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Who controls the remote? Examining the motivations of Widening Participation practitioners towards online provision using Expectancy-Value Theory

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Abstract Many widening participation (WP) organisations moved their operations online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and since then anecdotal evidence has suggested that most are retaining an online element to their provision. This study seeks to discover to what extent this is the case, and what providers expect to be the impacts of this shift. By surveying and interviewing sector staff we find that most organisations delivering WP activities to young people plan to continue with some remote delivery. However, our respondents also felt that such sessions were less effective across several measures. We use the framework of Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) to examine this apparent disjunct. Our research finds that while most practitioners do not expect online delivery to be as effective due to issues such as lack of engagement and personal contact, this deficit is balanced by value benefits to themselves and their employers, such as cost and time savings, and increased geographical reach. The study demonstrates the utility of EVT in analysing the decision-making processes of WP staff specifically, and more generally for educators other than classroom teachers.

Key words Remote delivery, online provision, WP practitioners, Expectancy-Value Theory

Introduction

The UK response to the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly moved all educational interaction online in March 2020, with government mandates around when and how in-person learning could occur persisting until the end of the following academic year (Department for Education, 2021). Schools and university academic departments were not the only organisations left to grapple with this shift; external providers of educational services also had to adapt their offerings. This included those involved in the WP sector, such as Uni Connect branchesⁱ and university outreach departments.

Since the end of pandemic restrictions, mainstream learning has returned to the classroom, with the UK Government stating that 'Attendance is essential for pupils to get the most out of their school experience' (Department for Education, 2023). However, where external providers are concerned, anecdotal evidence in late 2021 suggested that some were continuing to use online provision in a variety of forms (e.g. Richardson and Barraclough, 2021), although there was little information available about the scale of this practice and its potential impacts.

If efforts to attract underrepresented groups to higher education are to some extent likely to move permanently online, it is important to understand what the implications may be for the overall efficacy of such programmes. We therefore decided to undertake a research study to determine to what extent WP organisations were retaining online provision, and what they expected the impacts of this to be.

We begin by reviewing the existing evidence on online delivery of WP initiatives. Research on best practice in remote education and its impacts is a long-standing field, which was expanded upon during and after the pandemic. However, the corpus focusing specifically on outreach practice is more limited, though we summarise relevant contributions to date.

We then move on to present the methodology used in our study and its results, both in terms of whether WP professionals expect to retain a remote element in their provision, and if so whether they expect that this will be beneficial or harmful to the core aims of their organisations.

To inform our thinking about the competing pressures faced by outreach providers, we employ the structures of EVT. This approach allows us to study both the provider's expectation that they will be able to successfully meet their goals using online provision, and the value that they place on such provision. In educational theory, EVT is most commonly used to discuss educational attainment of pupils and students; however, it also has merit in researching motivations for teachers' professional practice, and in this study we demonstrate its utility in considering the decision-making processes of WP practitioners as educationalists.

Background and literature review

There is a long history worldwide of the use of distance learning, particularly among geographically isolated communities such as those in the Australian Outback, and a large associated literature (e.g. Beldarrain, 2006; Holmberg, 1994; Moore, Dickson-Deane and Galyen, 2011; Phipps and Merisotis, 1999; Valentine, 2002). However, in this section, we focus on developments during and since COVID, with an emphasis on WP practice rather than education in general.

Online education during COVID-19

By mid-April 2020, COVID-related school closures were affecting around 94% of learners in 200 countries, leading to emergency remote teaching at universities and schools (Hodges *et al.*, 2020). All educational delivery, including WP provision, was moved online for, in some cases, extended periods over multiple years. Since then, there has been much research done into the general lessons for remote education from the period, including technical aspects such as the benefit of breaking down content into short units (Bao, 2020; Marshall, Marshall and Chauhan, 2020); the importance and difficulty of student engagement and building relationships (Karalis and Raikou, 2020; Longhurst *et al.*, 2020); and the 'digital divide' in access to technology (Aissaoui, 2021; Cattan *et al.*, 2021), including teachers' difficulties in adapting (Ofsted, 2021; Winter *et al.*, 2021) which to some extent still persists (Walker *et al.*, 2022).

WP in the pandemic

In pre-COVID times, WP provision was predominantly delivered face-to-face, and there is little direct research looking at online outreach interventions before 2020 to guide us. However, since the pandemic, a small body of literature has developed studying the practice and impacts of translating WP activity delivery to a remote format during the school closures.

