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Learning Disrupted

Young People with Disabilities' Access to and Experiences of Learning and Workplace-based Training during COVID-19

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Summary

It has been widely acknowledged that people with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, having faced significant restrictions in their access to services and supports, with consequences for social networks and participation in society. Opportunities to access training and employment services as a route to inclusion are one area that has been recognised as adversely affected.

This study, conducted in partnership with the National Learning Network (NLN), explores some of the impacts and challenges faced by young people with disabilities aged 18-30 (including people with intellectual disabilities (ID), autism and mental health difficulties) attending learning and vocational training during COVID-19. It also investigates how alternative learning pathways and models of work placement might be promoted as we continue to grapple with the long-term effects of the pandemic.

The research is based on a small-scale qualitative study of 11 young people with disabilities aged 18-30 participating in a skills and vocational training programme at NLN during the first stage of the pandemic. It also includes interviews with family members and focus groups with NLN staff and employers who provide work placements to young people.

Key findings

The wider impacts of COVID-19 on young people with disabilities

As a wider context to students' learning at NLN, the pandemic had significant socio-emotional impacts on young people. While for some, it offered a comfort level insofar as they were able to stay within the parameters of the home, for many, it had negative socio-emotional effects, including **heightened anxiety, damage to their social networks and contacts and a disruption to daily routines.**

Disruptions to learning & training

The pandemic forced a sudden halt to learning activities on site and work placements for students in March 2020. A rapid transition had to be made to remote forms of learning and engagement which caused anxiety for many students and challenges for staff in how best to



support the students. The home learning environment became far more significant, with family members having to get involved in various roles to support students. While recognising the significance of this support, students, family members and staff acknowledged this was not necessarily a positive development, as it could undermine students' autonomy and independence.

Challenges in making the transition to remote learning

The study identified a number of challenges in the transition to online learning. *Structural issues* included a lack of access to, or knowledge of, appropriate technology and lack of a suitable home learning environment conducive to study. *Navigating the new (virtual) learning environment,* refers to challenges in terms of the organisation of learning in remote environments, and in maintaining interpersonal communication and engagement with peers and instructors in the online space. A final set of challenges relates to *individuals' personal motivations and engagement* with learning: maintaining everyday routines and motivation in the context of social isolation was identified as a key challenge for students, who sometimes struggled to place a clear boundary between the home as a space of leisure and work.

What supported and maintained a positive transition to remote learning?

A number of factors supported a more positive transition to remote learning for students. These included appropriate access to technology; regular, informal, individual communication between students, their instructors and trusted supporters/ advocates; the development of innovative teaching methods and modes of assessment in the online space; and a strong network of trusted supporters for young people within the home learning environment.

Disruptions to work placements & the potential of remote work placements

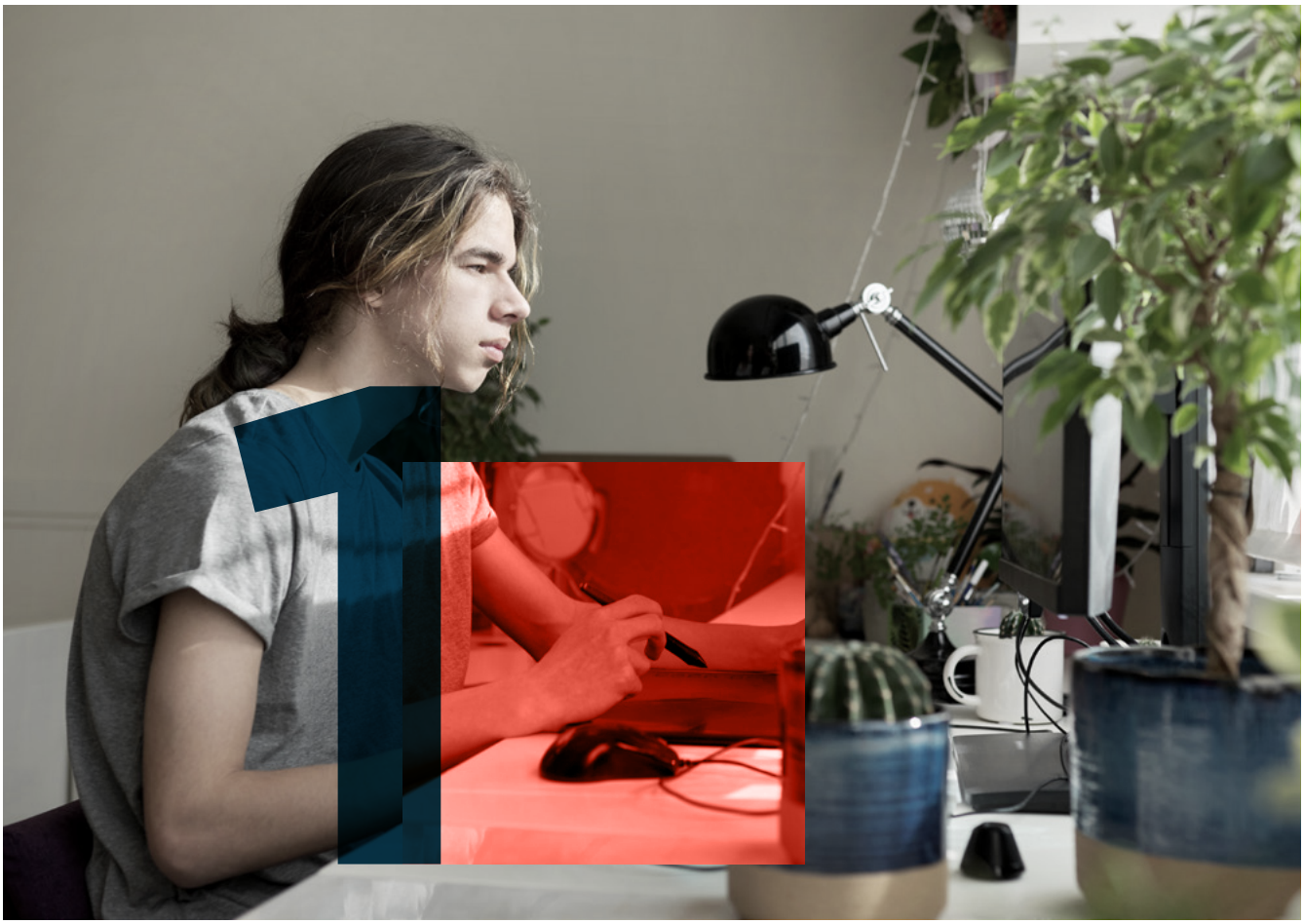
Curtailment and lack of work placements for students was one of the hardest impacts of the pandemic in the context of the learning and training experience at NLN. It caused uncertainty, and restricted students' ability to put into practice the academic and interpersonal skills they had learned on the programme.

A small number of employers did manage to offer remote placements to NLN students through the pandemic. Our interviews with students, staff and employers also suggest that many are open to the idea of remote or blended work placements. Remote placements could provide access to those living in geographically isolated areas, or who are comfortable in the online space. However, it was acknowledged that remote placements might lack the development of practical skills, or hands on experience needed in the work environment. Most interviewees recognised that the potential of remote work placements would very much be influenced by the **individual student, their skills and preferences**, as well as the needs of the employer.

Implications and recommendations for future practice

- In terms of educational equity and inclusion, there needs to be a greater recognition of the ways in which young people with disabilities undertaking further education and vocational training have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While attention has focused on higher education, and school education, rather less attention in Ireland has focused on this cohort/ educational sector.
- Any future moves to develop remote learning need to understand technology as just one part of a holistic education experience which includes wider social relationships, learning spaces/ environments and students' socio-emotional needs.
- Blended (virtual combined with face-to-face) forms of work placements and learning experiences may open up access to education and employment opportunities for people with disabilities. However, this very much depends on the individual student. Individual students reacted differently to learning and working online. Work placements and learning experiences need to be flexibly designed around the skills and needs of the individual: one size does not fit all.
- Greater resources need to be made available to ensure equity of access to technology for young people with disabilities and their families to support learning.
- The socio-emotional impacts of the pandemic on students' learning experiences – and the 'learning gap' experienced as a result of COVID-19 - need to be recognised and supports put in place to enable students to transition back into face-to-face or hybrid forms of learning.
- More government support is required to enable employers to develop their infrastructure and skills to deliver online or blended work placements. This includes support in terms of provision of appropriate technology, specific accommodations to the workplace, but also training in how to organise work placements and set up structures to support communication between the student and employer.





1 Introducing Learning Disrupted

1.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a profound restructuring of people's lives and social worlds. At societal, organisational and individual levels, the impacts have been sharply felt. From its onset in March 2020, people with disabilities faced significant restrictions in their access to services and supports, with consequences for social networks and participation in society (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), 2020; United Nations, 2020). Opportunities to access training and employment services as a route to inclusion are one area that has been recognised as adversely affected. Services and training traditionally delivered face-to-face were significantly curtailed, and service providers had to rethink training models, including how to provide services remotely.

This research is concerned with exploring some of the impacts and challenges faced by young people with disabilities attending learning and vocational training during COVID-19, and with investigating how new learning pathways might be promoted as we continue to grapple with the long-term effects of the pandemic. The research was carried out in partnership with the National Learning Network Cork (hereafter referred to as NLN), whose vision is 'to promote equality by providing world-class training, education and employment access services, and by actively influencing the creation of a more inclusive society' (https://www.rehab.ie/national-learning-network/find-out-more-about-nln/vision-and-mission/). Attendance at the NLN's programmes offers young people with diverse abilities opportunities for socialisation, building of routines, and the development of skills in terms of training and work placements. Like other services during COVID-19, adherence to public health guidance meant a disruption to the young people's attendance at NLN training sites and work placements. This research therefore aims to explore how this transition in learning was experienced, the ways in which young people, their families and also NLN staff responded, and how we

might learn from these experiences to build learning and training strategies as we move into the future.

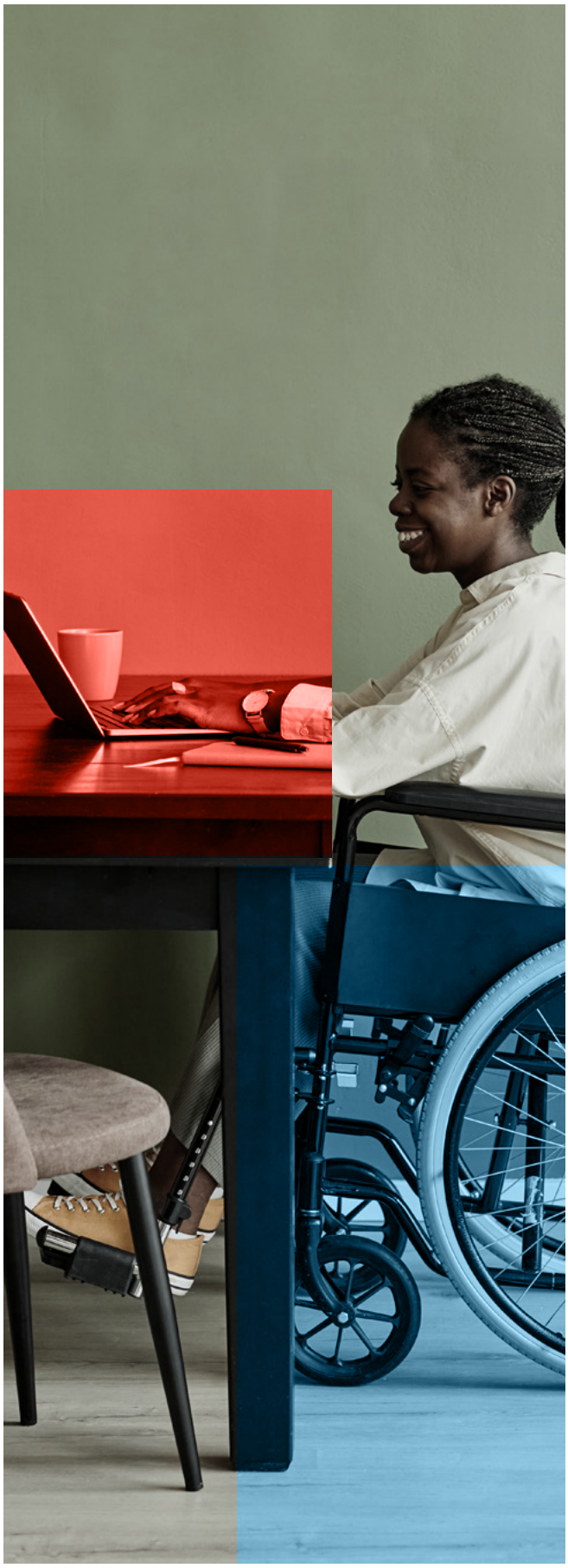
1.2 Study aims and objectives

The overall aim of Learning Disrupted was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic affected people with disabilities' (aged 18-30) access to, and experience of, skills training and work placements at the NLN, towards determining the potential of alternative learning experiences (such as remote work placements) as a response to these challenges. The study had three key objectives:

- To ascertain how young people with disabilities' (including people with intellectual disabilities, autism and mental health difficulties) learning experiences and access to work placements at the NLN have been affected by COVID-19.
- To examine the consequences of remote models of learning for people with disabilities in accessing training and work placements through the NLN.
- To explore with young people, their families, NLN staff and employers, the potential for alternative avenues for learning and training experiences (e.g. remote work placements).

