. We have always provided a range of have-a-go activities, relevant to the pathways at college, which young people and families could participate in. These activities enabled students to actively engage and offered a taster experience that went far beyond reading a prospectus. Parents could book into sessions on different topics led by various staff including the admissions team, work experience coordinators and members of the senior leadership team.

Finding a way to replicate the face-to-face experience in a virtual way is a challenge that has been embraced by staff, involving input from the senior leadership team, admissions and transitions, marketing, teaching and care staff, and, of course, our students. As we progress

towards a third virtual open day, we have also been able to use valuable parent and carer feedback to assess the process and implement improvements along the way.

Back in March 2020, the majority of teaching moved online with only a small number of students and staff remaining on site. It was clear that we needed to rethink our open days, too. Our first virtual open day in June 2020 was pre-recorded. It featured key staff talking to camera, library videos of students working in pathways (shot prior to Covid-19), as well as new video footage showcasing the site. The event was publicised via social media, our own database of interested contacts, e-newsletters and the press. We also provided have-a-go activities via PDF downloads and created a specialist area on the website for all the contacts and topics discussed in the open day video. The video remained on YouTube to be viewed by families who had missed the event, or those who wanted to watch again or share it with others.

For our next virtual open day in October 2020, we decided to try a different approach which we would then compare to the first event. Feedback from participants in the June event led to a number of changes. We realised that parents, carers and students interested in day placements had different questions and priorities from those considering residential placements. So we created **two** events: one to cover our main site and one specifically for day students, some of whom were interested in our smaller satellite sites. As well as a pre-recorded film, we added a live question and answer session with expert staff. The events were hosted on a Saturday morning rather than a weekday when parents might be working and students at school. We felt this would help participants to take part as a whole family. We hosted these second open days on GoTo Webinar rather than YouTube. This allowed us to create a branded event, we could upload surveys and send automated links and reminders to registrants as well as set up opportunities for feedback from all participants.

At the time of writing, we are planning our spring 2021 virtual open day for 6 March 2021, taking into account all the learning from the previous open days including participant feedback, to help us shape a really well-thought through event. We have increased the student voice within our videos so that they now feature plenty of current students telling their own stories in their own words. The virtual open day video will be sent out to participants as soon as they register so that they can watch the video with their young person before the event. This will allow families to watch at their leisure, and to opt for watching in smaller time chunks, to focus on areas of interest and keep their young person engaged. It will also leave more time during the live event for questions. We are also asking for participants to send questions in advance if they are able, so that we are well-prepared to answer as many as possible, as well as taking live questions on the day.

We will be measuring our success against a number of key quality indicators. At the end of the open day prospective students and their families:

- are able to see the campus and the work that students undertake
- have a feel for what life would be like as a student at Derwen College
- have enough information to help them make an informed decision
- know how to apply for a place if they want to
- know what support they can get with an application.

We are feeling quietly confident that we are going to be able to meet these aims. We certainly hope so as a continued strong media campaign, along with increased parent/carer awareness of virtual open days, has resulted in rising numbers of 'visitors'. Nearly double the amount of people from previous open days have already registered in advance.

Having to rethink our open days has been a challenge but we have learnt valuable lessons which will help us improve the quality of our approach even when we return to 'normal times'. As a national college, many potential students and their families travel long distances to visit Derwen College for open days. Offering families more video and online information in advance of an event could save wasted time and resources if Derwen is not the right place for a young person. It will also allow us to maximise the face-to-face time for those who do choose to attend on site.

No virtual experience will ever quite replicate the experience of actually being on campus, talking to students in their areas of work, and meeting the teachers in their real-life settings. However, moving forward, we believe we can deliver the best of both worlds to make the difficult decisions faced by prospective students and their families, that little bit easier.

Developing a new quality improvement course



Megan Dauksta, Natspec associate and Yola Jacobsen, Natspec Transform Manager describe how our new MQTLAS course came into being, and how a sudden turn of events led to Natspec's first online training.

At the beginning of March 2020, a professional camera crew spent a day filming two classes at a Natspec college. Thanks to the generous support of the college staff and students, the footage from that day now provides a core part of the new Natspec Transform course in Monitoring the Quality of Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Support (MQTLAS) for learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The original plan was to launch the MQTLAS course as face-to-face training in the summer term 2020. By mid-March last year, preparations were well underway. The training materials were in final draft, the date of the first course was confirmed, the trainer had been booked. A member college had kindly offered to host the training and information about the course was about to be published on the Natspec website. And then we went into lockdown!

Why develop a MQTLAS course?