Benefits of online delivery

Very few studies have thus far been published providing a direct comparison between online and in-person delivery. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the pandemic made this difficult for most of 2020 and a large part of 2021. One exception is Bellaera,

Norton and Thomson, (2022) who studied the impacts of a WP intervention which tutored 2507 students in-person and 2505 digitally in summer 2021. The study found no significant difference in tutorial attendance across the modes of delivery. However, online participants were significantly less likely to complete a baseline academic assignment at the start of the programme. After controlling for this, there were no differences in submission rates for a final assignment, although online students scored slightly lower marks. The authors conclude that early engagement with online programmes is crucial for success, and that if this can be achieved, then 'the mode of delivery does not reduce the impact of a WP programme'.

There are more studies looking at the impacts of remote WP delivery without the use of a comparator group. Campbell and McAdam (2022) explored how a transition programme for entrants from socially deprived areas of Scotland, normally conducted on campus, was adapted for virtual delivery. A report by the Scottish Commissioner for Fair Access in 2020 (Scott, 2020) stated that although a move to online outreach delivery had allowed more pupils to be involved in the programmes, it had 'probably undermined' the effectiveness of such programmes. However, the authors argue that the programme they studied had positive impacts, with more students enrolling than the previous (pre-pandemic) year and over 90% of participants finding the sessions beneficial.

Dodd *et al.* (2021) evaluated case studies from four university WP departments in NSW, Australia, finding that the design of online WP interventions was crucial for their success. Interactive and flexible sessions that utilised online tools were effective in keeping students engaged. The authors note that online provision,

'can engage diverse, new cohorts, increase the scale of engagement, and provide participants with exposure to a greater range of... learning experiences...'

Pickering and Donnelly (2022) reflected on the remote delivery experiences of HeppSY, the South Yorkshire Uni Connect, saying it had 'made some activities accessible and affordable to more learners' by removing barriers such as travel cost and geographical distance. They also state that some schools and colleges,

'had been able to provide "more individualised" one-to-one support... to help students make more informed decisions'.

Bowes and Patel (2021), who reviewed Uni Connect provision during the pandemic, state:

'Very limited evidence suggests that some online mentoring and multi-activity engagement has been as effective as face-to-face delivery'.

Challenges and the road ahead

The drawbacks of remote delivery have also been highlighted by previous research. Technology provision was a key issue, particularly for students in underrepresented groups, and schools sometimes did not have the resources for successful digital provision (Bowes and Patel, 2021; Pickering and Donnelly, 2022). Technological difficulties also impacted on providers, creating an extra layer of administrative work, for example in rescheduling meetings and troubleshooting (Bellaera *et al.*, 2022).

Other problems were recognised in engagement and immersive experiences. Pickering and Donnelly (2022) noted challenges in levels of remote engagement, finding that 'transformative' face-to-face experiences were difficult to replicate online. They stated that:

'The loss of these spaces was seen by some as a potential barrier to "breaking those boundaries... and changing the mindset of individuals who had never been to university before'.

Furthermore, the type of content was noted, with Bowes and Patel (2021) finding that while interventions such as information, advice and guidance (IAG) sessions and mentoring were fairly easy to deliver digitally, campus trips and summer schools were more difficult:

'...online approaches to activities such as summer schools may be less effective in helping learners understand what student life is like'.

Some authors discuss the potential future use of remote methods. Dodd *et al.* (2021) state that online delivery

'is a valuable supplement to traditional face-to-face engagement... but careful and balanced consideration must be applied if intending to substitute one for the other',

while Pickering and Donnelly (2022) conclude that digital learning should only supplement, rather than replace, existing provision. However, it is difficult to fully understand what future online learning might look like, with Rainford (2021) noting that emergency remote delivery [as in the COVID-19 pandemic] is 'distinctly different' to long-term, planned online provision, suggesting that in the longer term, practitioners need to consider pedagogical, technological and humanistic aspects when designing online interventions.

Research questions

This survey of the literature suggests that remote WP provision can be delivered successfully if carefully designed and can have benefits such as reducing cost and distance barriers. Due to the emergent nature of the research field, there is also limited evidence that activities such as mentoring and tutoring can be as effective when delivered remotely. However, loss of engagement and tech difficulties may impair the capacity of such programmes to impact the target group in the desired way, while some interventions, such as campus trips, are particularly hard to replicate online.

With this in mind, we posed the following questions:

1. Are providers continuing to deliver some of their activities online in the post-pandemic environment?
2. If so, what do practitioners expect to be the impact on their ability to deliver their organisation's key aims?