1.3 Methodology

Learning Disrupted is based around an in-depth case study of experiences of young people who were engaged in the PACES/ Employability Skills programme[1] at NLN in March 2020. In order to garner the experiences of young people, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 11 young people aged 18-30 who were undertaking the programme at the time of the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020. However, in order to gain a 360 degree picture of the disruptions experienced and recognising the range of factors and interrelationships that shape learning experiences, we also conducted interviews with five family members, a focus group



1 PACES is a person-centred, exploratory vocational training course run over 18 months. The primary focus of the course is the development of generic work skills and independent living skills, and it consists of a variety of modules including Career Preparation, Personal Effectiveness, Communication Skills, Self-Advocacy, Work Experience, and Internet Skills. The learning content of these modules is not only classroom based but is also applied to everyday living. The path to work and work experience constructs a large part of the PACES course. All students are encouraged to take various work experiences in fields of their choice, with support from NLN key workers and job coaches.

with NLN staff, and another four interviews with employers who have previously provided work placements to students. Combining these perspectives, we were able to gain a holistic picture of the varied impacts wrought by the pandemic on young people's experiences, those who support them, and also the service itself. The methodology is described in more detail in Chapter 3.

1.4 Limitations of the study

This study is by its nature a small scale, qualitative study, focused around the experiences of a small cohort of students based at one specific learning and training service provider in Ireland. Students were those who were participating in a particular programme and were invited to participate in the study based on their attendance at the NLN. Notwithstanding these limits to the study, it provides in-depth insights into the perspectives and experiences of the transitions that had to be made in the move to online learning, contributes to international literature which explores the impacts of COVID-19 on people with disabilities' lives, and raises key issues for practitioners and policymakers in terms of thinking through the possibilities of alternative forms of and strategies for learning and vocational training.

1.5 Report structure

This report is divided into five chapters. In Chapter 2, we seek to contextualise the Learning Disrupted study by exploring what literature tells us about the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic for people with disabilities, particularly in the sphere of education and employment. We also consider some of the observations that have been made about experiences and impacts of remote (online) learning models, and some of the challenges these raise.

Chapter 3 explains the methodological approach taken to the study, the recruitment of participants and ethical procedures followed. In Chapter 4, we consider the key findings of the interviews with young people, family members, NLN staff and employers, focusing on the effects of the pandemic on the learning experiences of young people, the challenges faced, and how they responded. Chapter 5 concludes the report by bringing together some of the key observations of the study and exploring what it reveals about the potential or otherwise of alternative, remote forms of learning and work experience.





2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the Learning Disrupted study in context by connecting it to themes emerging in national and international literature. Broadly, we explore two key interconnected areas: firstly, what literature tells us about the wider impacts of COVID-19 on people with disabilities' daily lives during the pandemic; and secondly, the specific impacts of COVID-19 on access to education and employment, and the consequences for learning experiences. In terms of the latter, we look specifically at literature which discusses the limitations and benefits of the move to online, remote forms of learning, and the potential or otherwise of technology to facilitate access to, and engagement in, learning and skills training.

2.2 People with disabilities and the impacts of COVID-19

A growing body of international literature has explored the significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of people with disabilities (Abrams and Abbott, 2020; IHREC, 2020; Jeste *et al.,* 2020; Murray *et al.,* 2021; National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities, 2021; Neece *et al.,* 2020; Portal *et al.,* 2020; Shakespeare *et al.,* 2022). People with disabilities were widely recognised as being at greater risk of morbidity and mortality as a result of contracting COVID-19, in part as a result of pre-existing health conditions, but also because of inequities in access to health services and living arrangements which made them more susceptible to contracting the virus, particularly in the context of institutionalised settings (Shakespeare *et al.,* 2022). International studies show that people with intellectual disabilities, in particular, have been significantly over-represented in terms of deaths from COVID-19 (Friedman, 2021; McCausland *et al.,* 2021).

In addition to the health risks of contracting COVID-19 itself were the significant disruptions to health, social care and educational services during

lockdowns which negatively impacted people with disabilities' daily routines, social networks and participation in day-to-day activities (Murphy *et al.*, 2020; NAS, 2021; Shakespeare *et al.*, 2022). In the Irish context, service provision was patchy, with some services, such as day and respite services for people with disabilities, suspended completely; indeed, in a submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19, IHREC (2020: 8) raised concerns that ''social care' was not always prioritised as an 'essential service' throughout the full duration of the crisis period'.

For many, the minimising of these supports, and the need to 'cocoon' meant a greater sense of isolation, an undermining of independence and a restriction on valued social activities. A study conducted for Inclusion Ireland, for example, found that people with intellectual disabilities felt more isolated during the pandemic as they were often unable to meet friends and family, prompting feelings of anxiety and uncertainty (Murphy *et al.*, 2020). Many had to stop work placements they had been engaged in, and whilst virtual technologies such as Zoom enabled them to stay in touch with others, they missed daily routines and activities.

Service restrictions also led to what Shakespeare *et al* (2022: 108) refer to as 'reversions' in how social care supports were provided. Many people with disabilities became increasingly dependent on family members and informal carers, partly because services were suspended or reduced, but also because some people with disabilities themselves chose to stop home-based supports for fear of the risk that personal assistants and care workers might bring COVID-19 into the home (IHREC, 2020). This created a number of dynamics, including increased pressure on family carers. Lafferty *et al* (2022) for example, describe the challenges inherent in family caring during the pandemic as 'colliding worlds' where carers sought to maintain work with increased caring responsibilities in the home space. Embregts *et al's* (2021) study of mothers of children with intellectual disabilities in the Netherlands also highlights the dilemmas and challenges of the new home environment created by the pandemic, in which parents had to balance concerns about exposing their child to the virus, with maintaining everyday routines for their children and ensuring their social and psychological well-being (see also Neece *et al.,* 2020). While there is little doubt that, for many people with disabilities, these family supports were both necessary and positive, others have 'expressed fears about a reversion to a residualist state with responsibility placed in the family as the 'carer of last resort', where aspirations of participation and independent living become a thing of the past for many people' (Shakespeare *et al.,* 2022: 109). Indeed, there is a concern that COVID-19 has undermined some of the hard-fought gains for disabled people's rights and autonomy, not least in terms of living independently in the community.



2.2.1 COVID-19 and the implications of technology

An additional theme that emerges in the literature in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on people with disabilities relates to the use of technology, and its potential to facilitate social inclusion. In their study of older people with intellectual disabilities pre and post lockdown, McCausland *et al* (2021: 886) note an increased use of and access to technology by people with intellectual disabilities post lockdown, which they

identify as 'potentially a welcome benefit of the COVID-19 period'. Technology provided people with disabilities with access to a range of spaces they had previously been excluded from, and a way of maintaining social contacts. However, others have pointed to issues with the 'digital divide', not just in terms of unequal access to technology, but the fact that even where people do have access, they may not have the privacy or space to engage in these online activities (Shakespeare *et al.*, 2022). Meanwhile, there were concerns raised about what happens to the relationship between virtual and in-person, in-place accessibility when lockdown ends: these concerns can be expressed both in terms of whether a reliance on Zoom, for example, might mean that concerns around physical accessibility of meeting venues would be relegated as secondary (because everyone



can access a meeting online), or conversely, that online modes of engagement become abandoned completely, thereby excluding people with disabilities once again from valued social and educational activities (Shakespeare *et al.*, 2022).

Overall, despite some of the limited, more positive outcomes identified in terms of the pandemic's impact on disabled people (for example, the greater engagement of people with disabilities in different social and educational activities through online technologies), the literature overwhelmingly points to the multiple ways in which COVID-19 has undermined the everyday rights of people with disabilities, brought to the fore often negative and discriminatory stereotyping of disabled people, and exacerbated already existing inequalities in access to services, supports and activities (Abrams and Abbott, 2020; IHREC, 2020; Portal *et al.*, 2020).

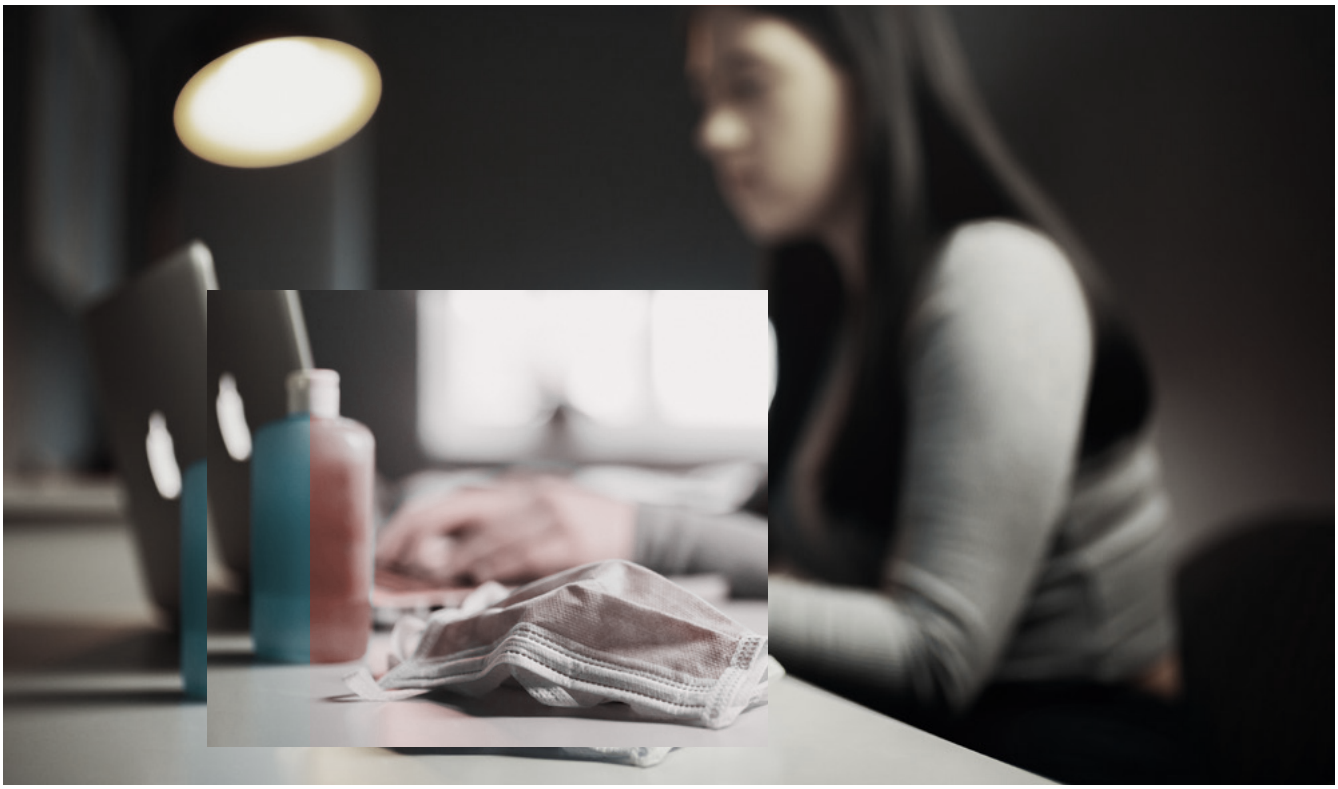
2.3 Accessing and experiencing education and employment during the pandemic

Ensuring that people with disabilities are 'encouraged and motivated to develop to the maximum of their potential' (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017: 26) by having the right to access and undertake appropriate education and employment remains a stated goal of the Irish government. *The National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021,* for example, states the government's commitment to providing a wide range of further education and training programmes for people with disabilities, to supporting smooth transitions from school into the workplace and ensuring people with disabilities have the necessary supports to move into the workplace should they wish to. Similarly, *The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024* highlights the significance of employment for disabled people's inclusion, independence, and fulfilment in society, and sets out an approach based around six priority areas:

- Build skills, capacity and independence
- Provide bridges and supports into work
- Make work pay
- Promote job retention and re-entry to work
- Provide co-ordinated and seamless support
- Engage employers

(Government of Ireland, 2015: 7)

These policy goals emerge in a context in which significant disparities still remain



in terms of people with disabilities' participation in education and employment in Ireland. People with disabilities are half as likely as non-disabled people to be in work, whilst people with intellectual disabilities experience some of the lowest employment rates (17.3%, compared to an overall employment rate of 36.5% for all people with disabilities) (National Disability Authority, 2019). Similarly, young people with disabilities are more likely to leave school earlier and while numbers are significantly increasing, are less likely to progress to third level education (Disability Federation of Ireland, 2017).

Many commentators have highlighted concerns about the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated and further embedded these pre-existing educational and employment inequalities experienced by people with disabilities (Darmody *et al.,* 2021; OECD, 2020). International literature suggests that in terms of school education particularly, and in a context where learning transferred to the home space, certain 'vulnerable' groups were more at risk of being adversely impacted, including those with special educational needs, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and migrant families (Darmody *et al.,* 2021). Similarly, in relation to employment, IHREC (2020: 10), in its aforementioned Oireachtas committee submission, raises concerns that discrimination against people with disabilities in workplaces 'may become even more widespread in the coming period of economic turbulence'. An international report suggests that people with disabilities were more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic and also to experience difficulties in returning to work (UN, 2020). On-going financial insecurity and economic exclusion therefore pose a real risk as an outcome of the pandemic for people with disabilities (Emerson *et al.,* 2021; UN, 2020).