But let's take a step or two back from this point. Why were we developing the course in the first place? Our review of CPD courses for staff working in further education found that whilst there are numerous OTLA (observation of teaching, learning and assessment) courses available, none specifically focuses on provision for learners with SEND or includes more than a brief reference to the observation of learner support. To fill this gap Natspec decided to develop a course for staff whose primary focus is on the education and training of students aged 16-25 with SEND. We set out to create a course that would:

- help participants understand what effective teaching, learning, assessment and support look like in a SEND context
- equip them with the necessary skills, approaches and tools to observe and record observations effectively and to provide constructive feedback so they could take a holistic approach to quality improvement.

What does the course cover?

As the delivery and management of support is so crucial for learners with SEND, we have made this a key feature throughout the MQTLAS course. The training encourages participants to question why we observe teaching, learning, assessment and support and how observations fit into an organisation's quality cycle. We explore the dual function of observations as quality **assurance** and quality **improvement** activities and consider what needs to be done to ensure observations are effective and of good quality. The importance of clear and evaluative feedback, both written and verbal, to support action planning and to drive quality improvement is also covered.

We also wanted delegates to leave with a clear understanding of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF), in particular its focus on curriculum. The course helps participants identify the most effective ways of monitoring the full depth of a learner's experience of the curriculum and how best to capture a broad range of evidence. Through a series of confidence-building activities, the trainer helps participants gear their approach to match the 'deep dive' approach now taken by Ofsted inspectors.

We use videos of sessions with learners with SEND within the training. We encourage participants to consider how to prepare for an observation, identify areas of focus and also how to give constructive feedback.

We decided that the course should be delivered over two separate days with sufficient time in between for participants to put into practice some of the learning from the first day, on which they could reflect on day two.

Moving the course online

Which brings us back to lockdown. Before we'd even had a chance to deliver it face-to-face, we found ourselves in the new territory of shifting courses online. Like everyone in education and beyond, we have been on a steep learning curve in terms of developing teaching and training sessions for online delivery. We have focussed our energies on ensuring the continuing quality of our training, in particular how to make the course as interactive as possible. Opportunities to network and share ideas are as important as ever, if not more so, given the restrictions and isolation of lockdown. Zoom break-out rooms have certainly helped. They can be effective for more detailed learning activities and to build a sense of learning as a group, as can polls and use of the chat function. We encourage participants to indicate when they register if they would like to share contact details with others to network after the training. We also keep the sessions running for a short time after the session finishes to offer a little 'hang-out space' for a chat with the trainer or fellow participant.

During this period, we have been learning alongside our participants. As our understanding of what the online platforms can offer increases and our confidence in how to use the various tools grows, we have become more adept at shaping online training to meet participants' needs. We have become better at differentiating learning and including all members of the group. We are trying our best to model the effective practice we are looking for in the practice of teachers working with learners with SEND. And despite our initial apprehensions, we have found there are benefits to online learning, not least that we've been able to bring together people from across England and Wales to share ideas with no travel time or cost.

How it is going

At the time of writing, we have delivered two complete MQTLAs courses and feedback has been very positive. The nature of the restrictions currently in place has meant that it has not been possible for everyone to complete observations between the two sessions but splitting the course into two, with several weeks in between has still been welcomed. Some participants have noted at the start of the second session how they have already put into practice some of the suggestions from session one. For example, following a discussion in the first session about focussing on the impact the teaching is having on learning, one manager reported:

"I have already adapted our OTLA paperwork and put learning first to reflect the comments in the session."

The use of video footage of sessions has proved particularly powerful. It is allowing staff from a range of different colleges to discuss expectations and align standards.

Interested in this course?

You can book this training as an in-house course or join a multi-college event. You can find details of this and all our other courses on our [Natspec Transform webpage](#).

Digital Accessibility – time to reflect and re-evaluate



Fil McIntyre, TechAbility Manager at Natspec explains why now is a good time to take stock and re-examine digital solutions hastily implemented during the pandemic.

In the last twelve months, technology has taken centre stage like never before in education, work and home life. People who were self-confessed technophobes now attend online meetings, set and review academic work electronically in the day and FaceTime their relatives in the evening. This development is reflected within colleges. Reaction to the initial lockdown has seen a wide range of technical solutions and responses hastily put into place. While speed was of the essence at the start of the pandemic, now seems a good time to review these solutions through the lens of quality focusing in particular on digital accessibility. Let's reflect on what has happened, what we should now consider, and what questions we might ask ourselves about our current provision.

Live home learning

What has happened?

With the speed required to get home learning and student engagement up and running there was a rush to get delivery platforms in place. Understandably, this resulted in a mix of what colleges already had, what they could get quickly or what they saw others were using. The platform which offers most accessibility or is most suitable for your setting may not have been selected.

What to consider

The three major platforms are Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and Zoom. If you are using a different platform you are unlikely to be maximising accessibility. All of the 'big three' include live auto-captioning, zooming, keyboard shortcuts and screen reader compatibility. Each has other features besides these.