Methods

To answer these questions, we instigated a study which aimed to gather the views of WP practitioners. In the first stage, participants completed an online survey with both quantitative and qualitative elements. The survey was conducted between May and June 2022. Word of mouth and social media sharing were used to recruit participants, along with direct approaches to the network of 29 Uni Connect partnerships. Because of the opt-in nature of data collection, it is not possible to state that our cohort forms a representative sample of all WP practitioners across England.

The second stage consisted of in-depth interviews to gain a more fundamental understanding of the issues raised. We recruited interview participants from survey responses, social media and direct contact with interested parties. To be eligible for interview, respondents were required to have direct experience with both online and in-person delivery of WP activity.

The research was approved by the ethics board at the University of Central Lancashire and was conducted in partnership with Future U, the Lancashire Uni Connect, which funded the study.

Participants

In total, 74 participants completed the WP practitioner survey, with 71 meeting the criteria for inclusion in this study. Of these, 43 were university outreach team members and 28 worked in a Uni Connect branch. Most were involved with direct delivery of WP activities, with others in management, co-ordination and evaluation roles. All had experience of delivering in-person activities, while 69 had experience of live online sessions and 46 of pre-recorded online content.

We conducted interviews with six WP practitioners, four from university WP departments and two with Uni Connect staff. The interviews aimed to achieve a geographic spread and both high and low tariff universities, though there was a poor response rate from those at the lower-tariff end of the scale.

Study limitations

Data collection was restricted to those working in England due to differences in educational structures between the four UK nations. Care should therefore be taken in extrapolating results to the other UK countries, or indeed internationally.

University WP practitioners interviewed were primarily from higher-ranking institutions. The goals, practices and resources of WP teams may differ based on university type, therefore conclusions drawn from our study may not fully reflect the entire WP sector.

Expectancy-Value Theory

This study examines WP practitioners' attitudes to shifts to online provision through the lens of EVT, which has been used to develop theories of motivation in a number of fields since the 1950s (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). Expectancy-Value Theory is a psychological model that seeks to explain how individuals behave and make decisions based on their beliefs about their ability to succeed and the value they place on the outcome of their actions. According to EVT, two main factors influence decision-making:

- **Expectancy:** beliefs about how likely it is that a particular action will lead to a desired outcome. For example, an employee might consider how likely working extra hours is to result in a promotion when deciding whether to do so;
- **Value:** the importance or value that the individual assigns to the desired outcome. Continuing with the workplace example, this would relate to how much the employee values the prospect of a promotion, and how they perceive the benefits that might come with it.

Either expectations or values can motivate a behavioural choice, and the theory suggests that motivation to act in a certain way is highest when both the expectancy and value assigned to that outcome are positive. If a person believes that their efforts are likely to lead to success (high expectancy) and that such success is important to them (high value), they are more likely to be motivated to pursue this behaviour.

The use of EVT in educational research was pioneered by Jacquelynne Eccles from the 1980s (Wigfield and Eccles, 2000). Eccles and her colleagues developed a model of young people's achievement-related choices in which motivation is predicated on both expectation of success (expectancy) and assessment of the value of the task (value). Both expectancy and value can be split into a number of factors, as in Figure 1:

Expectancy	Value	
Expectancy for success – how likely the individual believes they are to succeed in an endeavour	Intrinsic value – the inherent enjoyment or satisfaction derived from engaging in an activity	Attainment value – the value an individual places on achieving a particular outcome
Ability self-concept – the individual’s beliefs about their abilities in the area	Utility value – the practical value that an individual places on engaging in an activity	Cost – the perceived negative consequences or sacrifices associated with engaging in an activity

Figure 1 The structure of EVT Theory

Use of EVT to study educationalists’ practice

Much of the literature on the use of EVT in educational settings focuses on pupil achievement; however, as Smith (2021) points out, the motivations of teachers, and by extension those of other adult educationalists, ‘may be quite different from those of students’. Accordingly, for our current study, we should draw on literature where the motivations of adult educationalists have been investigated using this framework. There have been several studies in this vein; for example, Foley (2011) used an EVT framework to investigate teachers’ implementation of Comprehension Strategy Instruction, while Lao (2016) took a similar approach to teachers’ use of Problem-Based Learning.

However, the most notable strand of literature in this context, and the most relevant to our current work, is in the study of teachers’ attitudes to integrating new technologies into classroom practice. The pioneers in this area were Wozney et al. (2006), who relate the decision-making process to EVT in the following way:

‘...expectancy items probe teacher perceptions of the contingency between their use of the strategy and the desired outcomes. These include internal attributions (e.g., self-efficacy) and external attributions (e.g., student characteristics, classroom environment). Value items... include benefits to the teacher... and to the students... Cost

items assess the physical and psychological demands of implementation operating as a disincentive...’.