2.3.1 Impacts of COVID-19 on people with disabilities' education and learning

A number of studies have emerged in Ireland over the past two years documenting and exploring the experience of people with disabilities, their supporters and educators in terms of negotiating remote learning, and to a lesser extent, vocational training and work placements, during the pandemic (AHEAD, 2020, 2021; McCauley and McGrotty, 2021; Murphy, 2021). Many of these relate to people with disabilities' experiences in terms of school education and higher education, with rather less in terms of vocational training programmes and work placements. However, we believe that some of the observations from studies in these different

spheres of education have relevance and insights for the aims of Learning Disrupted.

A number of studies conducted in Ireland bear witness to the disruptions to education and learning that occurred for people with disabilities particularly at the start of the pandemic. Murphy *et al's* (2020) study describes how many people with ID in Ireland had to stop work and work placements, whilst O'Connor's (2021) case study of an organisation working to provide education and employment opportunities for people with ID describes how its members felt sadness at having to stop work and experienced isolation and sometimes anxiety in a context where they had to 'cocoon' at home. From the perspective of families, moreover, a study conducted by Inclusion Ireland (2020) which surveyed over 700 parents of children with intellectual disabilities and autism during the initial three months of the pandemic found that a large proportion of parents described themselves as not coping well. The report identified a number of challenges, including difficulties in trying to educate their child at home whilst working; very variable support from schools, including a lack of clarity about what was expected and appropriate educational resources, and differential access to technology and broadband to enable their child to engage online. Many parents also noted that their child lacked the motivation to learn at home and often presented behaviours which needed the support of skilled teachers.

Concerns from people with disabilities about coping in the initial stages of the pandemic were also found in the higher education sector. For example, a survey conducted by AHEAD with 601 students in further and higher education institutions in Ireland in April 2020 revealed that over half agreed that they were not coping well, citing struggles in terms of navigating home life and study, and contexts in which access to online educational materials differed depending on different teachers/tutors. In terms of learning at home, students identified the top five challenges as:

> *'Lack of structure to my day and motivation to learn' (64%), 'Distractions/other demands at home' (52%), 'Lack of clear communication from the college/ centre of how I continue to engage in learning' (26%), the 'Reliability of my internet/internet shared with other members of household' (24%) and 'Disruption to the disability support provided to me by the college/centre' (20%) (AHEAD, 2020: 25).*

While a repeat study conducted in 2021 identified that students expressed being able to cope better, and in particular, had better access to technology (less sharing of laptops, for example and a greater use of Assistive Technology), they still identified significant challenges with the 'sensory environment' at home, with many stating that the 'noise levels from home often disrupted their learning' (AHEAD, 2021: 7), as did poor broadband connections. Nevertheless, it is clear that experiences are very mixed, and that while for some students, learning from home was extremely challenging, for others it was a welcome respite from the social pressures of attending college in person, or of having to travel, and enabled them to pace their work as they wished (see also Heyworth *et al.*, 2021).

2.3.2 Virtual learning and working: challenges and benefits

There has been significant reflection on the benefits and barriers presented by online or e-learning in the context of the pandemic. E-learning is often held out as offering particular benefits, including greater flexibility for learners in terms of managing their own study time and pace of study, reduced need for physical accommodations in learning spaces and providing a sense of comfort where the home study space is one of 'sensory and social safety' (Heyworth *et al.,* 2021: 1; see also Murphy, 2021). Studies of students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland bear witness to some of these benefits, with many citing that e-learning provided greater control over their study, particularly in a context where they could study from the comfort of their own home and could watch various course materials (such as online recordings) in their own time. In other educational spheres, the benefits of learning online



were also felt. For example, O'Connor's (2021) discussion of hosting a programme of online classes for a group of people with ID illustrates the benefits that came from online engagement: this included learning new skills, and also utilising classes as a social opportunity and to host activities to support mental well-being, such as Zumba and yoga.

That said, others point to the challenges of modes of e-learning. Studies show that these include difficulties in accessing technology and becoming familiar with Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs); assessment methods which are unsuitable to online learning; a greater reliance on self-motivation in the learning process; and barriers in terms of communication in the online space (Murphy, 2021). Some of these barriers are well-described in O'Connor's (2021) study, which notes how people with ID in the online programme could experience difficulties with communication: one participant, for example, spoke about how it was hard to hear others, and to be heard in a space such as Zoom. Others found it stressful seeing their friends and colleagues online, and not in the 'real world'. Staff running the programme alluded to a number of challenges that needed to be addressed, including technical difficulties of getting online, turn taking in the group, and maintaining participants' attention. This led to staff developing a number of learning strategies, including ensuring each online class had a routine, communicating in simpler language in the online space, and ensuring each participant got a chance to contribute (O'Connor, 2021).

In the sphere of work placements, the benefits and challenges of online working have also been explored. Discussing how a work placement programme for graduates with disabilities moved online, McCauley and McGrotty (2021) describe how one of the key benefits of the remote context was an opening up of employment in more geographically remote places to people with disabilities, as people did not need to travel, and a lesser need to focus on adjustments or accommodations that might be needed in the workplace. They also note that communication technologies such as Zoom, Teams and other apps all led to greater inclusion for people with disabilities. That said, they also describe how graduates experienced difficulties in communicating with colleagues in the workplace at times, particularly in the absence of more informal, impromptu conversations that might happen in a face-to-face environment; others felt concerned about a need to 'prove themselves' to their employers and worked extra hours at home as a result (McCauley and McGrotty, 2021).

2.4 Conclusions

A growing body of international literature indicates that people with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in ways that have, in many cases, challenged their fundamental human rights (Portal *et al.,* 2020). Disruption of access to education and employment is just one of these effects and has significant consequences in terms of future societal educational equity and inclusion. There is little doubt that educational services in particular have adapted in multiple, innovative ways, using strategies such as remote learning and technologies, which have presented new opportunities for inclusion but also a range of associated challenges. The impacts of these strategies – and indeed, the consequences of 'learning gaps' (OECD, 2020: 33) precipitated by the pandemic - are still only becoming known and will require further monitoring in terms of people with disabilities' future educational engagement, equity and opportunity.



3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we describe the methodology of the study, provide an overview of the engagement with research participants, and outline the participant recruitment and consent processes followed.

3.2. Overview of methodological approach

The aim of Learning Disrupted was to capture the experiences of students with disabilities at NLN, and those who work with them and support them, at a particular point in time in the COVID-19 pandemic. Following a preliminary literature review exploring what we know about the impact of COVID-19 on people with disabilities' access to learning and work placement opportunities, a qualitative, case study approach, based around in-depth interviews and focus groups, was put in place. The research targeted four different cohorts of participants: young people with disabilities attending the NLN PACES programme; family members; NLN staff; and employers who provide placements to NLN students.

3.3 Recruitment of research participants

The National Learning Network assisted the research team with the design of the project methodology and recruitment of all participants, facilitating the distribution of project information sheets and consent forms to all cohorts. In the case of the students, a vocational trainer, who works at NLN and who has a well-established relationship with the students, offered support around participant recruitment. Easy Read versions of the project information sheet and consent forms were circulated to the students and the vocational trainer held informal discussions with students about the Learning Disrupted project. Following this, a virtual group information session for students was held with the research team on Microsoft Teams, in the presence of the vocational trainer, and students had the opportunity to ask

questions of the research team pertaining to participation in the project. In the case of individuals from the family member, staff and employer cohorts, once they had indicated their interest in participating, their email addresses were shared with the research team who then liaised directly with them to set up the interviews.

The Learning Disrupted research project underwent ethical review by the Social Research Ethics Committee at University College Cork and Rehab's Research and Ethics Committee and was approved by both panels. As part of the ethical review process, the researchers met with the regional lead psychologist from Rehab who provided feedback on the data collection instruments which in turn was implemented by the researchers towards minimising any potential harm to participants.

3.4 Overview of research participant cohorts

Fieldwork took place between September and December 2021. Four different participant cohorts were engaged during the primary data collection, as follows:

National Learning Network students

A total of 11 NLN students participated in one-to-one research interviews, including six women and five men. All of the students interviewed were enrolled on a NLN programme at the time of interview. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 and the student interviews lasted between 15 and 35 minutes. The participants included autistic students and students with mental health difficulties, including social anxiety disorders.

The focus of the interviews was on exploring students' experiences of life and learning during COVID-19. All the students interviewed had taken part in a previous creative initiative within NLN, a letter-writing project, in which students wrote letters conveying their experiences of life during the lockdowns imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These letters were made available to the research team with the students' consent and were used as prompts for discussion during the interviews.



All the students interviewed had taken part in a previous creative initiative within NLN, a letter-writing project, in which students wrote letters conveying their experiences of life during the lockdowns.



Family members of NLN students

Five parents of NLN students took part in one-to-one research interviews. This cohort was comprised of five family members - four mothers and one father - whose son or daughter was either enrolled in a NLN course at the time of interview or had recently completed a course at NLN. The family member interviews lasted between 35 and 50 minutes and aimed to explore their perceptions about the effects of COVID-19 on learning experiences during the pandemic.

NLN staff

Six NLN staff members participated in a focus group which lasted approximately 80 minutes. One of the focus group participants provided further follow-on information in a short interview lasting 25 minutes. The focus group participants work in a variety of roles at NLN, including learning support, vocational instruction, guidance counselling, rehabilitation and employment-based training. The focus group sought to explore staff experiences of the barriers faced by people with disabilities, and to consider how alternative forms of learning might be promoted during this time of pandemic, with a focus on the potential of technologies to support remote learning.

Employers whose organisations provide work placement opportunities to NLN students

A total of five representatives from organisations which provide work placement opportunities for NLN students participated in the Learning Disrupted project. Of these, three took part in one-to-one interviews, the duration of which ranged from 25 to 50 minutes. Two further employers took part in a pair interview which lasted approximately 45 minutes. The organisations represented by these participants are from the retail, local authority and commercial sectors, all of which had hosted at least one NLN student for work placement.

3.5 A note on COVID-19 guidance relating to field research

The Learning Disrupted project was carried out in line with the guidance on field research set down by University College Cork during COVID-19. At the time of data collection, this guidance directed that research interviews should be conducted remotely, via an online platform. For that reason, all the interviews and focus groups for the Learning Disrupted project took place online using Microsoft Teams as the virtual meeting platform. Each interview was recorded with the participant's prior consent and professionally transcribed. The data was thematically analysed and the main findings are presented in this report.



4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we outline the findings from the interviews conducted with four groups of participants: young people with disabilities, their families, NLN staff and employers who provide work placements to NLN students. Our aim in this chapter is to give voice to these different perspectives and narratives, as a way of building our understanding of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' learning. For students, parents and NLN staff, we consider three core areas which emerged in our analysis: the more general psycho-social and structural impacts of COVID-19 as they were felt by participants; the experience and impact of transitioning to online learning and back to face-to-face learning after lockdown (including the challenges, but also the opportunities presented by this transition); and perspectives on student work placements, and specifically, the possibility of remote work placements. With employers, we focus specifically on their experiences of NLN work placements during the pandemic, and again possibilities for remote placements in the future. Throughout, participants are referred to by acronyms to preserve anonymity.

4.2 Young people with disabilities' experiences

In this section, we focus attention on how young people attending NLN training experienced the pandemic, and more specifically, the changed environment which saw their learning moving online, and within the home space. As we elucidate in Chapter 3, students in this study had different experiences of impairment and diverse communication styles; this means they are a heterogenous group with different learning needs. Many of the students told us about the benefits which they saw of attending NLN programmes, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. These included acquiring transferable skills such as communication and stress management for use in employment contexts, establishing routines, forming friendships and building confidence.

This was articulated by S1, who stated: *It's interesting and it's very helpful. I mean, transferable skills, you know, what skills you need for a particular job (S1).* S3 also stated: *You kind of gain the skills to get like employment. And it was actually really interesting [...] I enjoyed it and made a lot of new friends (S3).* Opportunities to undertake work placements are highly valued by the students as a chance to put the skills acquired at NLN into practice and to gain an understanding of the expectations of employers, as S2 said: *I get a feel for what's expected of me and what's, how it all works, (S2)* whilst S3 noted: *I think probably maybe like, you know, I got a bit more confidence and, you know, like more like I definitely improved my communication skills (S3).*

4.2.1 Broader effects of the pandemic on students

Throughout the interviews with the NLN students, they shared some insights on what life was like for them following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is apparent that, as a broader context to their engagement with NLN, COVID-19 had a number of **negative psycho-social impacts** which affected their everyday lives. Many students described how their social lives were severely impacted due to public health restrictions and the requirement to remain at home. Being home a lot and not seeing friends and loved ones left many students feeling isolated, with some explaining that this had a negative impact on their mental health. In some instances, students explained that this affected their confidence levels, which in turn made the resumption of regular activity more challenging when restrictions lifted. This is related to the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic altered the routines that many students had worked hard to establish, with their attendance at classes in NLN often forming a key part of that routine.

A number of students also explained that they found it difficult and sometimes stressful watching media coverage about COVID-19. Some also alluded to the difficulty associated with maintaining relationships and friendships solely through online social media platforms which do not offer the same levels of connection and engagement as meeting in person. That said, for some students, the lockdown periods presented opportunities to develop new habits and skills, such as baking and exercising. These insights from the students provide an important context for the discussion of the disruption to their learning at NLN and the transitions that followed.

4.2.2 Transitioning to and navigating remote learning during COVID-19

In the interviews with NLN students, they shared a rich body of insights into their experiences of transitioning to online learning as a result of the pandemic, with a mixture of both positive and negative impacts felt.