Learners and staff may not be aware of all the accessibility features available, along with other useful tools such as breakout rooms and polls. A wealth of features has been added to these platforms over the last year, so it can be hard to keep up. Sometimes accessibility equals usability and usability equals familiarity. Having more than one option can help to ensure that

learners and parents/carers can access online teaching. Mastering the delivery tool should not be one of the learning outcomes!

Questions to ask

1. Does our video conferencing platform offer accessibility features?
2. Is our software up to date to make sure new features are available? Does it get updated regularly?
3. Do we have the education version of the platform to ensure maximum features e.g. integration with other software?
4. Do we have an alternative platform if our preferred one is inaccessible to some learners?

Accessibility of devices

What has happened?

Many learners have been using their own devices while at home and have found that they have greater accessibility features than those they use in college. This could be due to newer software on home devices, e.g. Office 365 or a newer iPad. or that operating systems in colleges may be so 'locked down' that accessibility options are not available. Out of necessity learners may also have been working on different hardware at home but have found it preferable. This could be a tablet rather than a desktop or a phone rather than a tablet.

What to consider

If accessibility features in technology are not available in your college, you may be in breach of the Equality Act 2010. It is worth reviewing whether the following settings can be adjusted by learners:

Windows – Ease of Access (in Settings)

Mac – Accessibility (in System Preferences)

iPad – Accessibility (in Settings)

Chromebook – Manage Accessibility Features (in Settings> Advanced)

Android – Accessibility (in Settings).

Sometimes the best device for a learner is the one they are most comfortable using. Don't get stuck in the rut of thinking that desktops and laptops are for 'formal' learning while tablets are for learning on the move. Some learners will type faster on a phone than on a PC keyboard, others will struggle with inputting to an on-screen keyboard.

Questions to ask

1. Are the accessibility options on our devices available to learners?
2. Do we have a range of hardware to meet learners' needs – both physical and cognitive?
3. Can our learners use their own device if they prefer?

Safe but still accessible

What has happened?

Obviously for any remote learning, safeguarding has to take priority. However, this has led to policies which may limit access to learning. Some organisations have imposed too many restrictions, for example a blanket ban on camera use, chat features or even on all video conferencing from home. Others may risk safety by not considering the additional safeguards online teaching requires.

What to consider

While safety must be paramount, restrictions can sometimes unnecessarily limit learning opportunities. The facial expression of learners will communicate much to tutors about understanding and engagement; some learners may prefer typing to speaking. While limiting technology is the easy fix, developing knowledge and safe behaviour in staff and learners will achieve longer term outcomes.

There are additional factors in remote learning, but the responses expected of staff should safeguarding situations arise are the same as in face-to-face circumstances. It might be worth updating safeguarding and technology policies and training to reflect some of the new learning relating to remote education. Guidance for online engagements should also be available and up-to-date.

Questions to ask

1. Is our guidance and training up to date and robust?
2. Are we being over-zealous in our attempt to keep learners safe and in doing so blocking their learning?

Digital skills

What has happened?

On countless occasions in the last year, I have heard anecdotal tales of staff 'just getting on with it' when they had previously avoided technology. Learners, staff, parents and carers have all been working together to make learning happen via email, learning platforms and video conferencing, often on devices which may not be fit for purpose.

What to consider

Those of us whose role has always required good digital skills may not realise how stressful it is for others to 'just get on with it'. COVID-19 may have forced greater technology use, but (alongside additional pressures) it has not provided the best circumstances in which to learn to use new tools.

There is also a danger that we think digital skills training is no longer needed, because everyone can now use Zoom. Even though staff and learners have just 'got on with it', there may be significant gaps in their skills which require addressing. Digital skills knowledge is often self-taught and picked up from colleagues. Staff may not be aware of key accessibility features in software and hardware which could enable learning, or shortcuts that could make their lives easier.

Questions to ask

1. Where are our digital skills gaps? A [simple digital skills audit](#) or a [more in depth digital skills audit](#) could find the gaps which need addressing.
2. Do we consider accessibility? So many options are now built into computers and tablets but are not known about. For a start see [Make Tech Work for You](#)

So while we should congratulate ourselves on the way we swung into action at the start of the pandemic, let's not rest on our laurels. Let's take a breath and consider as we go forward how to ensure our increased use of technology is contributing as fully as possible to making learning accessible for our learners.

Influencing our students' post-college lives



Kirsten Jones, Policy Officer at Natspec, opens a conversation about ways to ensure that the tremendous gains that many students make while at a specialist college are not lost after they leave.

We are all too familiar with witnessing the growth, achievements, and attainments of young people at specialist colleges, only to see or hear about their skills stagnating or, worse still, declining when they leave. As a consequence, we find ourselves having to defend our colleges against those who question the value of specialist placements. "What is the point of investing in a specialist college place?" they ask, "if no long-term benefits are reaped, and the young people end up in the same situation as they would have been had they never gone?" It's not enough," they say, "that the young people have a great experience while they're there, if there is no return on the investment."