This description of expectancy as being constructed of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ attributions aligns with what is usually termed ability self-concept (internal) and expectancy for success (external).

The usefulness of EVT in expanding on teachers’ technology integration motivations is discussed by Cheng *et al.* (2020) who investigated whether it is necessary to distinguish between the four elements of value and two of expectancy using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and concluded that ‘teachers were able to distinguish between different facets of value beliefs... composed of at least four distinct aspects’, and that although ability and expectancy beliefs were highly correlated, CFA showed they were differentiated from one another. The authors note that this contrasts with empirical findings on student achievement, where expectancy and ability beliefs were not distinguishable; however, they note that both biological maturity and fundamental differences between professional technology use and student classroom learning could factor into this.

Given the above, we have constructed the following EVT-based framework for assessing WP practitioners’ motivations as regards to shifts to online provision.

Expectancy

1. Expectancy for success (external): Given their fundamental attributes – for example, that the practitioner is not in the room with participants – can online WP sessions meet the aims of my organisation?

2. Ability self-concept (internal): Do I have the necessary skills to successfully deliver remote WP sessions?

Values

3. Intrinsic value: Will I enjoy, or get job satisfaction from, delivering WP activities online?

4. Utility value: Are online activities a useful way of meeting my organisation’s goals?

5. Attainment value: Is it important for me professionally to introduce remote provision to my practice?

6. Perceived cost: Are there negative impacts, for myself or others, associated with moves to remote provision?

It is worth noting that the interpretation of ‘attainment value’ in the context of professional practice is somewhat fluid in the literature. In some instances, the different facets of value are not discussed in depth (Foley, 2011), while in others the statements used in instruments, for example ‘‘For you, being good at integrating technology is’’; 1 = not at all important to 7 = very important’ (Cheng et al., 2020) are open to a broad range of interpretations. Here we take our cue from Lao (2016) whose measures of attainment value asked whether innovations were ‘important for my career’ or ‘for my professional growth’.

Results and discussion

Will online provision continue to be used by WP organisations?

We asked participants, ‘Does your organisation plan to keep some WP activities online?’. The results can be seen in Figure 2:

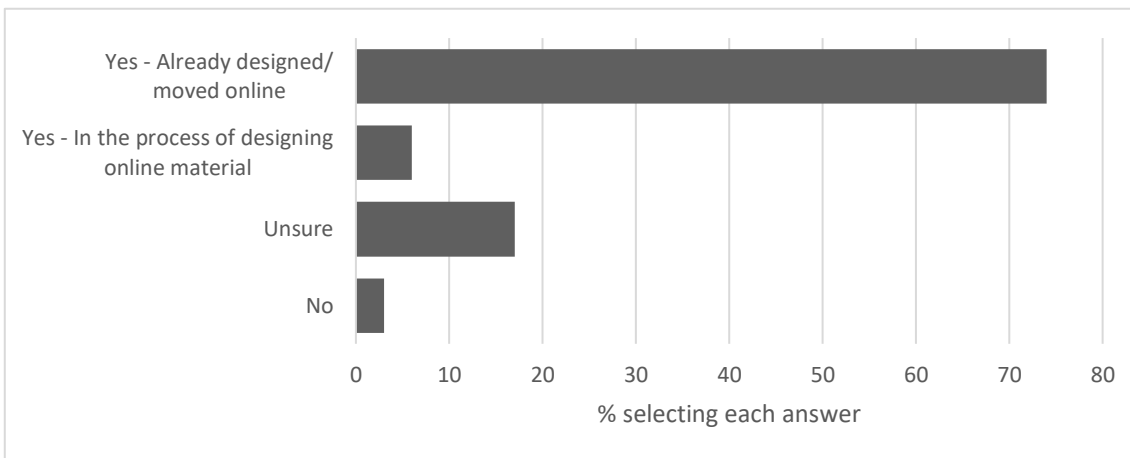


Figure 2 Proportion of providers intending to retain an element of remote provision

As can be seen, the vast majority of providers planned to keep an online offer in place. Although our survey respondents were not necessarily in charge of making those decisions, few expressed strong objections, and most were supportive of a

blended offer. All interviewees, meanwhile, also expressed a willingness to retain certain aspects of online delivery.

How effective is online provision?