The students discussed feeling well-supported by the NLN staff and felt that, in some respects, having the opportunity to engage in online learning helped them to maintain a sense of routine during lockdown and gave them a sense of purpose:

> *I was able to do my normal routine, have my breakfast, do my chores, go downstairs, set up everything down the office, my iPad, my things, my books, my copies, my pencil case, so I guess routine was the positive thing for me (S1).*

A couple of the students indicated that learning remotely suited them better than classroom-based settings. Students who regard themselves to be introverted, for example, were less impacted by the loss of social interaction than others who require it more. One student shared that: *I actually found it easier to keep up with it when it was remote (S10),* an idea that is expanded upon in the section on findings from NLN staff who might have seen improved outputs from some students at home in contrast to the physical classroom environment. Specific supports articulated by students from NLN during pandemic lockdowns also included access to counselling at NLN and the ability to talk about worries and concerns arising from the transition to online learning and students' broader anxiety which was induced by the pandemic:

> *I kind of had a lot of problems, you know, like, you know, kind of like friendships and stuff and, you know, like, of course, you know, like a parent is there to talk to, but, you know, there's only certain things you can—you can't tell—you can't tell your dad…You can tell, like, you know, a counsellor or something (S3).*

4.2.2.1 Challenges of remote learning

On balance, however, it seems that there were more negative consequences of the transition for students than positive ones. Like much international research which has pointed to a digital divide in terms of access to technology for education, or the technological resources required in the home environment to support online learning, students discussed the **difficulties they faced with setting up the technology required to work from home**, including issues with internet connectivity, while also demonstrating an understanding that such things were beyond their control:

> *I was able to like get on to Microsoft Teams like grand… I suppose there was one time I couldn't really get into it because there's been an error to my email account. And there was once when [it turned itself off]…It was a bit frustrating, but, sure, look, if it happens it happens (S7).*

All of the students interviewed eventually succeeded in transitioning to online learning using the virtual platforms. Yet while this process did not pose any technical difficulties at all for some students with strong digital competencies, it was the **loss of the face-to-face engagement** that was problematic, and in some cases, students lost contact with their peers. For example, S6 stated: *I found it easy to use [MS Teams] but I missed the personal experience… I missed just seeing the people (S6).*

Indeed, in terms of learning and engagement, the students expressed some reservations about how they were able to keep up with their learning on online platforms, with **interpersonal interactions in the digital learning space or** 'classroom' being a particular challenge. Having the confidence to speak up online could potentially be more difficult, as a number of students stated: *It was actually hard to try and like say "I can't understand something" (S7)*; similarly, as S2 said: *I think it was harder to ask [questions online]. You had to stop the whole thing [re MS Teams function]*. For S1, *studying online was kind of difficult. I think I found it better, you know, in the classroom, you know, taking down notes, learning it the normal way*.

Another student described their experience of trying to learn online as 'chaotic' due to the adjustment required when trying to interact with fellow students and teachers in the virtual classroom environment:

> *I think like it felt like a bit more chaotic online than, you know, than when you're actually in a classroom, like, you know, in the centre, because, you know, kind of you have to—you know, like the teacher would have to put other people on mute so like, you know, one person is talking at the same time and it's just chaotic (S3).*

The transition to online learning had a profound impact on and **disruption of the routines** of the young people interviewed, and there was a period of adjustment while new routines were put in place, as S4 explains here:

> *We came in and we done induction for a couple of weeks and then it went back to lockdown again and we had to do a lot of it online for the first few months. So that was a little weird to get used to. …Because I'd always been used to having a routine, getting up and getting a bus and coming in and sitting for a few hours in a classroom (S4).*

Related to the loss of routines, some students shared the difficulties they had faced with keeping motivated during lockdowns and maintaining their engagement with learning. This they related in some instances to a shift to a home-based learning environment. Working from home also engendered a new engagement and reliance on family support.



4.2.2.2 Home learning environments and family relationships/supports

Wider literature has pointed to the key role that support within the home has played for people with disabilities in accessing education remotely during the pandemic (Heyworth et al., 2021). It is apparent that part of the challenge for students continuing to engage in learning was negotiating how to study in the home space, where the **boundary became blurred between home as a space of work and leisure.** One student stated for example that *I thought it was tricky kind of separating the work lifestyle from just leisure, you know (S2).* It was evident that many students preferred to do all their learning at the NLN centre, not least because the home environment could involve distractions which made it hard to maintain focus:

> *Sitting at home it can be a lot easier to just throw everything inside, put on the telly, and get something to eat, and just procrastinate basically…So I've always found it easier to come in and get used to the work inside and get it all done, and I guess everyone else found the same thing too (S4).*

> *I found it more tricky because I just got way into videogames and computing and all that and then my mind-span is going back and back. So I don't have a good retention of knowledge anymore (S6).*

> *Doing things online and trying to like study from home and not getting much of a—you know, help with things…It's kind of more of a struggle…I just really can't do a lot because I would prefer to be in the centre…than to just do it at home …not knowing what the hell I'm doing (S7).*

Students also spoke about the challenges of home as a learning space, and not having a separate space to study:

> *When you're doing Zoom a meeting, like you can't really focus because there's other background noise […] you're losing focus as well because you're around people, like family or friends, and you're just like oh, how am I going to do this, you know? It was all the distractions as well, to be honest (S5).*

It is important to note that whilst many students spoke positively about the supports they received through NLN, the transition to remote learning had a bearing on the students' access to the wider network of supports provided by the service. For example, when asked about how they found engaging with the rehabilitative officer during lockdown, one student responded: *It was a bit harder because I don't really like talking over the phone, right (S10).*

It is clear that during the pandemic the home learning environment became a greater influence, and many students needed to draw on support from family members to facilitate their learning and engagement. In the course of interviews with students, many of them outlined the support they received from families as

they faced the disruption to their learning brought about by the pandemic. Students spoke about the practical support family members provided such as downloading the apps required to facilitate online learning and offering support to the students to develop their digital skills, as S3 noted: *I kind of, you know, know how to use Microsoft Teams, like. You know, my mum uses it a lot and, you know, my dad's a very kind of technical person. So, yeah, I had some help (S3)*. Additionally, many of the students indicated the emotional and psychological support provided by family members at that time, which of course related not only to their NLN journeys, but to life in general as the pandemic took hold: *I think my family have been supportive and we as a family have been supportive of each other through this difficult time (S1)*.

4.2.2.3 Managing transitions back to face-to-face learning following remote learning

As indicated above, the students experienced some challenges following the pivot to online learning due to the onset of the pandemic. The dynamics of engagement with teachers and fellow students were hugely altered. Further transitions had to be navigated when the time came to return to in-person learning at the NLN centre. For some students, having lost contact with their classmates and having struggled to maintain friendships aside from the learning tasks, there were some challenges and apprehension associated with getting back to face-to-face learning. As one student explained: *"Yeah, definitely anxiety. I don't know. Yeah, it's hard to reintegrate, kind of, you know. […] Yes, it's been strange. You have to improve your social skills again" (S2)*.

Looking to the future, in terms of preferences for online or face-to-face learning, there was a mix of opinions among the students. Some indicated that they found online learning to be less stressful due to the reduced travel and interpersonal interactions expected of them. For others, there was a preference for face-to-face learning as they enjoyed meeting their friends and found it easier to talk to their teachers and classmates in person; this included the improved ability to read body language when in someone's physical company. Students specifically mentioned the perceived loss of a fun and friendly dynamic when trying to interact with other students online, which caused them to state a strong preference for face-to-face learning:

> *We have no idea what to say to each other on a video call sitting at home…It's very difficult. When we're in the centre we get on like houses on fire. We'll chat away during lunch and have a laugh and it's great to be in person. Thank God it's not all online because I don't know what we'd—like otherwise we'd never be friends, like (S4).*

It was also recognised that attendance at in-person classes provided the students with a reason to utilise skills which they otherwise might not: *I prefer going to the centre. It's better. If it's just taking the bus, which is something that I only do to—because I rarely go out unless it's for—unless I have to (S11)*. Overall, there was a positive disposition among the students towards a blended approach to learning; one student suggested that it was conducive to maintaining good mental health: *Oh, definitely half-and-half. I'd some online and some at home…I found it a lot easier as well just to have, you know, a mix-up (S4).*

4.2.3 Disruptions to work placements

The interviews provided a specific opportunity to ask students about the experiences of work placements which form a key part of the training experience at NLN. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the related requirement to stay at home, several of the students interviewed experienced cancellation or deferral of their work placements. Placements in the hospitality sector were particularly adversely impacted due to the face-to-face nature of that work and the closure of many providers during lockdowns. Many of them expressed their disappointment at the disruption to their placement opportunities which resulted from the pandemic lockdowns:

> *COVID came and I had to stop. And I was looking for—like I was loving my experience. Of…Like I was loving the whole—my new routine, my—you know, before COVID came, and COVID just wiped everything (S5).*
>
> *Like you're learning for like Zoom meeting during lockdown, but there's no work experience or practicals to know that you're doing it, you know. So like what am I doing with this course if I'm not doing practicals with it during lockdown? (S5)*

In the case of S5, the culmination of disruptions including lack of placement meant that they came close to dropping out of their programme. Concerns about student retention are further explored in the findings from the engagement with NLN staff.

4.2.3.1 Potential of remote work placements

Students were asked whether they might consider undertaking a remote work placement based online if the opportunity arose. This prompted a mix of responses from the interviewees. One expressed their reticence as follows: *I think it would be difficult because I'm more a practical person myself and so I learn as I'm doing (S5).* Another interviewee who had successfully completed placements at the time of interview agreed that it had been important for them to be present on-site to get a full sense of what the role entails: *Yeah, it gave me a great, great understanding of what two of those jobs would be like (S6).*

Other students expressed that they would be willing to try a remote work placement, with different motivations evident between them. For one participant, it was an attractive prospect due to the reduced interpersonal interaction an online placement might entail: *I think I'd be more comfortable online because it wouldn't be like interacting with people. But I'd like the opportunity either way (S2).* Another student indicated that a remote placement would be preferable to no placement at all: *I think I would have liked it because, you know, there were definitely days where I was struggling on like, you know, what to do and stuff…So I would have been open to anything (S3).*

A few of the students indicated that their confidence in their abilities to undertake a remote placement has been enhanced due to the digital skills they acquired while learning from home, as S6 stated: *To be fair, either way I wouldn't mind now because I wouldn't be that bad on the IT side. So I've no problem linking in (S6).* This was echoed by S4 who noted:

> *I probably would since I've been used to doing online now. I mean, before COVID, like, if I never had to do virtual work online, I would have never done anything like that. It wouldn't have been my forte. I'd always want to get up and have a routine… But it would be something I would give a go to for six months or a year or whatever (S4).*

4.3 Family members' perspectives on students' learning during the pandemic

Recognising the significance of family perspectives and relationships in supporting family members with their learning and engagement with NLN, our interviews sought to gain an understanding of how parents and siblings experienced the move to online learning in the home environment. Many family members reiterated students' perspectives regarding the benefits of attending NLN, including a sense of independence, purpose and routine that attendance affords the students; an observed growth in confidence; the acquisition of practical skills which support employability, including I.T., and social and emotional support offered by staff. There were clear concerns expressed by family members about how the acquisition of these skills – most notably independence - could be eroded by COVID-19, and concerns about how to provide support to their son, daughter, or family member so as not to jeopardise or undermine this growing autonomy and development of new skills.

4.3.1 Family members' perspectives on the effects of the pandemic

The students' family members shared from their perspectives what they had observed to be the effects of the pandemic on the students. Many of them expressed concern about the constraints placed on students' social interactions, which sometimes resulted in loss of connections with friends. For some students, family members described how this adversely impacted their son or daughter's mood and led them to become withdrawn. Many of the family members commented on the disruption to students' routines, which included their commute to NLN campus, decline in motivation and an observed regression in aspects of their social skills. Some family members commented on the impact on students' wellbeing of closely following media coverage of COVID-19. One family member who was interviewed felt that the disruption to learning experienced by their relative during the pandemic ultimately resulted in them deciding not to undertake a further programme of study, where they might have considered doing so otherwise.

4.3.2 Transitioning to and navigating remote learning during COVID-19

From the perspectives of the family members, the fact that learning continued during the pandemic was welcomed as a means to help students maintain a sense of routine and daily focus. Among the observations was that students' digital skills were enhanced out of necessity. The parents interviewed all conveyed positive feedback on the efforts of NLN staff for keeping the programmes running throughout the pandemic, in addition to providing support to families when gaps in understanding arose:

> *[My son] would say, 'I don't know what I'm to do. I don't understand.' And I suppose when you're not out there [at NLN Centre] with them—he would have asked out there. I know he would say, 'I don't understand.' Like a lot of things he wouldn't understand and so I would have had to ring on a few occasions, and my husband rang on a few occasions, you know, just— And [vocational trainer] was so kind, amazing, and would have chatted to us and gone over things with us, explained things to us, you know (F2).*

It was also noted by family members that, from their perspective, NLN staff demonstrated a reflexivity in their responses to student needs and a willingness to accommodate the individual requirements of students who were grappling with the transition to online learning and the broader impact of not being able to attend the NLN centre:

> *I think a couple of months into it [lockdown and remote learning] I think it just became very overwhelming for [son] and I could see, you know, the anxiety was starting to get very heightened in him. […] I'd ring [vocational trainer] up, I'd explain the situation, and everything that could be done for him—[vocational trainer] would be like, let's pull back, let's do this, let's do that, whatever makes him comfortable. So they [NLN] were fantastic in that sense (F5).*

Such informal, but often individualised, supports were seen as extremely valuable, as family members often took on the role of mediator or broker between the service and their son or daughter.