Evidencing high-quality and sustainable outcomes for young people following placements at specialist colleges is something that can often feel out of colleges' control. In this article I want to open a conversation about what proactive steps colleges can and are taking to challenge such perceptions. As the pandemic continues to exacerbate existing inequalities, it is more pressing than ever that we learn from each other about what works in terms of securing long-term positive outcomes. As our tools to support students leaving colleges grow, so too will their life chances.

Since commencing my post with Natspec last autumn, I have been dismayed to speak with professionals who believe that outcomes associated with specialist colleges are poor. I am familiar with the charges that we are 'costly' and 'take people away from their communities'. I am also well-versed in ways to challenge these arguments. But that we should also be seen as poor quality has come as a shock and I find it hugely disappointing. While my instinct is to charge forward brandishing RARPA matrices in one hand and Ofsted / Estyn reports in the other, I recognise that a more considered response is required.

The breadth and complexities of the challenges facing our students means that for specialist providers, to a far greater degree than for other providers of education and training, what constitutes a quality outcome means different things to different stakeholders. This is familiar territory to colleges routinely juggling the often-contradictory expectations of students, parents and local authorities with those of inspectorates. Our greatest asset here is expertise in keeping

students' wants, needs and aspirations at the forefront of decision-making. However, we may need to improve on how, and to whom, we articulate students' progress and achievements.

We know that currently many students leaving the comparative security of a placement at a specialist college are failed by an under-funded system that silos their different needs and compromises their wellbeing and growth. As colleges, we need to consider what we can do to improve this situation. Recognising what we can readily influence is a logical starting point. I would suggest there are two important things we can do. The first is to better demonstrate and articulate the progress and achievement that young people have made while at college and the second is to increase post-college support for students.

I am not suggesting there is a need for more transition documentation for young people with complex needs. Instead, I think we should be thinking about different ways to supplement this. We might start by considering what is effective about transition **into** colleges which typically we do well. For example, we will often visit a prospective student on their own territory – at school and / or at home. Meeting a young person and observing their interactions with others is not only a good way to help a future provider understand their support and care needs, it is also an important means of demonstrating progress and achievement. By inviting in those who will be working with a young person after they leave you, to come and observe them in the familiar environment of your college, you can help them start to build a picture of what they can do, and the nature of the support that enables them to utilise their skills, along with any communication or sensory needs or preferences. It also means that for the student, new relationships are built on familiar and safe territory. This then increases the likelihood of trusting relationships developing, which in turn will enable the young person to continue or maintain their skill development. When the young person moves on, college staff could shadow staff in the new provider to offer information and guidance on what the young person can achieve independently and the environments most conducive to their wellbeing.

For the small number of learners who progress to another education provider, it will be important that the new provider understands the curriculum and goals the student had been working on at college. One specialist college provides the local authority with a 'social services friendly' precis of the student's individual learning programme, summarising the last targets that the young person has achieved and suggested next steps. This means stakeholders are in a more informed position when determining what the young person's daytime activities will look like. It also serves as tangible evidence of their achievements.

Developing students' self-advocacy skills is another way we can positively influence their post-college lives. By nurturing students' understanding of who they are and what they want from their lives we can help them articulate to decision-makers what is important to them in their post-college lives and what support they need to achieve their aspirations.

For many young people ending their placements at specialist colleges, decisions on what they will do are either made late, allowing little or no transition time or they are made after the young person has left. We can be proactive by securing agreements with stakeholders in good time on how the college will actively be involved in supporting the students' transition to their new living or day services. This could, include for example, building post-college assimilation goals into individual learning programmes. For some students, this may mean collaborating with job coaches or careers advisors to secure voluntary or paid work. It may also mean liaising directly with employers where students have work to enable existing arrangements to continue or suitable alternatives to be put in place when the young person leaves college.

Colleges could also agree to a six or twelve-month review with stakeholders to consider if any further support is needed to enable the young people to sustain the positive outcomes achieved on leaving college. One specialist college offers support to both students and their employers for **three years** after finishing a preparation for employment course at college. They see this as key to their students achieving sustained employment. Recently their work placement coordinator supported an ex-student through a redundancy consultancy process which resulted in him being offered an alternative role within the company instead of being made redundant. There are costs associated with these sorts of approaches but they are not always as resource-intensive as they first appear.

I firmly believe that specialist colleges generally do a great job for their students but it's not people like me that have to be convinced. We have to do things differently – and be more proactive – if we are going to bring onside those who are questioning the value of specialist provision. I would suggest that means accepting that our responsibilities for young people do not cease on the day formal contracts end, and providing more tangible and meaningful evidence of achievements and the post-college support needed to ensure longer-lasting positive outcomes.