We asked WP providers to rate the efficacy of three delivery types across a variety of measures. Delivery types considered were in-person, live online delivery, and pre-recorded online content. Practitioners were asked to rate each of these from 1 (low) to 5 (high) for student engagement, how inspiring young people found the sessions, and how much learning occurred; a 'don't know' option was included. The results can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1 Practitioners' ratings of different session types on a series of measures

Engagement	1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
Pre-recorded	0%	33%	22%	11%	0%	35%
Live online	0%	10%	25%	42%	12%	12%
In-person	0%	0%	7%	58%	35%	0%
Inspiration	1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
Pre-recorded	2%	16%	36%	16%	0%	31%
Live online	0%	3%	26%	46%	7%	18%
In-person	0%	0%	14%	65%	21%	0%
Learning	1	2	3	4	5	Don't know
Pre-recorded	0%	13%	41%	22%	0%	24%
Live online	0%	3%	22%	49%	13%	13%
In-person	0%	0%	11%	56%	32%	0%

In-person delivery was highest-rated across all three measures, with pre-recorded sessions deemed the least effective option. In addition, no practitioners chose 'don't know' for the in-person sessions, while many selected this for online sessions, particularly pre-recorded interventions. This demonstrates that it was often the case that practitioners simply did not know whether online sessions were impacting on the target audience.

We also asked participants to rate feedback received from school staff and/or pupils. As can be seen in Figure 3 below, feedback was generally positive for all session types – although as some practitioners pointed out, online content delivered during the pandemic was often gratefully received in the absence of any other support. However, feedback for in-person sessions was notably better; the average score was 4.5, compared to 4.2 for live online delivery and 3.7 for pre-recorded material.

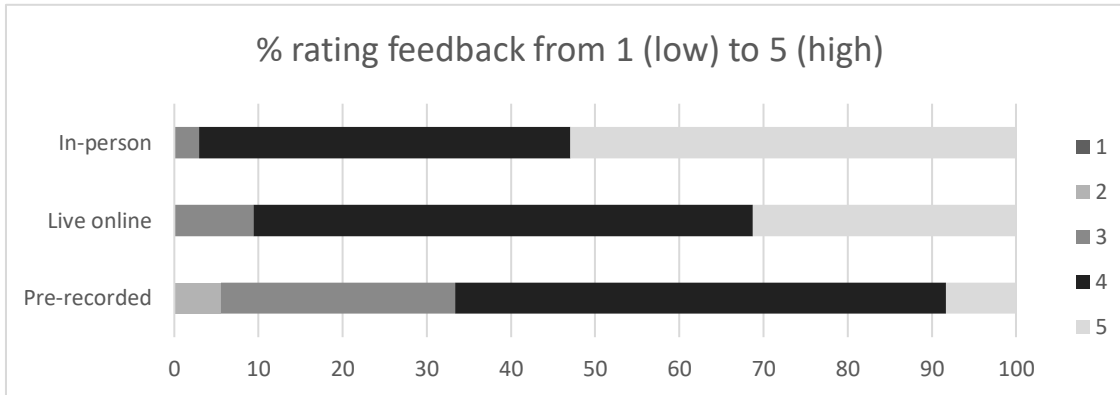


Figure 3 Feedback received for different delivery modes

The decision by most providers to retain an element of remote provision may seem anomalous considering that practitioners rate in-person activity much more positively on all measures. In order to understand this apparent disjunct, we now consider the qualitative data gathered from surveys and interviews, using the EVT framework discussed in previous sections to structure our discussion.

Decisions about the use of online provision through the EVT lens

Expectancy factors: expectancies for success

‘Success’ for WP practitioners means being able to run activities that provide young people from underrepresented groups with the tools to make well-informed decisions regarding higher education pathways, and to widen the pool of young people who progress to university. Many participants doubted whether they would be able to achieve these aims using online delivery methods.

Loss of pupil engagement was a common concern, cited by around half of participants. In general, remote sessions failed to engage pupils to the same extent as in-person interventions; 'face-to-face engagement cannot be fully replicated online', stated one respondent. Practitioners felt it was easier for individuals who didn't want to take part to sit back, and even in sessions where engagement was high, only part of the group may have participated. It is much harder, moreover, to assess engagement through a screen than it is in person, and hence to know to what extent students engaged with the session at all.

Allied to this was a decreased ability to build relationships with pupils. Online sessions provide no opportunities for casual one-to-one conversations or personalised support; it is harder to identify specific needs and check understanding. Some pupils, for example those sitting quietly in a corner distant from the camera, may receive no interaction. Difficulty in recognising and instantaneously responding to changing classroom conditions and 'reading the room' was another concern; one of our interviewees told us that:

'...we've all done it ... [you're] halfway through [and thinking] this is seriously not going well, and you can make those changes. Whereas you just can't when it's online'.