4.3.2.1 Challenges in navigating remote learning

While family members were positive about supports provided and the continuation of the learning experience for their son, daughter or sibling, it is clear that there were a number of challenging impacts identified. Like the students, family members identified practical concerns about **access to digital devices** in order to participate in online learning:

> *Because the two of them are at home I had to go away and get a second laptop because the two of them were using it at the same time. […] I remember kind of saying to myself, nobody thought of where the technology was going to come from for the extra child in the house, you know (F3).*

Parents often ended up playing a key role in organising digital supports, with one parent noting,

> *I had to support her where we tried to get [her computer] repaired, which to be fair to her was very problematic. The company kind of took her PC and then lost it. So getting help with that she needs help (F1).*

There was also shared sentiment that while online engagement was welcome, and engagement with individual NLN staff was supportive, the overall **structure and arrangement of teaching and learning presented some challenges.** For example, the amount of contact hours was felt to be insufficient, and some family members pointed to a lack of organisation of learning, particularly in the first lockdown. It was also suggested that the opportunities for students to connect with their classes were not maximised:

> *When there was the worst of the lockdown to get through and […] it was all at home, I did wonder—I felt that if—I don't know, I just felt his isolation so keenly […] if there had been a way of maybe being a bit creative about increasing the engagement, you know, even having an opportunity of bringing the other students together in almost like a social context on Zoom (F4).*

Echoing the view expressed by a student about the 'chaotic' nature of the establishment of online learning, one parent noted that she had found administrative arrangements at the start of the pandemic very disorganised. Noting that *lessons were cancelled, changed (F1),* she stated that there was a lack of preparation and planning: for her daughter, who values routine, this proved to be a frustration. Other parents similarly expressed their concern at the lack of a timetable or consistent schedule of online interaction with NLN, with one interviewee outlining the efforts taken to establish a routine to replace the one that was lost; this proved especially challenging for students who struggled with the blurring of the distinction between work and home when learning moved online:

> *I was like, okay, [son's name], this is the work [vocational trainer] has sent today, and then the eye rolls and 'I don't want to be sitting here with you doing this'. But then I couldn't let him off to do it himself because he wouldn't have done it. He would have just left it to the side and said, 'That's fine, another time, I'm at home now.' So it was kind of a case of me having to try and make a structure at home to say, okay, look, we'll work from 2 o'clock to 3 o'clock, we can take a break. […] he preferred that, okay, I have my set hours, I go into the centre, I get it done, and when I come home that's all left behind in the centre, home is home. So, as you can imagine, when the work started coming through it was a bit of a battle again! Yeah, he didn't like it (F5).*

It is clear from this quote that family members felt the need to create a structure for learning within the home environment in order to support continued engagement of their son or daughter. Family members observed that the suspension of face-to-face learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the pivot to virtual classrooms prompted significant changes in the way students engaged with their learning. A number of parents expressed the view that attendance in the virtual classroom **reduces the demands on students to engage and participate**, and indeed, could lead to disengagement:

> *Zoom it is such a comfort zone in a way because he would largely have his camera off if he could. And so it's that sense again of it's too comfortable or it's—you know, in a sense. Whereas I think having to go to a course and be in the room like with the—just getting on the transport, there's a lot more organisation required in terms of, you know, what you need to bring and what you need—it's just a hugely different thing (F4).*

"We have no idea what to say to each other on a video call sitting at home...It's very difficult.
When we're in the centre we get on like houses on fire..."

(S4)

> *I found that when, you know, when he's in person, even if he's not entirely interested […] when he'd be with [vocational trainer] and in the centre obviously he'd put a bit more effort into it because it was being pulled out with him in person. […] But when online and things and the group was involved, he would be quite happy to sit back and let all the other guys and girls do the talking and just be like, okay, I'm here and I'm here and I'm listening, but, you know, I'll be switching off soon kind of thing. So he lacked a lot more interest online than he did in person, yeah (F5).*

One participant noted that her son seemed to be struggling as a result of not attending classes at the NLN centre and was having difficulty learning in the virtual classroom, stating: *I know he wasn't really getting it completely at home online, you know what I mean. It's definitely much harder. […] Yeah, he definitely is a person who needs to be in there, you know (F2).* As outlined in the findings from the student interviews, one of the particular issues of concern was the impact on students' ability to effectively engage with the instructors online, for example to seek clarification on something they did not understand:

> *I was upstairs earlier and I could hear him outside the room interacting away with the coach in this team, and chatting back and forth. But, you see, I suppose he's not getting it back because other people may talk and it all clashes and, you know, if he asks a question somebody mightn't hear him or he might only be talking about something trivial, you know, and he's just not being heard. […] I feel if he had been out there communicating with all the people and interacting with them and listening to them he would have learned so much more, you know (F2).*

A related issue observed by one parent is that it may not be as readily apparent to an instructor online that a student has not understood, as it might be in a face-to-face setting:

> *[Re: daughter's use of MS Teams] she may not retain everything that's being said, and that's because of the intellectual disability. […] I needed that interaction with the National Learning Network to tell them that and to be aware […] It's when she needs to be face-to-face before they cop something (F3).*

In short then, family members noticed a number of changes and challenges with engagement which were precipitated by the move to online. It is apparent, moreover, that they played a significant role in supporting their son or daughter's continued engagement with learning, particularly during the early days of lockdown.

4.3.2.2 Home learning environments and family relationships/support

Echoing what many of the students had referred to in their interviews, family members discussed the ways in which they tried to offer practical support to NLN students in response to the sudden and profound disruption to their learning. An important part of this was helping students to cope with the acute changes that took place at the onset of the pandemic, as articulated here:

> *Life changes all the time and we just have to cope with it, we've done years and years of work ourselves here, you know, explaining to him change happens, things just don't stay the same. So I suppose in that sense we were lucky that he had become a lot easier around change. But he still found it so, so difficult, you know (F2).*

One parent shared their observation that a significant part of the transition was the need for learning to take place in the home rather than at the NLN centre:

> *I was conscious that the routine is slipping—his routines are slipping. It was like a real holiday vibe for him and I could see some not-such-good habits coming up. So yeah, I was trying to kind of guide him into a better space, but it was*

> *like pushing a rock up a hill. It was really, really difficult (F4).*

The impact on routine was discussed by several of the family members and they outlined the practical ways in which they helped support their family member to manage the transition to learning remotely. This included supporting the students in developing the digital skills required to remain engaged in their programme of learning;

> *At the start he was all over the place. He was, I mean, trying to set up. He was missing meetings. He was missing, you know, emails. So I had to get on top of it. I literally had to be there all the time making sure my—like my day was literally—I couldn't leave the house if something is coming up because he—but he did learn. Now, that was the one good thing. I suppose he did learn how to set up eventually, how to email, how to do lots of things (F2).*

As a consequence, some of the family members discussed how they felt a need to closely monitor the students' learning, to see how they were managing and to identify any gaps or need for additional support:

> *I could see sometimes he was missing some of the stuff coming through [via online learning]. And I knew that he wouldn't get some of it, but I couldn't go in then. And I was trying to take notes outside sometimes, outside the door, which I don't know was that even allowed, you know. I questioned what I was doing myself then as well (F2).*

As the above quotation demonstrates, it was often difficult for parents to negotiate these circumstances and to determine what level of involvement on their part was appropriate. For some, there was a reluctance to become involved because they did not want to encroach on that area of their family member's life, or undermine their autonomy, as F1 stated: *I know he has autism, but at the same time he's a young man and he didn't want me constantly on his case all the time.* In this context, it was apparent from the family member interviews that communication with NLN was highly valued by most, but there was a reticence about overstepping boundaries relating to students' engagement with NLN: *I'm always struggling with myself as 'the mother' not to be too involved. I would love to be probably having—my ideal world I'd probably have a weekly five-minute feedback from everyone that contacts [son's name]! But I'm really conscious that this is his [thing]—he's 21 (F4).*

Relatedly, there was a concern among some parents about how their involvement might be perceived by staff at NLN:

> *It's a difficult one I imagine for families like us because, you know, the person that you're trying to support. And they might like you to be there and help them with the phone conversation or whatever, but might very obviously look to the other people like you are getting in their way or pushing them or not allowing them their freedom or—you know. So yeah, so taking over, whatever. So that would have held me back from—but I did—and I don't want to get in [son's name]'s way. I don't want to kind of dis-empower him by having my own connection with the job coach. It's sort of the job coach—it's his relationship, you know (F4).*

In spite of these concerns, many of the parents did engage directly with NLN staff and the opportunity to do so was something they valued highly as a means to compensate for the aspects of the students' learning which were adversely impacted by the pandemic or to fill the gap left by the lack of direct face-to-face engagement between students and staff. In that regard, several parents spoke in positive terms about the reception from NLN staff, and the support they received:

> *They [NLN] would always answer the phone to me and they would always, to be fair, they'd reassure her if she was anxious over something. […] There was no panic. You know, there's no stress on it. Don't get worked up. You know,*

> *this is all I want you to do. But in saying that they always made sure she had something to do (F3). I did need to ring the head of the course in the summer to ask questions about the summer and how the holidays work, you know […] and that was really great because then I could ask her, you know, woman to woman, you know, how is he getting on. And that was great just to get the feedback (F4).*

Such quotations speak to the importance of maintaining informal, regular communication in terms of supporting students and their families through the pandemic, and in an absence of face-to-face contact.

4.3.2.3 Managing transitions back to face-to-face learning following remote learning

Overall, the family members interviewed expressed positive views about the resumption of face-to-face learning at the NLN centre, with many of them eagerly anticipating the full return of campus-based learning for students. They expressed the view that face-to-face learning affords the students the opportunity for structure and interpersonal interactions:

> *We were absolutely delighted when she was able to kind of go back again. […] I just think it sort of, you know, gives her that structure that she so needs and that interaction, so it was definitely a positive improvement (F1).*

There was a strong preference among the family members for face-to-face rather than online learning, with parents regarding the in-person experience as important for maintaining skills and also helping to prevent loneliness or isolation:

> *I'm just hoping now that he will get back into Paces full-time five days a week, please, and Friday—they were talking about their social day. He loves social days. He loves going out into restaurants. You know, we've put so much work down through the years with his money, his wallet, his phone, you know, and going into restaurants, ordering his food, you know, minding himself and all his things, and that Friday he was looking so forward to having that on a Friday in the National Learning Network (F2).*

As this quote highlights, resuming attendance at NLN was as much about social opportunities and being able to re-build social networks as it was about specific areas of learning or being in the 'classroom'.

4.3.3 Disruption to work placements

The family members who participated in interviews indicated their disappointment at the fact that student placements had been postponed, cancelled or were uncertain at the time of interview. For many, the opportunity for their family member to gain workplace-based training was a key component of the overall curriculum from which the students can derive many important benefits; as such, it was regarded as a significant loss in cases where it did not happen: *There was meant to be a lot of work experience and things involved in that course [PACES] as well, but of course unfortunately they didn't get the chance to do that because of COVID (F5).* A further difficulty for families was the uncertainty they had to navigate around placements and the time frames for their possible resumption:

> *I was hoping that once he had his vaccinations, I think started opening up in the autumn, that he would get a placement, you know, fairly soon into the autumn. And then he was coming back and saying, 'Oh, no, it's fine, you know, it's no hassle and other people have them but it's okay.' […] I was getting quite stressed and thinking, oh, no, should we do it? Are they going to do more? How does this work? How do we work on this together? (F4)*

As this quote bears witness to, apparent inconsistencies in placement offerings as restrictions eased was a cause of concern for families, sometimes leaving parents unsure around the appropriateness or otherwise of them becoming involved in trying to progress matters in their family member's favour.

4.3.3.1 Potential of remote work placements

When asked for their opinion on the suitability or otherwise of remote placements based online for NLN students, many family members expressed their reservations. One such reservation was that an online placement would not allow their family member the experience to interact with others and enjoy interpersonal engagement: *I would say no, it's not something she'd go for because she's something else in her head. It is about interacting with people and chatting and that's what she wants to do, that's what it's about (F3).* A further point made by one parent was that, for a student who values a clear delineation between work and leisure time, online working could blur the boundaries between the two and this would not be agreeable for the student in question: *[My son] has had this thing: home is home and school is school or home is home and work is work (F5).*

Another parent highlighted the unsuitability of a remote placement on the basis of their family member's skillset and the solitary nature of online working:

> *I find that [online work placement] hard to imagine […] because he's a very hands-on sort of person. That's where his skills are and he wouldn't get satisfaction, I think, from being—like working with texting or typing too long in a given day. And he likes to be in his own company, you know, to some degree for leisure things, but I think for working it wouldn't suit his skillset actually (F4).*

Many families we spoke to then found it hard to imagine the benefits of a remote placement, stressing instead the importance for their son or daughter of gaining the 'hands on' experience that only an in-person placement could provide.

4.4 Perceptions and experiences of NLN staff

In this section, we turn our attention to NLN staff perspectives on the impacts wrought by the pandemic on students' learning and work experiences. As individuals working to provide on-going support and instruction to the young people, our discussions with them facilitated a reflection on the challenges they faced, particularly at the start of the pandemic, but also the ways in which they actively sought to develop new modes of learning engagement to reflect new circumstances in which the home learning environment became more important.

