

Online Learning and FET: Challenges and Opportunities

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 necessitated a transition to online delivery for teaching and learning from primary to third-level education in Ireland and across the developed world. A wide range of studies have since emerged on the impact of this pivot on teachers and learners (Kessler et al., 2020; Lemay & Doleck, 2020; Quezada et al., 2020; Flynn, 2021).

The pandemic brought uncertainty, isolation, and stress to many, not least to learners, who must learn to navigate new technologies to keep pace (Flynn et al., 2022). Since then, the rapid evolution of digital technologies has transformed the landscape of education globally, with online learning emerging as a component of further education and training (FET). This shift has brought both significant challenges and remarkable opportunities, particularly in the context of expanding access to education, enhancing learning experiences, and addressing the diverse needs of learners across Ireland.

Challenges

1. *Digital divide*

One of the most pressing challenges in the adoption of online learning in FET is the digital divide. While online platforms offer flexibility and accessibility, not all learners have equal access to the necessary technology or reliable internet connections. This disparity can exacerbate inequalities, particularly among rural communities, low-income households, and marginalised groups, limiting their ability to fully participate.

2. *Engagement and motivation*

Online learning often requires more self-discipline and motivation from learners compared to traditional classroom settings. The absence of face-to-face interaction can lead to feelings of isolation, which may



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This article explores the shift to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting both challenges and opportunities for further education and training. Key challenges include the digital divide, lack of learner engagement, quality assurance, and the need for additional support systems. Opportunities include increased access, personalised learning, global collaboration, innovation in teaching, and lifelong learning. The article emphasises the importance of addressing these challenges to create an inclusive and adaptable education system for all learners.

impact engagement and retention rates. Educators face the challenge of creating interactive and engaging content that keeps learners motivated and connected throughout their educational journey. Locke (2015) argues that classroom structures and the physicality of teaching spaces are not benign but rather confer their own pedagogical value. In this way, buildings 'convey their own messages, solidified and materialised through physical walls and demarcated spaces' (Locke, 2015, p.596). Similarly, Gieryn (2002) writes that buildings 'stabilize social life. They give structure to social institutions, durability to social networks, persistence to behavior patterns.'

3. *Quality assurance and pedagogical shifts*

Ensuring the quality of online education is another significant challenge. Traditional pedagogical approaches may not always translate effectively to digital platforms, requiring educators to rethink and adapt their teaching methods. Additionally, institutions must ensure that the online courses they offer meet rigorous academic standards and provide the same level of educational value as in-person learning.

4. *Support systems*

Online learners often require additional support to navigate the digital learning environment. This includes technical assistance, academic advising, and mental health resources. The challenge lies in providing these support systems in a way that is accessible and responsive to the unique needs of online learners, particularly those who may be balancing education with work or family responsibilities.

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Opportunities

1. *Increased access and flexibility*

Online learning has the potential to significantly increase access to FET by removing geographical barriers and offering flexible scheduling options. This is particularly beneficial for adult learners who may be juggling work, family, and other commitments. The ability to learn at one's own pace and from any location can make education more accessible to a broader audience, including those who may have previously been unable to pursue further education.

2. *Personalised learning*

Digital platforms enable personalised learning, where content can be tailored to meet the specific needs and learning styles of individual students. This approach allows learners to progress at their own pace, focus on areas where they need improvement, and access a wide range of resources that cater to

their interests and goals. Personalised learning can lead to more effective and engaging educational experiences.

3. *Collaboration and global connectivity*

Online learning platforms facilitate collaboration and communication among learners and educators from diverse backgrounds and locations. This global connectivity can enrich the learning experience, exposing students to different perspectives and ideas. Online learning communities can also provide valuable networking opportunities.

4. *Innovation in teaching and learning*

The shift to online learning has spurred innovation in educational practices. Educators are increasingly adopting new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and gamification, to create dynamic and interactive learning environments. These innovations have the potential to enhance the quality of education and to provide learners with skills that are relevant in a digital world.

5. *Lifelong learning and upskilling*

Online learning supports the concept of lifelong learning by making it easier for individuals to continuously update their skills and knowledge throughout their careers. As the demand for new skills in the workforce grows, online FET programmes can provide timely and relevant training opportunities, enabling learners to stay competitive and adaptable in an ever-changing job market.

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Conclusion

The integration of online learning into FET presents both challenges and opportunities that are shaping the future of education in Ireland. While there are significant hurdles to overcome, particularly in ensuring equitable access and maintaining engagement, the potential benefits of online learning are vast. By embracing these opportunities, we can create a more inclusive, flexible, and innovative education system that meets the diverse needs of all learners.

It is essential that we continue to address the challenges while leveraging the opportunities to ensure that online learning fulfils its promise as a transformative force in FET. We continue to consider the best means of delivery for all learners' emotional and psycho-social needs, and to put their interests at the forefront of our decision-making. In this sense, we are interested in maintaining a relational approach, as 'it is important to establish a pedagogy that is critical, emancipatory and relational' (Wals, 2020).

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Pictured here are Leo Clancy, CEO of Enterprise Ireland, and Andrew Brownlee, CEO of SOLAS

On 24 October 2024, SOLAS and Enterprise Ireland announced the launch of a Strategic Partnership between them to widen access to up-skilling programs for small, medium and micro enterprises and to help drive their growth and competitiveness in Ireland.

SOLAS is Ireland's Further Education and Training Authority, and Enterprise Ireland is the Irish Government's enterprise development agency.