The loss of personal interaction, or 'being there', is also detrimental from other perspectives:

"You can't replicate that human contact"

said one interviewee. There were a number of facets to this:

- lack of atmosphere and excitement of the session being an 'event';
- less likelihood of being perceived as a role model, particularly for representatives from elite institutions who wish to present themselves as 'real' or 'normal';
- greater difficulty in building lasting relationships with participating schools.

Worryingly, practitioners expected that detriments would impact most strongly on pupils from low-participation groups – in other words, the target audience for many activities. This was particularly the case for selective universities; as one practitioner told us:

'I think people have a very ... stereotypical image of what they expect us to be. And it's a lot easier to break that down in person when you go in and they see you as a person and you can interact with them as people.'

There was a strong conviction that one of the most popular WP interventions, the campus visit, could only be successful if retained in person:

'...actually getting on to a campus and seeing the university and [imagining] themselves in a university student's shoes, I don't think you can replicate that online'.

There were, however, a few situations in which practitioners expected that online sessions could be as, or more, impactful than their in-person equivalents. Let us consider these in turn:

- Mentoring

Some respondents had seen real benefits to moving mentoring online, reflecting the findings of Bowes and Patel (2021). One noted that 'engagement has been much better (less distractions and better behaviour)', while another stated that 'some learners are more honest on a 1:1 basis when communicating via a messenger-type platform'. However, opinions varied, with others feeling mentoring worked better face to face.

- Different personality types

There were suggestions that pupils who lack confidence or are anxious might find attending events online easier, particularly if they can do so from home. One practitioner noted that remote provision 'feels inclusive of children who feel anxiety about attending events in person, crowds, noise, not knowing people etc.'

- Small or dispersed target groups

Online provision allowed delivery to groups who had previously not been reached. One practitioner gave the example of specific sessions for Black students:

'...we simply can't reach the students that we're looking for [with] in-person delivery ... The makeup of [the area] is not ethnically diverse enough to support a program of 50 students'.

Other small target groups, such as care leavers or those from military families, could be better served by online provision, as

individual schools may have too small a number for face-to-face sessions to be practical.

- Simple factual information

The easiest types of sessions to provide online were those intended to relay factual information, with some suggesting that brief, informational sessions were actually better delivered online than in-person. A potential benefit was that online provision such as IAG videos could be watched multiple times to refresh knowledge.

- Sessions for parents

Many felt online delivery was better for interacting with parents, enabling session times which were easier to fit around other responsibilities. One participant said,

'[There is an] increased opportunity for parents to engage at different times with their responsibilities as caregiver or employee'

Expectancy factors: ability self-concept

When it came to assessing their ability to effectively deliver online, study participants tended to comment on their team's proficiency rather than their individual skill set. While expectancies of a successful outcome from online WP delivery were rather low, this was largely felt to be an intrinsic function of the method, as detailed in the previous section, rather than in some ability deficiency that could be improved by training or up-skilling.

The most common source of ability-related concern was around IT and technical difficulties. Interestingly, however, WP practitioners were more likely to locate this deficit in schools rather than in their own practice. A few mentioned technological difficulties that might be faced in their own teams, for example:

'We have had issues with things like sound not working, not being able to play videos that are included in the presentation or links to virtual platforms not working'.

However, far more were uncertain of the ability of school staff to facilitate online provision. Sometimes this was down to a lack of confidence or training at the level of the individual teacher, and sometimes to the school's lack of robust technological capability.

There were several comments on this theme: ‘...a lot of them have technical difficulties, outdated equipment...’.

More generally, respondents made remarkably few comments about their own abilities to deliver online provision. However, they did acknowledge that a permanent shift to more online delivery would require thought and adaptation.

‘[Moving sessions online] would require a lot of work initially to make sure everything was set-up for online delivery and really went into detail to maximise the success of it’,

said one, while another noted that ‘[it would take] more work to create real quality online resources’.

Overall, although there was low expectation that remote sessions would be as successful as traditional events, this view was hardly ever located in the staff’s view of their own capabilities, but rather in the intrinsic nature of the delivery style.

Value factors: intrinsic value

There was a general sense that work–life balance benefited from a move to blended provision. Being able to work from the office or home was one advantage, and easier scheduling of sessions another. Less travel was cited; one interviewee spoke of ‘spending a lot of time on the road, spending a lot of time away from home’, and commented that ‘we’ve all gained a lot more time in life’.