4.4.1 Staff perspectives on the effects of the pandemic on students

As observed from their perspectives, the NLN staff shared a number of wider impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their students. The loss of social contact, the reduction of opportunities to meet friends face-to-face through attendance at NLN programmes was a dominant concern and a decline in physical activity and wellbeing were all noted. Also diminished were the chances for students to talk and express how they were feeling beyond their family unit. It was noted that the home circumstances of students were significant during periods of lockdown, related to matters such as caring responsibilities as well as sharing resources and spaces, all of which have a bearing on the students' abilities to engage with their studies.

The staff discussed how difficult it was to host induction for new entrants to courses during lockdown and the related impact on the formation of social relationships between students. The difficulty of having to rely on the telephone to communicate with students in place of face-to-face conversations, particularly in the case of students who communicate most effectively in person, was also outlined. Staff also discussed feeling curtailed in their capacity to provide students with the levels of support that had been established pre-pandemic, noting that provision of on-site supports (learning support workers, resource teachers and so on), became more fragmented when the pandemic hit. Staff also detected a disconnect between what some students perceived to have been beneficial about being able to remain at home where they felt most secure and not having to interact with other people; this was described during the NLN staff focus group as a 'false positive' because of

the adverse impacts this had on students' social interaction skills. One staff member expressed the sentiment that such matters as those outlined in this section be given due consideration when decisions are being taken around lockdowns, due to the profound nature of the impacts on people's lives. It was also noted that the resilience of students was applied to great effect in the coping strategies employed during pandemic lockdowns.

4.4.2 Transitioning to and navigating remote learning during COVID-19

Staff articulated that the shift to online learning presented significant challenges in how to maintain engagement, but also pushed them to develop novel ways in which to deliver learning, and to support students. Staff acknowledged that for some students, the move to online learning was a comfortable experience, and enabled them to flourish:

> *Some people who would have found it challenging to come into the training room really thrived having the space to do their own work [...] they had the capacity to kind of just sit back and, you know, not be worried about this kind of sensory issues or noises or having to deal with other people (NLN2).*

However, in the early days of the pandemic particularly, for many students the disruption was experienced as anxiety. Staff therefore spent significant time offering support to students as they came to terms with the new ways of being which were necessitated by the pandemic, including social distancing and staying at home. As one staff member said: *There was a lot of calming people's nerves and try and work things through with them [...] taking it one problem at a time because otherwise it would be very overwhelming for a lot of them (NLN3).* Another stated:

> *Often the calls were really checking in with them but also just trying to keep the anxiety a little bit down, but a lot of the anxiety was over the uncertainty of when they were going to be able to come back into the centre. And you get that question every week—so when do you think we're going to be going back in? (NLN1)*

Staff acknowledged however, that this wasn't just an anxiety felt by the students, but by staff as well. Throughout the focus group, it was evident that the response to the pandemic at NLN was as a community; the sense of anxiety around the sharp changes instigated by COVID-19 was felt by everyone, as one staff member articulated: *You need to keep as positive as you can for them [students], but we weren't out of the equation ourselves either when it came to anxiety, I think (NLN6).* As another staff member said, *They [the students] were adjusting but we [staff] were adjusting too. You know, we had to learn to deal with our own feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence and all of that as well (NLN3).* Relatedly, a staff member expressed the view that one perceived benefit of the pandemic is that social anxiety, which is experienced by some of the students who attend NLN, may now be more widely understood by staff with increased empathy.

4.4.2.1 Challenges in navigating the transition to remote learning

In the focus group, staff noted the significant challenges they faced in adjusting to the sudden transition to online learning. The preparedness of staff for the sudden and unexpected pivot to online learning had a bearing on how smooth and effective the transition was. One staff member explained that it was really helpful to have had an e-learning platform designed and set up before the pandemic, which helped to make the transition to remote learning more seamless. Yet, as with the student and family member cohorts, the NLN staff detected a significant number of challenges in the transition. Some **shortcomings in the standard of programme delivery** as a direct result of the pandemic were identified by the staff. Concerns about GDPR, for example, meant that there was a delay in being able to establish the online 'classroom'. It was acknowledged that the suddenness of the first pandemic lockdown meant staff were not as prepared as they might have been when it came to delivering programmes online:

> *Lockdown 1 obviously none of us were prepared for. So there was a big learning curve not only for the students but also for us in relation to learning how to use the platforms and the technology and all of that (NLN3).*

Furthermore, there was a perceived **negative impact on staff members' capacity to undertake student-centred practices in virtual classrooms**, something which is core to the approach taken at NLN more broadly:

> *Paces is like, you know, focused on like a person-centred course. So as (NLN2) was saying, we tailor the course for each student. But during the pandemic we kind of—I don't know would you agree—we had to become more generic about our presentation and it became less person-centred. And, you know, that's a huge loss. That's not what there there—that's not what they're in Paces for, I think (NLN4).*

Staff were conscious that this impacted not only on the students directly, but also on their family members, for whom the lack of face-to-face engagement became a stressor, one which was exacerbated by the uncertainty around time frames for lockdowns and restriction easing:

> *[Re: adapting to learning on Teams]: parents of children with intellectual disabilities because they couldn't engage. So they were actually tearing their hair out, you know, when can they come back? And that was the main thing. And even though they knew, you know, we had the 5-mile distance and all that, like, and they knew all of that, there was still an expectation—God, you must be able to do something, you know. And you were left helpless. So some students then you might have lost because there was no point. They were wasting their training time, you know, and maybe having to take them back later on. And like students who weren't suitable at all, like, to academic learning, you know, that they learn through doing rather than academia, you know. So yeah, parents were—a lot of parents were very, very distressed, yeah (NLN7).*

Staff also spoke more broadly about the challenges of delivering learning in a remote environment. The group dynamic which characterises some of the teaching delivery at NLN was adversely affected by the pivot to remote learning; it **proved difficult to facilitate effective groupwork online** and this had an impact on the students returning to campus when face-to-face classes resumed:

> *[Pre-pandemic classroom based learning] conversations would kind of evolve naturally and you'd have a great group discussion that you wouldn't necessarily have planned and that was a huge part of how Paces would flow as well and it built people's confidence and people got to know each other in that way as well. And it is a huge loss, yeah. Because it's very hard even now even with the lads coming back into the centre. There's still so much of a gap—it feels like a gap anyway—to try and recreate that because, you see, they wouldn't have been in the centre when things were normal or however you'd put it, you know. And so they don't even know what that experience is, so trying to recreate it now is very difficult, you know (NLN2).*

The **establishment of rapport** among students was also challenging online, something which one staff member attributed to the fundamental isolation that can characterise remote learning for some students:

> *Like, you know, when you're in a group environment and the lads, you know, obviously have anxiety or whatever, you have the communal feel. You have the feeling of support around you. You know, it's more casual and you can talk without feeling that everyone is focused on you. When you're on MS Teams, regardless of how great it is, you're on your own in that*

> *room and you do have this feeling that everyone is very much focused on you when you're talking. So, you know, it isn't a great forum for our students in some senses to express themselves freely, let's say (NLN4).*

The issue of engaging students online, and maintaining their motivation, also presented a persistent challenge, one which arguably became more difficult to overcome the longer online-only learning went on:

> *Were they participating? I mean, you could get them engaged. They might be logged on to the call with no camera and with no microphone on. Sure, they could be gone for a run or anything. That was—I don't know—or gone off, left the room, you know. You ask a question and you get the sound of silence, you know. So that was an issue as well (NLN5).*

It was also noted by NLN staff that **variations in access to technology and devices, as well as inconsistencies in broadband provision**, can impact greatly on learner engagement and create a digital divide among students' which impacts their attainment levels. The demands within households during periods of lockdown was a factor that NLN staff had to take into consideration in their engagement with students:

> *So you'd have parents working from home. So there's the concern there with the technology. What time will you use—what time will you contact me because the Wi-Fi won't hold up to dad or mam being on at the same time as maybe the student being on, or else maybe they're trying to use their smartphone with MS Teams, which makes it very difficult, I'd imagine, with such small screen, to do that (NLN1).*

The staff members expressed a collective view that the **strategic needs of NLN students and NLN staff as education providers were largely overlooked at a national level.** This pertained to the issue of financing for IT resources, capacity building to navigate the particular challenges posed by GDPR concerns, and digital skills training for staff. One focus group participant expressed the importance of educators remaining critical as regards their engagement with online learning strategies in recognition of the fact that they are not universally congenial to all:

> *I had a meeting about two weeks ago saying online is brilliant, online is great, online is wonderful, remote teaching, but no one had the bravery to step up and say, 'Na-ha, this isn't going to work for this category of student. It's not going to work for this student.' But nobody wants to say it because it's the new buzzword and it's wonderful. So I do think it needs to take into account, like [NLN3] said—we're going to need alternatives because we're going to leave people behind if—but blended is great because it's a balance. Like [NLN4] said, if it's all one—if it's all only on one side, we're going to lose people and leave people behind (NLN1).*

Such an observation speaks to a wider recognition that virtual learning technologies are not a panacea for students' engagement and learning but have to be approached with a critical eye to both their benefits and limitations.

4.4.2.2 Developing new practices in the context of online learning and student support

In response to the concerns raised, there was discussion with NLN staff of their innovative responses to the disruption to student learning, which related both to the programme curricula and student wellbeing more broadly. For the staff, it prompted an awareness of the value of harnessing the online teaching skills of staff and the potential this holds for blended approaches to delivery into the future, which may benefit students' diverse learning styles and preferences:

> *We've had to be more creative in terms of what we can deliver remotely as well. But it's also kind of shown us what other possibilities there are. I mean, once upon a time we would never envisaged an art class happening via Teams but now*

> *it is. Or, you know, a fitness class that we have on Fridays. […] The blend is good because it gives—it kind of re-energizes people and gives people a chance to have that space and then come back in and—you know, they're not as isolated. You know, there's enough to sustain the learning (NLN2).*

Alongside the transition to online learning technologies, the staff also developed initiatives intended to maintain students' motivation levels and a sense of connection among the students as well as attending to their mental and physical wellbeing:

> *I remember introducing like a Wellness Wednesday because it was something that got the lads on board. And what we did is we took a walk remotely from where we were in our own homes, including myself, you know, because I couldn't be saying to them 'off you go now' and me sitting on the couch at home. And then we'd WhatsApp photos to each other from wherever we were and then we would swap our step counts at the end. So then it kind of became a bit of a competition (NLN2).*

The pivot to online learning prompted reflection on other aspects of teaching and learning practice; in the course of the NLN staff focus group, the issue of assessment and the application of Universal Design for Learning principles was discussed, with one participant sharing the following reflection:

> *I think we do have to open up. And we're very good at adapting our teaching, but I think the assessment side of things is where there is a big, big problem. They're still looking for the same—doing it the same way, and that needs to be changed because it doesn't help all learners, absolutely not, and I think the pandemic would show that (NLN3).*

Another participant discussed how the pandemic had prompted her to engage in continuing professional development in the area of digital skills, with a commitment to learner engagement in evidence:

> *I decided to do a tech and learning course with the National College of Ireland, which was brilliant. […] I learned about a lot of other platforms I could use to try and bring in collaboration. So like I got students working on an essay together on Google Docs. So they had to collaborate with each other using a lot more of the breakout rooms with exercises (NLN3).*

4.4.2.3 Home learning environments and family relationships/support

The NLN staff who participated in the focus group were unanimous in their view that positive supports from families made a significant difference to students' learning journeys, something which applies beyond the specific context of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic: *When parents are involved and intellectually and emotionally committed to the process it makes our job a lot easier (NLN6).* There was an acknowledgment of the role played by families to support students in the sudden transition to online learning, with the staff praising the efforts of family members who bridged the gap resulting from the fact that students could not attend the NLN centre in person:

> *A lot of responsibility was transferred over to the family to, you know, help engage the students. And if that family support wasn't there you were at a huge loss […] one guy I had, you know, he couldn't get into his own email unless there was someone beside him. And so unless his parents—and his parents were brilliant, like really supportive, but, you know, he was really lucky to have that (NLN4).*

A less welcome outcome was the impact on students' levels of independence on their learning journeys; while family support was required to help maintain students' engagement, there was concern on the part of staff members about the regression of skills which were under development:

> *But it also negated everything we were trying to do because what we try to do is make the lads more independent. So what you're really*

"We've had to be more creative in terms of what we can deliver remotely as well. ***But it's also kind of shown us what other possibilities there are..."***

(NLN2)

> *doing is they were taking five steps back and they needed their family so much more than being at home and they weren't working on their own. And I think that was difficult for them to come back in. Like we want them to be training-ready and ready for the workplace, which means a certain amount of independence, which could not happen during the lockdown (NLN4).*

It was recognised that there are variations among the students in terms of the levels of support at home. For those who lack family support, the welfare role of the NLN is increased; the necessary closure of the NLN Centre due to COVID-19 restrictions and the diminished opportunities for face-to-face engagement with students was therefore especially detrimental for that cohort of students:

> *Seeing the students who had a supportive family they were so lucky, you know, to have that support, and then others nothing. So, like, you know, it really wasn't distributed equally at all. And for, you know, for the students who are living on their own or in group homes it was nice for them to come in to us and like we formed an awful lot of their support network. Yeah, and I felt like that was really stripped away from them and they didn't have a lot of advocacy through that time (NLN4).*

4.4.2.4 Managing transitions back to face-to-face learning following remote learning

The NLN staff shared their perspectives on the experiences of students as they returned to in-person learning at the NLN centre following a period of remote learning. They acknowledged that it induced anxiety for some students:

> *Certainly coming back to the centre there was a level of anxiety. People can get anxiety over a weekend, so you can imagine what a year and a half is going to do. So there was that. So maybe people getting—or somebody trying to get on a bus. You know, transport, anxiety around that. And the whole anxiety possibly around sitting beside somebody on a bus coming into the centre, that was another big thing (NLN7).*

There was also an understanding that the students would need support in re-establishing the routines that had been compromised due to the pandemic lockdowns, noting that some students found it challenging in terms of the routine of getting back to the centre.