However, although some remote working was felt to be beneficial, many saw too large a shift as detrimental. ‘It’s more enjoyable to do face to face’ said one, while another commented that,

‘one of the best things about the job is visiting lots of different places and seeing lots of different people, and I just don’t feel I get the same online’.

There were some extremes of opinion in this respect. A few respondents were very strongly in favour of moves to online activities, citing issues such as improved disability access or ecological/environmental benefits. However, there were others who were just as strongly opposed:

‘[It’s] much more boring than doing in-person activity and therefore motivation diminishes quickly’, commented one.

Despite this range, the most common view was that a moderate amount of remote provision was a benefit to working conditions and enjoyment of the WP practitioner role.

Value factors: utility value

A significant number of useful attributes of online provision were identified by practitioners; here we consider some of the major themes in turn.

- Time and cost savings

Remote delivery means significant cost and time savings for providers:

'Our team would be able to deliver more events as we wouldn't need to take travel time into account, and it would certainly make our budget go further'.

Practitioners emphasised the potential to increase the number of events organised, and the ability to work with more schools. There was some reluctance to return to face-to-face delivery because of the 'lost' time:

'You have to probably sacrifice a few online sessions to do one in person'.

- Convenience and flexibility

Remote WP activities are convenient, with sessions much easier to fit into the school day, avoiding timetabling issues and extra staffing costs. However, while practitioners found this flexibility helpful, around two-thirds told us that schools preferred face-to-face activities.

- Increased reach

Being able to work with more, and a greater variety of schools, especially across a broader geographical area, was cited by some as a benefit of online delivery. Some practitioners stated that their volume of delivery had increased:

'We're running at a normal capacity for our in-person delivery and then we're doing online delivery on top of that' said one.

Pre-recorded content was useful as a resource to send to schools when staff time was fully booked.

Value factors: attainment value

The question of whether it is important for practitioners to incorporate online delivery methods into their professional practice is dependent on whether it is now expected of them as part of fulfilling their job role. Those who feel that either their employers or the schools they work with expect them to be able to deliver online will also see this skill as important for their career.

It is clear from their survey answers that many practitioners take it as given that they will be expected by their employer to continue with remote delivery in the future, and that this may become a key skill in recruiting teams. As one commented,

'I think some of my less tech savvy colleagues might struggle [with moving provision online] but there would be more opportunities for those comfortable with the online platforms'.

Moreover, while it is certainly the case that schools were likely to prefer face-to-face provision – an opinion stated by around two-thirds of respondents – there was also some demand from teachers and school leadership for blended provision to be retained. Convenience, flexibility and time savings were valued by both schools and WP organisations, suggesting that both sides of the equation have come to expect that WP professionals will be able to provide online sessions.

Value factors: cost

Several negative values of online WP provision were identified. One of the most pressing was severe difficulty in evaluating online sessions; most participants felt remote delivery made tracking pupil learning much more difficult. Evidence of this can be seen in our survey results, where 'don't know' was selected by up to a third of respondents when asked about the efficacy of remote sessions. 'Evaluation is pretty much non-existent' said one respondent.

Another great concern was negative impacts on relationships with teachers and schools, and the ability to build robust professional networks: 'Engaging with schools is easier in-person as so much is relationship based', one explained.

Working conditions were another site of negative effects. While some respondents felt work–life balance was improved by online delivery, others found job satisfaction and enjoyment reduced. Participants highlighted the importance of variety in the role; some found face-to-face delivery ‘more enjoyable ... more purposeful’ and online delivery ‘a lot less fulfilling’. Increased workload and decreased productivity due to online fatigue were also cited.

Concerns were also raised about staffing levels. An increased emphasis on online delivery could lead to a ‘potential loss of jobs as fewer people would be required to prepare recordings/deliver online sessions’, said one respondent. Another stated that there had already been a reduction in staff numbers in their department and a scrapping of plans to recruit because ‘we don’t need that extra person’ as online delivery was more efficient.

Discussion

The decision to continue long-term with some aspects of online WP provision when it is clearly viewed as less effective by professionals may seem paradoxical at first sight. However, the structures of EVT enable us to explore the different pressures that have led to this point, by recognising that choice of delivery medium is motivated both by the expectation for a successful outcome which is held by the practitioner, and by their subjective perception of the associated value factors which come with that choice.