In terms of preference for online or face-to-face teaching in the future, the staff appeared to favour face-to-face more than remote engagement, particularly on the Paces programme, where *there's a lot of learning done kind of naturally, in the sense that, you know, a conversation could take many different tangents (NLN2)*. While they acknowledged the merits of remote learning for students who find interpersonal interactions very challenging - for example, some students with Asperger's Syndrome - they ultimately conveyed the view that there is no comparison with being in the same room as students to see what's going on and also to maintain a sense of spontaneity and fun, as NLN2 stated:

> *When you're in a room with students you can see what's going on for them. You know, you're observing all the time as an instructor. So you know when to step in, you know when to let a person, you know, work away themselves.*

That said, staff recognised that the pandemic afforded the opportunity to think about the possible merits of online approaches to learning and could recognise the potential in blended approaches to complement the learning styles and preferences of individual students:

> *I think that the blended model is the optimum model, like, as what [NLN3] was saying, like. I think they all get something out of it. So those people who have like severe anxiety you're giving them breathing room as well when they're at home for a day, and*

> *those people, you know, who need the support are bringing them in and they can do—you know, that they enjoy the MS Teams a bit more when there is a mix (NLN4).*

4.4.3 Disruption to work placements

The COVID-19 pandemic precipitated many changes across society, and these were felt acutely within the learning community at NLN. Social distancing and public health restrictions meant that many work placement opportunities fell into jeopardy:

> *You're looking at employer-based programmes and the practical side of getting out, getting into the workplace. And of course for many—and (NLN6), you could see very clearly employers were scared even to talk to you during the lockdown. They didn't want—they couldn't bring in their own staff, never mind bringing in people, you know, that were looking for placements or whatever. So that was the big challenge there (NLN5).*

There was a strong consensus among the participants in the NLN staff focus group that the disruption to student work placements was a significant loss to students; this was especially the case for students whose scheduled placements were cancelled due to the onset of lockdown, requiring a further adjustment in addition to that necessitated by the transition to remote working. This prompted an unsettling time for many students, as explained here:

> *In the first lockdown the following week they were due to go out on their work placement. So they had four weeks all ready to go and all of a sudden then that happened. So in the beginning there was a sense of loss and what happens next? So they were dealing with the stress of the pandemic, and I suppose...kind of all the unknown in relation to that...They also had the unknown in that the work placement had suddenly gone and they kept on asking me when will it happen and I was unable to tell them when it was going to happen!*

> *So there was a lot of adjustments for everybody. And so due to that I suppose there was a lot of unease (NLN3).*

Staff expressed their dismay at the loss of opportunities for students to apply their practical skills and learning in placement contexts, and the confidence-building associated with that; on placement, students have the opportunity to prove to themselves that they are capable of implementing the skills learned at NLN. Practical placements are furthermore regarded as valuable as a means of balancing the academic demands of a programme, something which was compromised during lockdowns:

> *Oftentimes if a student is struggling with, say, the written work or the academic side of the programme we'd look at maybe tailoring a work experience for that person so that, you know, that would suit their needs and their personality more and they'd get a lot more out of being out in a work environment. But that was impossible. […] The whole point of Paces is about exploration, trying out different work experiences […] But all of that stuff was lost (NLN2).*

4.4.3.1 Potential of remote work placements

The NLN staff focus group participants raised a number of points relating to the feasibility and potential of online placements, all of which ultimately came back to the needs and interests of individual students. In reference to the current cohort of students with which one participant is working, they expressed the view that online placements would not be suitable:

> *It's just because of the level of support. […] Supervision might be a thing for some of the students. Just to be demonstrated to how you do something. And that's much better in a one-on-one situation in real-time and real-life. It's very hard to demonstrate something online, I think (NLN4).*

One participant expressed their disappointment that it had not been possible to set up remote placements in response to the sudden manner in which pandemic restrictions were introduced, while also seeing value in exploring what might be possible in this regard:

> *And our students really they—the students from the last year's group really lost out by not having that work placement big, bigtime. And I think employers found it very difficult to even go online because, you know, to try and integrate a new staff member into a group, they didn't have enough knowledge and know how to do that and how to link people in, so it didn't really happen. So I'm kind of hoping that this year we will have that. But yeah, I think that was one of the biggest losses. And how that could be done differently I think is something we need to think about (NLN3).*

There was a recognition of the potential for remote placements to suit the skill sets, preferences and requirements of some NLN students. The fact that many of the NLN student cohort are familiar with communicating online was cited as a reason why it could work quite well. It was suggested by one participant to present an opportunity for students who experience challenges relating to the accessibility of work environments:

> *What I did find was that the remote work experiences could really work for some of our students. You know, like there was one lad I had who had, you know, impaired vision and a lot of, you know, practical work experiences, you know, let's say in retail or hospitality or whatever he could not do that. But because technology is his friend, this remote working could open up (NLN4).*

Another participant was of the view that remote working could help students to overcome the challenge of geographical remoteness:

> *That [remote working] would solve that issue for a lot of trainees who don't have access to, you know, transport and they might be isolated rurally, but if they had a piece of technology, you know, it could transform their work for them and make them more valuable literally overnight if it could be achieved (NLN6).*

On the whole, the NLN staff group concluded that blended approaches to work placement, combining in-person, on-site activities with online working, would be a preferable model to pursuing one or other option exclusively. One of the focus group participants spoke about her experience working with students who had completed remote placements with varying degrees of success. A key piece of learning from the online placements to date is the central importance of communication to ensure positive and rewarding outcomes for students, as well as fostering relationships with employers:

> *Communication is key because, you know, it's not the same as, you know, meeting a person face-to-face. So staying in contact. But, I mean, that's something we do anyway, so it's not really that far removed from, you know, your face-to-face circumstances, it really isn't. You know, it's about picking up the phone, talking to the person. The only difference is is that sometimes we'd actually go onsite and visit (NLN4).*

4.5 Employers' perspectives

In this section, we focus on findings from our discussions with employers who provide placements to NLN students. We consider how employers understand the benefits of placements, both for the students and for their own companies and organisations, their experiences of providing placements during the pandemic and the learning that has emerged from this, and their insights on the potential of remote work placements.

4.5.1 Employers' perspectives on the benefits of NLN student placements

In conversation with the employers, the impetus for providing placements to NLN students was discussed. Employers noted the benefits that accrue to NLN students through placements, but also to the organisation/company themselves. As one employer said:

> *Students get their on-the-job work, upskilling and work placement and training, whereas we get on-the-job disability awareness training I suppose you could call it […] I suppose a lot of people have a fear that if somebody's coming in working with a disability they don't know what to expect. We do have a tendency to think they're not able to do certain roles but we don't actually know that for a fact. So I think it's a huge benefit, because people are coming into the organisation, they're showing everybody within the organisation that they are actually, you know, an asset to the organisation (E05).*

Placements were recognised as opportunities to dismantle some preconceptions that may be held regarding the capabilities of people with disabilities to be effective employees, and provide learning for staff, including those staff within organisations who become mentors for NLN students. Crucially, however, employers recognised the significance of work placements for students' development, in terms of their interpersonal skills, confidence and specific work skills. Key to this is the meaningful nature of placements in which students' expertise is applied in appropriate contexts, as one interviewee who works in a human resources role expressed: *It's just about finding the role that's most suited to the person (E03).*

There was a commitment evident among the employers to ensuring that the roles assigned to students on placement are meaningful and well-matched to their skill set. As one employer who is based in a civic library noted: *We know it's not a demeaning job, it's an essential job. And we'd always give them jobs that, you know, would be worthwhile to them and to us so that it gives them a positive experience (E04)*. For NLN students on placement to be part of the team and being fully integrated into the workplace environment was identified as a priority:

> *Every week then we would have updates with all the assistants and every week while [student's name] was with us he formed part of the update […] I think the key thing about inviting [student's name] to the team meetings was that he got an opportunity I suppose to hear. […] But he also had the opportunity then to speak as well and tell people what he was doing for the week, so what his plans were (E01).*

This integration also meant that students on placement are treated akin to employees by the placement provider; as one interviewee put it, *it was very much like how we would start anybody coming into the job (E02).*

The importance of appropriate levels of support for NLN students on placement was widely acknowledged by the employers interviewed. One participant who works with HR in a large retailer offered the following insight: *We'd be very conscious that especially someone who's new into the company—and it takes a bit of getting used to and it's quite fast-paced. So, I suppose making sure there's a support network there is very, very important (E03).* The employers displayed a keen understanding of the importance of placements to students, with one participant from the retail sector articulating it as follows: *For a student who comes from the National Learning Network, if they have a negative experience with us, how far back that can push them (E01).* For that reason, it is important that employers assess their capacity to provide a positive and meaningful placement experience to students: *I would be quite conscious that if we can't provide the level of support and*

supervision that any student requires or deserves then I would be first to say, okay, look, unfortunately we're not in a position to do this because it's probably—look, it's not right for the student and it's also not the right thing to be doing as a business (E03).

Employers also recognised the vital role of the NLN job coach in supporting successful placements. Speaking about the choice of mentor who works alongside the student during placement and who also engages with the student's NLN-based job coach, one employer said

> *You just have to make sure that you have the right person with the student really. I think that's so important (E05). This commitment on the part of NLN to ensure the meaningfulness of placements was credited by the employers; for example, one interviewee who is based in a local authority setting stated: The National Learning Network coordinators are wonderful...they have such a belief and worth in their students, it comes across to us as an organisation. You know, they're not coming in here 'anything will do'... so I think there's a credit due to them for instilling that in us (E04).*

4.5.2 Disruptions and adaptations to placements due to COVID-19

As with the campus-based learning, placement opportunities were disrupted for students from the onset of the pandemic. Some placement opportunities were put in jeopardy but ultimately went ahead due to the efforts of the NLN job coaches and the placement providers, while other placements were cancelled. An HR manager in one of the large retailers, for example, explained how his predecessor in the role had put a proposal together to allow this placement to take place in a virtual environment and, with the assistance of resource provision by NLN, the placement was able to go ahead. Here he outlines the strengths and practical limitations of the approach:

> *When COVID hit we had to give all our assistants laptops because they all had to have the ability to work from home. So off the back of that then we obviously laid out the new way of working to the Learning Network and they provided him [student], as far as I'm aware, with all the equipment. There was never any technical issues with [student]. You know, it was Microsoft Teams and he was able to log on and do whatever. And assistance then, if there was any documentation to be sent over we just emailed it over to him. There was no issue or anything with that...I suppose because he had the National Learning Network the only thing was that he didn't have access to our own internal network because he wouldn't get the VPN built onto the machine. But we built our placement and we built what we wanted [student] We kept most of the tasks that we would have gave [student] around things that he would have been able to find out without accessing our network (E01).*

Some of the employers explained how they were restricted in their capacity to provide placement opportunities during the pandemic. In some cases, operations largely ceased at that time, while for other employers it imposed a limit on the number of placements that could be offered. One of the participants alluded to the role of the NLN in getting the placements back up and running:

> *COVID coming in that impacted a lot of the placements, the work experience we were in a position to provide. So there was kind of a pause put on it for a period of time. And then basically the National Learning Network again reached out. So I met with a number of people from the organisation and I suppose we agreed then that we were happy to provide placements again and monitor kind of I suppose the current climate and case numbers and stuff like that (E03).*

Echoing the idea of loss that was evident from the interviews with parents and staff,

one employer did allude to the sense that a placement conducted virtually was not as meaningful as it might have been if carried out face-to-face:

> *But I do think that if we were able to have [student's name] in we would have been able to support him a lot more from a social perspective. It's the stuff that you don't see when you're doing I suppose a role, when you're working in a role which is primarily task-based where we give you a task and you do it for us and we talk through it. It's those little interactions. It's having the cup of coffee below in the canteen. It's chatting at the desk. It's asking face-to-face, you know, how did the weekend go, being able to read somebody's facial expressions and being able to have those little conversations. As a manager that type of stuff is invaluable and you can't do that across Microsoft Teams, you know (E01).*

The employers also expressed concerns about the welfare of existing staff and the need to consider their concerns during the pandemic, which in turn had an impact on the creation of placement opportunities:

> *We have staff that are quite anxious about COVID and, you know—so just at the moment we wouldn't be looking at bringing in new staff that way…and the group we were working with in Paces as well…we're all used to masks and things now, but even just making the connection with staff…it's all changed that way for everybody and it's very hard to meet new people yourself, you know (E04).*

4.5.3 Employer attitudes to provision of online work placements

During the interviews with employers, participants were invited to share their opinions about remote work placements. There was a general optimism about their feasibility alongside an acknowledgement of the associated challenges and shortcomings. The potential of online placements as a viable alternative to in-person placements which would otherwise be cancelled was articulated as follows:

> *It definitely can be done. It's not ideal, but it's not a reason to cancel a placement either… Because it definitely can be done. And even what I would say is that the most important thing is to include the placement student in everything that you're doing (E01). I think because we've all been working from home for so long we can all see that it actually does work. So maybe if you had asked the question two years ago it probably would have been a definite 'oh God, not a chance'… But now it might be more probable (E05).*

The possibility of hosting online placements in the future, not necessarily arising from pandemic-related factors, was also expressed:

> *If there was a role or something suitable that could be done remotely, the technology was there, the support in relation to I suppose the instruction and the correct training—I do think that would be challenging online as well — but if it was there and I think if all parties were open to it I wouldn't see any reason why it wouldn't work (E03).*

Other employers were more sceptical about the feasibility of remote work placements, for both practical and social reasons:

> *I don't think, hopefully when all this is gone, there will be a need for remote learning and I don't think that it would be something that we would be in favour of if we could get the individual into the office. Because there is a lot more positives out of it, not just from a work point of view but a social point of view, of getting people into the office. I mean, like everybody is sick to death of looking into their screens now, you know, talking to people into the screens and all that type of stuff (E01).*

The importance of support provided to students on placement by an appointed mentor has already been referred to. One participant based in a local authority stated that:

> *I think the day-to-day support is important because people need to know that there's someone there that they can go to if they have a question or if they just need to know a little bit more information or if they have any concerns about any of the roles that they have been allocated, you know (E05).*

This does raise the question of how feasible it is to expect that this level of support can be replicated in an online environment, when students are not sharing the same physical workspace as their mentors and may perceive their mentors to be less readily available to them for help with queries.

It is evident that alongside the potential of remote placements, some associated challenges exist. Much like the consensus among NLN staff that blended approaches to online learning are a preferred option, employers expressed a similar view in relation to placements:

> *COVID has shown that we can work remotely. So even if there is a situation where a student could work remotely part-time, so would do half their placement in the office, half the placement, you know, remotely. I think working in the office is very beneficial as well from the social aspect of the placement, and being in the workplace and meeting your colleagues and going for your coffee break and all that side of things is as important as the academic learning part of it, you know...so perhaps something where it's, you know, it's shared between remote and onsite might be something we could look at it early in the New Year (E05).*

4.6 Conclusions

Our interviews and focus groups across all four groups of participants – young people, families, NLN staff and employers – show remarkable commonalities in terms of perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 and its effects on the young people's learning and training experiences. All groups expressed how the initial transition to remote learning proved extremely challenging, not just in terms of accessing and becoming familiar with new technologies, but also dealing with different learning environments and modes of communication that online learning initiated. While online learning suited some students, for the majority, it required significant negotiation and support from family members and NLN staff. In the wider context of the pandemic, students' daily lives became increasingly constrained, leading to the disruption of social networks and everyday routines, and for many, heightened anxiety.

It is apparent that despite the challenges, students, their families, NLN staff and employers were able to adapt ways of learning and working in multiple ways. However, the experience raises questions about the longer-term impacts of the pandemic and what we can learn about online modes of learning for future service provision. While we may no longer be experiencing severe public health restrictions, students, staff and families all raised issues about the transition back into face-to-face spaces of learning, which they recognised may not necessarily be easy for some. In the context of disrupted work placements, moreover, the pandemic has opened up conversations about the potential of remote, or at least, blended work placements for students, such that the benefits that may come from remote learning are not completely lost post-pandemic. We consider the learning from the study, and implications for future practices, in Chapter 5.



5 Discussion and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we consider what we see as some of the key conclusions of the study as well as potential implications for future practice. It is clear from the material set out in Chapter 4 that COVID-19 had a significant impact for the students and all those involved in their experience of learning, including NLN staff, employers and family members. Indeed, one of the points that emerges very clearly from the interviews is that in relation to emerging forms of 'digital engagement', we cannot see the use of technology in a vacuum. Rather, technological facilitators to learning (whether through Teams, Zoom, apps and so on) have to be understood as part of a number of different social and structural elements of the learning processes - for example relationships and interactions with instructors and peers; physical spaces within which learning takes place, including the home; the socio-economic factors which determine whether students are able to access digital support; and whether students have trusted supporters (including family members) who are able to scaffold and mediate the learning experience where it is required. This suggests that in terms of any future online or remote engagement, use of technology needs to be approached with a sense of caution, with an eye to both its benefits, but also its pitfalls, and understood in the context of these other factors.

5.2 The impacts of COVID-19 on young people with disabilities' learning experiences

In this section, we pull together the key findings which emerge across all the participant cohorts in the study.

5.2.1 Contexts for learning: the wider impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

It is clear from our interviews with all participants that as a wider context to students' learning at NLN, the pandemic had significant socio-emotional impacts on young people. While for some, it offered a comfort level insofar as they were able to stay within the parameters of home and family, for many, it had negative socio-emotional effects, which influenced their social relations and daily routines.

Many students expressed a feeling of **heightened anxiety** that was precipitated by the pandemic and its surrounding uncertainty: about how long lockdowns would last, when, if at all, they could return to the NLN centre, and indeed, in some cases, fears about getting ill. This is something that was not helped by the on-going media coverage of the pandemic, which raised levels of anxiety.

Other students expressed negative effects in terms of feeling more isolated at home and outlined the **damage to their social networks and contacts** in terms of not being able to see friends. This had a knock-on effect in terms of their confidence and building autonomy and independence. Finally, it is clear that **daily routines were severely affected**, and trying to maintain a sense of routine to support students' wellbeing became increasingly challenging as time went on.

5.2.2 Challenges in transitioning to and maintaining remote learning

The sudden lockdown and move to online learning was a significant change and adjustment for the students, and also for family members and NLN staff in how they delivered online learning. The transition to online learning was one that was forced, with little choice. With the view of hindsight, we can see that participants reacted to online learning with ambivalence: that is, while it brought benefits in terms of continued engagement and access to learning, it was seen as no substitute for face-to-face, in person delivery, particularly in the longer term and for a programme where developing skills around interpersonal communication is key. That said, while many students stated a preference for face-to-face or blended learning, the transition back into the physical 'classroom' after lockdown ended also proved challenging, as students had to readjust their routines and social interactions once again.

Indeed, it was evident that while the move to online suited some students, for most it created a number of challenges. For family members and staff, seeking to support students in their continued learning engaged them in different roles: family members, for example, became increasingly more engaged with their son or daughter, often acting as a broker or facilitator in their learning. This had both negative and positive consequences: as identified by both family members and NLN staff, it could undermine the independence and autonomy strived for by the students while NLN staff had to find ways to further develop teaching and learning practices to engage students.

Below, we summarise some of the key challenges that emerged in the study in terms of the learning transitions and disruptions precipitated by COVID-19. Some of these might best be described as *structural issues*, insofar as they related to access to digital resources, or a suitable home learning environment. Others reflect the experiences of navigating the *new virtual learning environment*, with the changes this brought in terms of interactions with instructors and peers, and group dynamics. A final set of challenges relates to *individuals' personal motivations and engagement* with learning.

Structural issues

- **Lack of digital capacity, access to digital resources** or technological know-how which could limit students' engagement. Participants across all groups spoke about the scramble to find appropriate technology and also to become familiar with the technology to enable learning to take place.
- Difficulties in **moving to a home learning environment**, where this environment may not be suitable as a space for study, and the blurring of spaces of work and 'leisure'.
- The **fragmentation of wider, holistic, service-based supports** for students

at NLN that happened as a result of the move away from centre-based engagement. Staff suggested that students could find it harder to access the wider range of supports offered by NLN when learning had moved away from the centre.

Navigating new learning environments

- In the early stages of the pandemic, negotiating challenges in terms of **how to organise learning** (decisions about amount of face-to-face online contact, for example) and establish learning routines, which led to some confusion amongst students and families.
- Challenges in terms of negotiating how to interact interpersonally in the virtual space. Students expressed how **interpersonal communication was often harder to maintain** in the online space. While some students felt comfortable in this space, others felt it could hinder them in terms of gaining clarification about certain points. Some expressed how their points could be lost in the virtual group chat online; others felt more comfortable with their cameras turned off, which could make it hard for instructors to gauge the level of engagement.
- As expressed by both students and NLN staff, building a group dynamic in the virtual space also proved more challenging.
- Perhaps unsurprisingly, most participants described missing the face-to-face communication which came with in-person classes at the NLN centre. NLN staff also identified these shortcomings, and the challenges of maintaining a group dynamic in the online space.

Individuals' personal feelings, motivations and engagement towards learning

- Maintaining everyday routines and motivation was a key challenge in the context of virtual engagement, and the wider context of the pandemic. This was something that students, staff and family members all described to us. Some students described feeling isolated, or that the confidence and skills that they had built up by attending NLN had being undermined. Students struggled to maintain motivation at times, and to place a clear boundary between the home as a space of leisure and work.

5.2.3 What supported and maintained a positive transition to remote learning?

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a sudden change in ways of working, of everyday routines, in ways that could not be planned for. Students, NLN staff and family members were finding their way through the transition and, initially at least, working things out a day at a time. Despite the unplanned nature of the situation, however, a number of elements supported more positive transitions for students and a maintenance of learning engagement through the initial lockdowns. These have implications for future practice, particularly in the context of how students and services engage with remote forms of learning in the future:

- **Appropriate access to technology**, and knowledge of different technologies to support learning.
- **Regular informal individual communication** between students, their instructors and trusted supporters/ advocates about expectations around learning. Students very much appreciated being able to approach instructors and other NLN staff and sought them out for support.
- A willingness on the part of the service to **develop innovative teaching methods and modes of assessment** to facilitate ways of reaching out in the online space, and to build a group dynamic virtually. The example of 'Wellness Wednesday', with the 'online walk' is just one example of this.
- A **strong network of trusted supporters for young people within the home learning environment.** The significance of the home learning environment, and the relationships embedded with it, cannot be overstated in the context of the transition to remote learning. Students benefited hugely from supportive family environments, where family members were able to offer

both practical and emotional support to their son or daughter. In some cases, this involved acting as learning brokers, engaging with the centre staff where they needed to. For others who did not have this family support, the challenges for them in maintaining engagement were much more significant. Such a finding very much echoes international research which points to the ways in which COVID-19 has highlighted disparities and inequalities in student learning in the move to remote learning and learning spaces in the home (OECD, 2020; Darmody *et al.,* 2021).

- It is important to note however, that there was a recognition from all groups (students, family members and staff) that there was a potentially negative impact of family members stepping in to provide support, insofar as it could undermine the autonomy and independence of the young people – one of the key goals of the programme at NLN.

5.2.4 Disruptions to work placements & the potential of remote work placements

One of the aims of the study was to explore how the pandemic affected work placements, but also to consider the potential for alternative forms of workplace engagement which may involve some remote component. It is important to note that this study took place at a particular point in time, when strict public health restrictions were being imposed. Since that time, Irish society has 'opened up', but questions still remain over the potential for new forms of remote working and work placements that facilitate diverse groups to participate in the labour market.

There is little doubt that the curtailment and lack of work placements for students was one of the hardest impacts of the pandemic in the context of their learning and training experience at NLN. At the start of the pandemic, employers, like other groups in society, were struggling to know how to operate online, and this put in jeopardy workplace experience for the students. It caused uncertainty, and restricted students' ability to put into practice the academic and interpersonal skills they had learned on the programme. That being said, a small number of employers did manage to offer remote placements through the pandemic.

It is in this context that discussions about the potential of blended or remote work placements emerges. Our interviews with students, staff and employers suggested that many were open to the idea of remote or blended work placements; however, this very much came down to the **individual, their skills and preferences**. For example, for someone who was very comfortable in the online space, and working on their own, it was acknowledged such a placement could work very well. Others however suggested that a remote placement would not give them the structure, practical skills, or hands on experience that they needed.

NLN staff also saw the potential of blended placements, again, recognising that they could work for certain groups of students. They also noted that for those students who were living in geographically isolated areas, a remote placement would provide a form of access to the workplace which would previously have been unavailable. They stressed however that in remote placements, communication with the employer was absolutely key, to ensure clear expectations on both the part of students and employer.

5.3 Implications and recommendations for future practice

Our research suggests a number of implications for future practice.

- In a context of educational equity and inclusion, there needs to be a greater recognition of the ways in which young people with disabilities undertaking further education and vocational training have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While attention has focused on higher education, and school education, rather less attention in Ireland has focused on this cohort/ sector of education.
- Any future moves to remote learning need to understand technology as just one part of a holistic education experience which includes wider

social relationships, learning spaces/ environments and students' socio-emotional needs.

- Blended (virtual combined with face-to-face) forms of work placements and learning experiences may open up access to education and employment opportunities for people with disabilities. However, this very much depends on the individual student. Individual students reacted differently to learning and working online. Work placements and learning experiences need to be flexibly designed around the skills and needs of the individual: one size does not fit all.
- Greater resources need to be made available to ensure equity of access to technology for young people with disabilities and their families to support learning.
- The socio-emotional impacts of the pandemic on students' learning experiences – and the 'learning gap' experienced as a result of COVID-19 - need to be recognised and supports put in place to enable students to transition back into face-to-face or hybrid forms of learning.
- More government support is required to enable employers to develop their infrastructure and skills to deliver online or blended work placements. This includes support in terms of provision of appropriate technology, specific accommodations to the workplace, but also training in how to organise work placements and set up structures to support communication between the student and employer.

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Learning Disrupted

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