Although professionals’ internalised, ability-focused expectations surrounding remote delivery were essentially neutral, expectancies of success in the external sector – those impacted by the fundamental attributes of online interactions – were significantly negative. All the drawbacks highlighted in the existing literature, such as technological difficulties (Bellaera *et al.*, 2022; Bowes and Patel, 2021; Pickering and Donnelly, 2022) and lack of engagement were cited, and many instances of the importance of personal contact, from relationship-building to session management, were mentioned, again as in previous studies (Pickering and Donnelly, 2022).

The picture is not entirely unfavourable; certain session types, such as mentoring and the provision of simple factual

information, were pinpointed as having the potential to succeed online, as suggested by Bowes and Patel (2021). In the main, though, WP practitioners do not expect to be able to achieve the same impacts delivering interventions remotely as they can face to face, and they do not believe that they can fully overcome this by training or up-skilling. 'Success', in the context of WP delivery, is closely bound up with personal interactions that cannot be replicated online.

In the values sector, more positive aspects are identified. It is certainly the case that there are costs associated with moves to remote interventions, including deteriorating working conditions, difficulties in building relationships with schools, and challenges in evaluating activities. These, however, were balanced by positive beliefs in each value domain. Practitioners appreciate the time and cost savings that can be made by adopting remote delivery, and the flexibility and increased reach that comes with this, as previously noted in the literature (Dodd *et al.*, 2021; Pickering and Donnelly, 2022; Scott, 2020). They often believe that their work-life balance is improved by such initiatives. Moreover, most acknowledged that their role will, in future, require them to continue to incorporate remote provision in their professional practice, and were accepting of their employers' plans in this regard.

The use of the EVT framework makes it straightforward to see how practitioners balance their different beliefs to arrive at a view about online provision that at first glance seems counter-intuitive: that, although it is less impactful in terms of the core aims of outreach organisations, it has a series of benefits that mitigate this. While target groups may experience some detriments, these are set against gains in areas such as work-life balance, convenience and flexibility, cost savings, and also by a pragmatic acceptance that remote delivery is now part of the WP role.

The EVT framework also allows us to identify the session types which practitioners are likely to determine as having a net benefit when both expectancies and values are considered. For example, if the sessions being delivered remotely are informational, or address groups that would otherwise not be reached, the calculus is likely to be that the balance of potential for success and value benefits is positive. However, if campus visits or session types

which rely on personal interaction are held online, the practitioner is likely to have a more negative view. Further work to understand the functional balance of online and in-person provision that is developing would be useful on this point.

It is important to note that the concrete benefits of online delivery highlighted are largely applicable to the practitioner and their experience, with the value to learners of remote provision more nebulous or tied to specific session types. The analysis offered by WP professionals is geared to their personal experience, rather than being an impersonal evaluation of programme impacts. This is an inevitable outcome of framing the EVT analysis around the practitioner's view, but it also provides a compelling answer to the question of why online provision is being retained in part when it is viewed as a 'second-best' option by most.

Conclusions

It is clear from our data that most WP provider organisations intend to retain an element of online provision in the post-pandemic world. It is also clear that the practitioners who work in these organisations see such provision as less engaging and inspirational than in-person sessions, and feel that less learning occurs. Despite this finding, our respondents in the main did not object to continued remote delivery of some interventions.

While this may at first sight appear an anomalous result, the use of the EVT framework described in this paper allows us to understand the competing factors and beliefs that lead to this situation. Widening participation professionals clearly believe that there are some aspects of online delivery that are detrimental to the aims of their organisation; that the impacts on target students' understanding of, and interest in, higher education will be negative. However, there are also a number of benefits that, at least in some cases, offset these drawbacks, such as cost and time savings, convenience and improved work-life balance for delivery staff. These advantages, which are largely focused on the working life of the practitioner and WP organisation, have been so beneficial that at times they have outweighed what is the primary focus of such organisations – to positively impact young learners from low-participation groups. It should be noted, however, that some session types are less likely to be adversely affected by

being delivered online than others, and further research to understand the types of delivery that are being kept online would be useful.

As well as clarifying the competing motivations of WP professionals in their views of online provision, this study provides an example of the utility of EVT structures more broadly in describing and analysing the professional practice of educators. While the framework has previously been used in a few instances to examine the motivations of classroom teachers, we have shown that its extension to the study of the attitudes of other education professionals can be valuable. While care needs to be taken in describing what each facet of expectancy and value might mean in a specific context, the framework has the potential to clarify the decision-making processes of these individuals, and its usefulness in this new arena should not be underestimated.

ⁱ Uni Connect is a UK government-sponsored programme of 29 regional partnerships which offer advice and information on higher education.

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